

## Religion and Politics in the Czech Republic: The Roman Catholic Church and the State

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Received: May 22, 2013 Accepted: July 29, 2013 Available online: August 6, 2013

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v1i2.145

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v1i2.145>

### Abstract

The objective of this paper consists in describing and analyzing the position of organized, institutionalized religions in the Czech Republic. It focuses on the role of organized religion in the public sphere of the Czech society, and it pays particular attention to the role of the Roman Catholic Church. The principal aim of this paper consists in describing the secularization in the Czech society, both on the micro (individual level of secularization), and the macro level (societal level of secularization). The juxtaposition of the two levels reveals a discrepancy: the individual level of secularization may be considered relatively high, whereas religion persists on the societal level and comes to be publically discussed on several occasions. The juxtaposition of the two levels of secularization is based on the theory by Karel Dobbelaere. It is based on Dobbelaere's thesis on the need to distinguish the diversity of the processes connected to secularization on various levels of the society. The paper aims to provide explanatory theoretical framework for the seemingly paradoxical situation when religion continues to play a non-negligible role within the highly secularized Czech society on the societal level.

The description of the individual level of secularization in the Czech Republic in this paper is based on the recent censuses carried out by the Czech Statistical Office. The available statistical data reveal a high level of individual secularity within the Czech society: the indicators of religiosity in relation to the organized forms of religion (religious proclamation, religious affiliation and church attendance) are decreasing. Nevertheless, organized religion continues to influence the public sphere of the Czech society, as the cases of the legal fight over the ownership of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague and the Church Property Restitution Bill reveal.

The results of the analysis are discussed in relation to the concept of secularization and to the concept of collective memory.

The concept of secularization explains the tendencies towards separation of the state and religion and also the decrease of the importance of religion on the individual level. The concept of collective memory provides an explanation for the attempts of the secular state to preserve and strengthen the role of religion.

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic Church, Czech Republic, church property, St. Vitus Cathedral, Church Property Restitution Bill, religion and politics, secularization, theory of secularization, collective memory

### 1. Introduction

The general aim of this paper consist in describing and analyzing the situation of religion – mainly in its organized forms – in the Czech Republic: what is the role of organized religion in general and the Roman Catholic Church in particular in the public sphere (Note 1) of the Czech society? What is the situation of organized religion on micro, or individual level, and on macro, or societal level? Do organized religions still matter in the contemporary Czech society? Do the institutional religions still deserve scholarly attention or should we rather settle for the popular image of the Czech Republic where religion will be 'nearly extinct' by 2050 (Compton, 2011)? And, last but not least, which theoretical tools could be used in the analysis of the topic? Even though we are going to open these issues on the following lines, we are well aware of the fact that it would exceed the limits of this paper to claim any decisive conclusions in these matters. (Note 2)

At this point it must be said that it is not the intention of this paper to provide a comprehensive picture of religion in the public sphere of the contemporary Czech society. We rather intend to open scholarly discussion on

the topic of religious change and on its theoretical and methodological aspects, on the example of the modern Czech society. We aim to challenge the simplified image of the modern Czech society as largely secular: the relatively high level of secularization on a particular level of the society does not mean, at the same time, a high level of secularity on another level. As Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen put it in their account on the power of religion in the public sphere: “Many of our dominant stories about religion and public life are myths that bear little attention to either our political life or our everyday experience. Religion is neither merely private, for instance, nor purely irrational. And the public sphere is neither a realm of straightforward rational deliberation nor smooth space of unforced assent.” (Mendieta & Vanantwerpen, 2011)

We are going to offer a comparative sketch of the roles played by organized, institutionalized religion in the modern Czech Republic on the individual and societal levels. We also aim at suggesting new theoretical tools to interpret the phenomena we are about to encounter.

As for the most recent scholarly works reflecting the topic of religion in the Czech Republic, for English speaking scholarly environment the topic is accessible for example owing to the work of Hamplová and Nešpor (2009). The authors describe and analyze statistical surveys of church membership and attendance. They come to the conclusion that despite low levels of these religiosity indicators, Czechs tend to embrace some alternative forms of religiosity, e.g. they tend to believe fortune telling, horoscopes, some forms of supernatural powers, etc. The authors also explore the historical reasons of “atheism” (animosity toward traditional, organized forms of religiosity) within modern Czech society. Jan Váně (2013) explores the topic of non-institutionalized lay religious communities, their views on the phenomena of illness and their relations to the Roman Catholic Church. In the introductory part of his paper, Váně (2013, pp. 97-98) briefly summarizes the topic of the position of the Roman Catholic Church in the modern Czech society. The role of religion in the Czech society is also reflected in the recently published volume of papers by Pickel and Sammet (2012), or in the essay by Zrinščak (2011). Váně, Lužný and Štípková (2013) focus on traditional and alternative forms of religiosity in the contemporary Czech society. Nevertheless, the scholars do not particularly focus on the issue of the most recent development of relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Czech state.

As we will show, the Czech society is often depicted as highly secularized. Therefore religion should not play any particular role within the public sphere of the Czech society. Nevertheless religion – in its organized, institutionalized forms – still enters the public sphere. Even though the statistical indicators connected to religion reveal the high level of secularity of the Czech society, topics connected to religion continue to become the subject of public debates. As we will see, the statistical data show a considerable decrease on the level of religious proclamation, religious affiliation and participation in religious rituals. At the same time, the public debate on diverse topics associated to religious institutions attests that religion in its organized forms keeps some position within the Czech public sphere.

At a first glance, the persisting importance of traditional religious institutions in the public sphere seems to challenge the image of the Czech Republic as mostly secularized country. It may also challenge the concept of secularization itself. If one is aware of complexity of the very concept of secularization (cf. Bruce, 2011), it is more promising to apply some theoretical model of secularization which reflects and systematizes its complexity, rather than to reject the concept of secularization as such. The situation of institutionalized, traditional religion in the Czech Republic can be, according to our opinion, well related to the model of secularization designed by Karel Dobbelaere (2002): as we will see, the secularization on the individual level may be considered relatively high, yet it does not mean that religion disappears on the societal level.

First we plan to follow the statistical indicators of religiosity available to us thanks to the recent censuses. This overview of the newest available data allows us to depict the individual level of secularization in the contemporary Czech society. We will focus on the newest data gathered during the last Census of Population and Housing carried out in 2011 by the Czech Statistical Office. The newest data are compared with the results of censuses from 1991 and 2001. As we will see, the statistics reveal considerably high level of secularity in Czech society at the individual level. Then we will examine two cases of religion entering the public sphere: the legal fight over the ownership of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague and the most recent developments in the case of the Church Property Restitution Bill. These two cases clearly reveal that religion still plays a significant role in Czech politics and it has not disappeared from the public sphere in Czech society. Relatively high level of secularization at the individual level does not automatically imply that it also permeates the societal level. Considering the high level of secularity within Czech society, how is it possible that religion in general and the Roman Catholic Church in particular still influence public debates in the Czech Republic? Why does religion persist on the societal level of the Czech society?

## **2. Method**

This paper is based on the application of the following methods: for the purpose of describing the current attitudes

of the Czechs towards religion we used the analysis of quantitative data available thanks to the Census of Population and Housing carried out regularly by the Czech Statistical Office (1991; 2001; 2011). The data of the census allows identifying long term changes and trends, e.g. with regard to the decrease of religious proclamation and religious affiliation. The data gathered by the organizations affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church (Press Office of the Czech Bishops' Conference, 2004) on church attendance confirm a decreasing level of involvement of the Czechs in the activities connected to the organized religious traditions. In two brief case studies (on the topics of the dispute over the ownership of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague and of the Church Property Restitution Bill) we used the method of media analysis: the description of the cases is based mainly on articles published in *Mladá fronta Dnes*, which belongs among the most sold newspapers in the Czech Republic, and on other relevant resources available on the internet (e.g. the official web pages of the Prague Castle, Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Culture). Finally, the results of application of the abovementioned methods are discussed in relation to the two theoretical concepts of social sciences: the concept of secularization and the concept of the collective memory.

For the purpose of this paper it is vital to explain the key terms and concepts: religion, secularity and secularization. As for the concept of religion, we start from the classical sociological definition of religion by Émile Durkheim: "(...) a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church." (Durkheim, 2001) We are well aware of all problems with defining the matter (e.g., Arnal, 2000). Nevertheless we consider this definition to be appropriate for the purpose of this paper since it focuses on the principal elements of religiosity we want to describe and analyze: on the systems of beliefs and practices (that is what people believe and what they do or carry out according to their beliefs), and on the organized communities of adherents to these systems of beliefs and practices. Obviously these characteristics form – more or less implicitly – the theoretical background of statistical enquiries on the level of religiosity in modern countries.

In examining the concept of secularity and secularization, it is important to specify briefly the terms and concepts we are about to deal with. It is important to distinguish "secularization", or rather "secularism", as a *de facto* political project rooted in the rationalist philosophy of Enlightenment and based on the idea of the gradual decline of religion (i.e. "superstitious" or "irrational") together with advancement of reason and science: this idea can be also called "secularization thesis". In using the term "secularization", we refer rather to the changes or adaptations of ideas and institutions that can be called "religious" into the historical process connected to modernization, rationalization and institutional differentiation (see Casanova, 2006; Wilson, 1966). We understand secularity at the synchronic level as resulting from a process of secularization in the diachronic dimension. Secularization, to put it in the simplest way possible, consists of the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance (Wilson, 1966, p. xiv).

The process of secularization can be described at three levels as proposed by Karel Dobbelaere (2002): societal, organizational, and individual. At the societal level, secularization can be perceived as the development of non-religious ideologies or world-views that have replaced religion in its social function of societal legitimization (Dobbelaere, 2002, p. 29) and it is connected to the historical process of social changes related to rationalization and institutional differentiations (Dobbelaere, 2002, p. 29). In this process religion loses its overreaching exclusivity becoming only one of many different institutions; new secular or non-religious institutions develop and replace religion as the universal worldview. At the organizational level religious organizations have had to transform in order to react to the changes related to the societal secularization (Dobbelaere, 2002, p. 35). The individual level reflects e.g. dropping of religious beliefs and practices or changes in "religious involvement" of individuals and it can be understood as acceptance or rejection by the individuals of norms and practices imposed by religious authorities (Dobbelaere, 2002, pp. 38-39, p. 137). Societal, organizational and individual levels of secularization can be perceived as mutually connected or influencing each other – even though the researcher should, according to Dobbelaere (2002, p. 49), beware of the "ecological fallacy" by simply jumping from the individual to the societal level.

In connection to the topic of this paper, it is vital to keep in mind the statement based on Dobbelaere's writings: the low level of individual religiosity based on statistical indicators does not allow, at the same time, making ultimate conclusions on the low importance of religion at the societal level (cf. Dobbelaere, 2002, p. 18, p. 49). We are going to juxtapose and compare the individual and societal level of secularization in the Czech society, whereas we omit the organizational level, the description and analysis of which would exceed the aims of this paper.

At the very first glance, the examination of the situation of religions in the Czech Republic seems to show that secularization permeates Czech society at all levels. After summarizing the individual level of secularity emerging from available statistical data, we will focus on the mutual influences and interactions of religion and politics on the societal level, where religious topics become subject of public debates. In order to better understand the complexity of religious situation in the contemporary Czech Republic, it is fruitful to place side by side the data illustrating the

individual level of religiosity (above all the newest available data gathered by the Census in 2011) and the current development of selected cases of religion entering the public debate in the Czech Republic. The relationship between religion and politics will be illustrated mainly on two selected examples: the legal fight over the ownership of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague and the case of the Church Property Restitution Bill. The two cases were selected among other examples because they were, according to our opinion, the most widely discussed in the Czech society and broadly covered by various media. Besides the two examples, we are also going to mention other cases of institutionalized religion entering the public sphere and publicly discussed. As we will show, the level of individual religiosity decreases whilst traditional, organized forms of religion continue to play an important role at the societal level. It is vital to find an appropriate interpretational frame for this seeming paradox.

### **3. Religiosity at the individual level in the contemporary Czech society**

The Czech Republic is often said to be one of the most secularized countries in Europe, (Note 3) often together with Estonia, former East Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries (see e.g., Meuleman & Billiet, 2011, p. 200; Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 128; Pickel & Bergelt, 2012, p. 58). The claim of the high level of secularity of the Czech society based on statistical enquiries is common in both the popular and scientific discourses (e.g., Stan & Turcescu, 2011, p. 35; “Czech close to compensating churches,” 2012).

From the point of view of statistical enquiries, the population of the Czech Republic shows a very low level of indicators connected to religiosity in the “traditional” understanding of the term. The individual level of religiosity can be shown on the three basic indicators: religious proclamation, religious affiliation, and church attendance. The indicators of individual religiosity can surely be questioned as closely connected to the so-called “traditional” forms of religiosity, above all to Christianity. Such an objection is surely worth noting, but if we intend to deal with the official statistical enquiries on the religious situation in the Czech Republic, it is not possible to leave their rather classical theoretical background unnoticed – with some recent exception that will be briefly discussed later. Let us also remember that we intend to focus on the role of traditional or established religious bodies in Czech society, and above all on the position of the Roman Catholic Church. From this point of view, the classical “Durkheimien” understanding of religion can be considered appropriate.

As we shall see later, Christianity-based beliefs and Roman Catholic religious affiliation remain a dominant form of religion in Czech society. Even though religious plurality exists in the Czech Republic, the followers of non-Christian religious movements remain statistically invisible or insignificant from a statistical point of view.

For the case of the Czech Republic the above mentioned three indicators of religiosity can be summarized as follows:

#### *3.1 Religious Proclamation*

This indicator specifies the respondent as “believer” or “non-believer” and it is based on the category of “religious belief”. Relying on the classical sociological definition of religion by Émile Durkheim (2001, p. 46), the respondent is offered the option to declare him- or herself as adherent to a system of religious beliefs.

According to the last Census of Population and Housing carried out by the Czech Statistical Office in 2011 (Czech Statistical Office, 2011), out of a total population of 10,436,560, only 2,168,952 respondents report themselves as “believers” – that is 20,8 % of the total population. Out of this number of believers, 705,368 respondents declared themselves as “believers, not belonging to any specific religious organization” (6,8 % of the total population) and 1,463,584 declared themselves as members of a specific church or denomination (14,0 % of total population). 3,604,095 respondents, that is 34,5 % of the total population, explicitly checked the option “no religious belief” on the census form and 4,662,455 respondents (44,7 % of total population) did not respond at all since the response to the question of religious belief and affiliation was not mandatory.

#### *3.2 Religious Affiliation*

The indicator of religious affiliation specifies the respondent’s membership in a specific religious organization. Durkheim’s definition of religion mentions membership in “a single moral community called a church” (Durkheim, 2001, p. 46) as one of the defining components of the general concept of religion.

According to the Census of Population and Housing (Czech Statistical Office, 2011), 1,463,584 respondents declare membership in a specific religious organization. Out of this number for the Roman Catholic Church stands out with 1,082,463 members, that is almost 74 % of all organized believers and 10,4 % of the total population. The level of membership of all other religious organizations can be considered to be negligible since the number of their members does not exceed 1 % of the total population: e.g. the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren has 51,858 members (approximately 0,5 % of total population) and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church 39,229 members (approximately 0,4 % of total population). After the Roman Catholic Church, these two churches are the two largest religious organizations in the Czech Republic.

### 3.3 Church Attendance

According to Durkheim (2001, p. 46), religious practices represent another important component of his classical sociological concept of religion.

According to the census of church attendance organized on 18 April and 2 May 2004 by the Roman Catholic Church (Press Office of the Czech Bishops' Conference, 2004), the total number of attendees at Sunday's church service was 405,426, which represents approximately 4 % of the total population. (Note 4) According to the statistical data gathered by the Roman Catholic Church and presented by Radek Tichý (2008, p. 8) the number of members of the Church who "actively practiced" in 2001 was 441,000 and 411,000 in 2005. These numbers do not exceed 4 % of the total population of the Czech Republic and represent approximately 16 % (in 2001) and 15 % (in 2005) of those who declared themselves as members of the Church in the census of 2001 (Czech Statistical Office, 2001).

The rites of passage and "connectedness" can be also perceived as indicating the level of religiosity of a certain population: the number of rituals and ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc., administered by religious organizations in general is gradually decreasing as well. This fact can be well illustrated by the decreasing number of baptisms carried out by the Roman Catholic Church: it decreases from 28,413 in 1997 to 23,668 in 2005 (Tichý, 2008, p. 12). It is worth mentioning that the number of funerals with no rites, with no religious or secular ceremony, is also increasing considerably.

### 3.4 Statistical Data – Preliminary Analysis and Remarks

The comparison of the statistical data on the level of religiosity provided by the censuses in 2001 and in 2011 reveals an interesting but specious paradox: the number of respondents who declared no religious belief or affiliation decreases from 6,039,991 in 2001 (Czech Statistical Office, 2001) to 3,604,095 in 2011 (Czech Statistical Office, 2011). Nevertheless it does not mean at all that the level of religiosity increased: it is important to take into consideration the above mentioned fact that the response to the question of religious belief and affiliation was not mandatory. Considering this fact, we observe a radical increase in respondents who left the question entry blank and their religious affiliation was not ascertained. In 2001 the number of respondents with their religious affiliation "not ascertained" was 901,981, but in 2011 the number of respondents who preferred not to answer the question was 4,662,455. This means that 44,7 % of the Czech population in 2011 decided not to provide the information on their religious belief even though, of course, it does not automatically mean that they do not have any.

From this point of view it is worth mentioning that a new option regarding religious belief was introduced to the form of the census in 2011, most probably in order to eliminating the problematic connection of religious belief with the membership in a specific religious organization. It allowed the respondents to declare themselves "believer with no specific religious affiliation" and 705,368 respondents chose this option, that is approximately 6,8 % of the total population (Czech Statistical Office, 2011).

It can be assumed that the introduction of the new option to the census would allow the respondents declaring some religious worldview while not identifying with an established religious organization connected to some specific system of religious beliefs. The population in European countries – not only in the Czech Republic – seems to support or endorse some non-traditional or alternative forms of religiosity, the new religious movements, and another forms of non-organized, individualized religiosity (Hunt, 2003). The tendencies to embrace some "non-conventional" elements of religiosity can be observed also within "long-established" Christian organizations (Váně, 2012) and we can observe some deep transformations in the attitudes of Europeans toward many "traditional" elements of religiosity such as the concepts of God, the belief in Heaven and Hell, etc. (Hunt, 2003, pp. 232-236; cf. Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009; Váně, Lužný & Štípková, 2013).

It is also worth noting that the new option in the census of 2011 does not correspond to the traditional definition of religion as a system of beliefs and practices together with a membership in a specific religious organization, yet this classical sociological definition of religion apparently lies in the background of the concept of religion in the census. On the one hand, it may reflect the thesis about the privatization of religion associated with the process of secularization (Casanova, 1994) and the new option in the census could reveal the presence of the "invisible religion" (Luckmann, 1967) within Czech society (see Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009), or, at least, the well-known thesis of Grace Davie of believing without belonging (Davie, 1990). On the other hand, it could also bring to mind the thesis of the well-known Czech catholic thinker and scholar Tomáš Halík who speaks about Czech people as believing in "something" that transcends the individual. According to Halík, Czech people could be labelled as "somethingers" ("něčisté" in Czech) since they may not believe in god, but they tend to believe in some universal principles or forces governing the universe (Ješ, 2010). Nevertheless the data from the 2011 census do not seem to confirm Halík's thesis or rather his concept cannot be easily ascertained from the results of the census.

With no doubt, the census from 2011 confirms the fast decrease in membership of the traditional churches. The

Roman Catholic Church as the largest religious body in the Czech lands is a very good example of this overall development: in the census of 1991 the number of members was 4,021,385 or 39,0 % of the total population (Czech Statistical Office, 1991), in 2001 it was 2,740,780 members or 26,8 % of the total population (Czech Statistical Office, 2001), and in 2011 no more than 1,082,463 members or 10,4 % of the total population (Czech Statistical Office, 2011).

Nevertheless, even from the point of view of statistical data, the general conclusions on the high level of secularity of Czech society can become misleading. If examined more carefully, e.g. from the geographical point of view, we realize that the level of indicators of religiosity has some important differences. These differences are quite noticeable if the indicators are examined in Bohemia, the western part of the Czech Republic with the capital Prague in its centre, and in Moravia and Silesia, the eastern part of the Czech Republic with Brno, Olomouc, Ostrava and Opava as the most important cities. According to the statistics of the Roman Catholic Church presented by Radek Tichý (2008, p. 8) the number of members of the Church who “actively practiced” in the years 2001 and 2005 in the Province of Bohemia represents only 2 % of the total population of that geographical part of the country, while in the Province of Moravia it is 7 % of total population in the Moravian and Silesian part of the country. Also the number of the Church members is radically different: in 2001 it was 20 % of the total population in the Province of Bohemia, while it was 37 % of the total population in the Province of Moravia (Tichý, 2008, p. 8).

It is not possible now to analyze these differences and their possible historical causes, but it is useful to keep in mind that the image of religiosity in the Czech lands is far more complex than expected from the first glance at general statistics.

On the topic of individual level of secularization in the Czech society, the statistical data reveal the following:

- a) The number of church members is generally decreasing and the traditional religious organizations are unable to change this trend by the means of proselytization or by the natural reproduction of the existing membership;
- b) The respondents most likely consider their spiritual or religious life to be highly private (cf. Váně, Lužný & Štípková, 2013) – let us recall that almost one half of the Czech population in 2011 decided not to provide the information asked for in the question about religious belief – or;
- c) The question of religious affiliation is not at all important to them.

At first glance, the statistics seem to confirm the idea of the Czech Republic as highly secularized country where religion is not publically important or where it is highly privatized. The topic of organized or traditional religion should be on the margin of Czech public life. As we will see, the real situation is different. The position of organized religion in the public sphere of Czech society is far more complex than the image emerging from the statistical enquiries at the individual level.

#### **4. Religiosity at the Societal Level in the Contemporary Czech Society**

Traditional religious institutions, churches and denominations enter the public sphere of the Czech society by the most diverse means. Various topics connected to institutionalized forms of religion continue to be publically discussed. We do not intend to describe the position of the churches in the Czech public life in its overall complexity: we just aim at showing that organized religion did not disappear from the Czech public life. The aspects of the complex relationship between the churches and the state in the Czech Republic still deserve the attention of social sciences scholars: that is what we intend to show. From all possible examples we have chosen two significant cases: the case of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague with the fight over its ownership between the Roman Catholic Church and the state, and the Church Property Restitution Bill. Both cases were widely discussed within the Czech society and – particularly in the case of the Church Property Restitution Bill – continue to influence the position of traditional religious organizations in the Czech Republic. Both cases may serve as illustrations of our hypothesis on the persisting importance of religion at the macro level of the Czech society and both may serve as a proof of the enduring influence of traditional, institutionalized religion on the Czech political life. It also illustrates the principal theoretical issue of this paper: the high level of secularity at the individual level does not imply the same degree of secularity at the societal level.

What is the “emic attitude” of the Church representatives toward the putative loss of public significance of religion in the Czech Republic? The official attitude of the highest representatives of the Church toward the presupposed decline of its importance in the Czech society is well illustrated by the recent statement of Dominik Duka, the archbishop of Prague and cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. Dominik Duka’s attitude clearly rejects the marginalization of the Church in the public sphere of the Czech society. In his comments, broadcasted weekly by Czech public radio station “Radiožurnál”, archbishop Duka stated:

“Even though we would take the latest results of the census at face value, taking into account only those who declared membership in the churches, we still have hundred thousands of members. The most common criterion

is the census of those who regularly participate at Sunday's services. We have 450 thousand of these in the Catholic Church. (...) Let's have a look at the membership of other organizations, such as political parties. (...) The biggest one, which is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, has 50 thousand members. In total, all parliamentary political parties do not even reach the number of practising Catholics. Therefore we are not a marginal minority." (Duka, 2013)

Archbishop Duka's statement can be seen as a kind of political declaration: the Roman Catholic Church has more declared members than any parliamentary political party. Therefore it must be taken seriously as a player at the political and public levels. According to Duka, the representatives of the churches can take responsibility for decisions on the field of relations of the state with the churches and for decisions about the financial compensations for the churches provided by the state (Duka, 2013).

Perhaps it is not surprising to hear such a statement from one of the highest officials of the Church. The public significance of traditional religious organizations would certainly remain within the realm of wishful thinking of their officials, had there not existed the cases of traditional religions entering the public debate and influencing the politics in the most recent history of the Czech Republic.

#### *4.1 St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague as a Symbol of Czech Nationhood*

Miroslav Hroch, a renowned Czech historian and political theorist, mentions the importance of historical phenomena preceding the formation of the modern nation at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hroch, 2009). According to Hroch (2009), some historical phenomena, such as symbols, values, stereotypes, legends or historical narratives become an important part in the process of nation formation. The historical existence of such phenomena can be perceived as independent from the wishes and plans of the so-called nationalists or proponents of the national identity, even though the so-called nationalists frequently use and often re-interpret such phenomena in their nation-building political programmes. Hroch's thesis recalls the theory of ethno-symbolism developed by Anthony Smith (see Conversi, 2007; Smith, 2009). From this point of view, St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague can be seen as a classical example of this type of historical phenomena: its history destined it to become such a national symbol.

The Cathedral is consecrated to the three patron-saints of Bohemia: to St. Vitus, St. Wenceslas and St. Adalbert. (Note 5) It was founded on November 21 in the year of 1344 by king John of Bohemia (1296–1346) and by his son Charles, the future king of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316–1378) (Kuthan & Royt, 2011, p. 52). The Cathedral was built within the grounds of Prague Castle, the residence of Bohemian rulers.

The site of the Cathedral was considered to be sacred from the earliest times. It is supposed to be the place of worship of Svantovit, the old Slavic solar deity: the old Bohemian chronicles mention a place called "Žiži" where the fire offerings to the Slavic deities were held. It is most likely identical with the location of the legendary stone throne of the dukes of Bohemia, even though the exact location of the stone throne remains unknown. The coronation ceremonies of Bohemian rulers took place within the precincts of the present-day cathedral since pre-Christian times (see Třeštík, 2009, p. 151; Žemlička, 2009, p. 290). The first Christian church on the place of today's cathedral was founded by St. Wenceslas (cca 907–929/935) himself. The remains of the patron saint of Bohemia were transported from Stará Boleslav and buried there after his assassination in 929 or 935 (see Kuthan & Royt, 2011, pp. 32-35). The church and the Cathedral serve as the seat of the bishop (from 973) and archbishop (from 1344) of Prague (see Kuthan & Royt, 2011).

Charles IV considered himself St. Wenceslas's descendant (Charles's mother Elizabeth belonged to the Přemyslid dynasty) (Note 6) and he established the Cathedral as the sacred centre of the Bohemian kingdom conceiving of it as the place for the coronation of the kings of Bohemia. The architectural outline of the Cathedral corresponds to the coronation ritual of Bohemian kings and it was Charles IV himself who inspired the concept of the ritual (Cibulka, 1934; Kotrba, 1960; Žůrek, 2012).

The crown jewels of Bohemian kings – above all the golden crown probably designed by Charles himself – are deposited in the Coronation Chamber within the precincts of the Cathedral (Kotrba, 1960; Kuthan & Royt, 2011, pp. 324-328; Otavský, 2011). The last coronation of a Czech king in the Cathedral took place in 1836 and it was Ferdinand V of Habsburg who underwent the coronation ritual (Sekyrková 2004). The Cathedral also became the burial place of Bohemian dukes and kings (Kuthan & Royt, 2011, pp. 196-202, 585-586). It is obvious that the Cathedral is intimately connected to Czech statehood and it is logical that it has become connected to Czech national and cultural identity as well.

The edifice of the Cathedral remained unfinished until the 70's of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when work on the completion of the Cathedral was started (Kostřková 1994; Kuthan & Royt, 2011, pp. 501-517). The completion of the Cathedral was initiated by the Metropolitan Chapter of Prague and managed by the "Union for the Completion of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague". The completed Cathedral opened in 1929, on the millennium anniversary of St.

Wenceslas's death. According to Ján Mišovič, the celebration of St. Wenceslas's millennia had two official parts: one was organized by the Church, the other was secular and the state aimed to prevent the Church from taking over the celebration (see Mišovič, 2001, p. 82).

The importance of the Cathedral for Czech statehood and national identity became apparent in 1989 and again in 1993. The presidential inaugurations of Václav Havel (1936–2011) were accompanied by a *Te Deum* mass in the Cathedral. John Keane in his biography of Havel expresses an interesting, but not implausible parallel with the ancient enthronement rituals: "Standing in the spot where Gottwald, and before him Beneš and Masaryk, had stood, Havel may not have realized just how much *pre-modern* history was buried within the ceremony. (...) The *Te Deum* was like the public celebration of a new sovereign, himself treated as a Christ-like figure, who vowed before his people that together they should aspire towards a certain kind of polity." (Keane, 2000, pp. 382-383)

In connection with the figure of Václav Havel, the importance of the Cathedral has become apparent once again, following Havel's decease in December 2011. It has become stage for the state funeral of Havel, accompanied by Requiem Mass celebrated in the Cathedral by Havel's old friend archbishop Duka, broadcasted by the public television channel ("Odešel symbol boje za svobodu," 2011). The mass and sermons above Havel's coffin in the Cathedral were the focal point of the state funeral, followed by a private civil ceremony reserved for Havel's family and close friends (Day, 2011).

It is worth mentioning that a thanksgiving mass has been held on 14 July 1948 with the election of Klement Gottwald as president. The mass was celebrated by the archbishop Josef Beran and attended by Gottwald, the first Communist president of the country. The event stirred controversies throughout the country and abroad (Kaplan, 1993, pp. 39-40). No ceremonies in the Cathedral took place after the presidential inaugurations of Tomáš G. Masaryk, of Edward Beneš and most recently of Vaclav Klaus.

No thanksgiving mass took place during the presidential inauguration of Miloš Zeman on March 8, 2013, yet the plan of president Zeman's inauguration included a brief visit to the Cathedral ("Zeman se v den inaugurace pokloní u hrobu sv. Václava," 2013). Miloš Zeman paid homage to St. Wenceslas at his tomb in the Cathedral, as Václav Klaus did in 2008. President's Zeman's visit to the sacred site was accompanied by a brief religious service led by Jan Graubner, the archbishop of Olomouc: the ritual included recitation from the Book of Proverb and Lord's Prayer ("Zeman složil slib prezidenta," 2013). Before his visit to the Cathedral, president Zeman has delivered his inauguration address. He concluded his speech with a plea for God's mercy: even though he declares himself "atheist" ("Zeman v Boha nevěří," 2013), he prayed for courage, humility and wisdom ("Dokument: Inaugurační projev," 2013).

The apparent public significance of the Cathedral surely influenced the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church and of the state to acquire the legal property of this sacred site.

#### 4.2 *The Fight over the Ownership of the Cathedral*

Until 1954 the Cathedral was administrated by the Roman Catholic Church. On 19 October 1954 Prague Castle and its precincts – including the Cathedral – was declared state property by the Czechoslovak government and entrusted to the President's Office (Ministry of the Interior, 1954, p. 215). In 1992 four institutions connected to the Roman Catholic Church (above all the Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague) sued the state. They asked the court to determine the owner of the Cathedral and of some other properties formerly administered by the Church within the precincts of the Prague Castle (Bárta, 2005).

After the complicated series of legal actions in 2006 the Municipal Court in Prague declared the Cathedral to be the property of the Church ("Katedrála patří církvi," 2006). In 2007 the Supreme Court overruled the earlier verdicts giving the Cathedral back to the state ("Církev sebrala katedrálu," 2007). The Church decided to take the case to the Constitutional Court ("Bude katedrálu řešit Štrasburk?," 2009). However in 2010 the Church and the state reached a compromise: archbishop Dominik Duka and president Vaclav Klaus signed a document according to which both the state and the Church will administer the Cathedral. The Church will use it as a metropolitan church and the state will secure the funds for the maintenance of the Cathedral ("Mír. Válka o katedrálu končí," 2010). Václav Klaus, the president of the Czech Republic, has stated: "The state and the Catholic Church perceive the Cathedral as an unparalleled national symbol." ("Mír. Válka o katedrálu končí," 2010)

#### 4.3 *The Church Property Restitution Bill*

The legal fight over the ownership of the Cathedral ended in compromise. Nevertheless the case of church property in the Czech lands remained unsolved. The case concerns the property of churches and religious organizations confiscated by the Communist regime after the Communist *coup d'état* in February 1948. Czech political representation, above all the liberal conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and conservative TOP09 ("Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity 09"), initiated the Church Property Restitution Law, finally



adopted by the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament on 8 November 2012 after of its rejection by the Senate (“Sněmovna přehlasovala Senát,” 2012). Under the law, the churches will be returned real estate worth 75 billion Czech crowns and will get another 59 billion as compensation. Together with that restitution and compensations the state financial contributions to the churches are to be gradually reduced and after the transitional period of 17 years the churches will be fully separated from the state (“Církevní restituce prošly,” 2012). The Cathedral and some other real estates in Prague Castle are explicitly exempt from the law (Ministry of Culture, 2012). Even though the opposition political parties (especially the Czech Social Democratic Party – ČSSD, and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia – KSČM) heavily protested against the law, the Prime Minister Petr Nečas (ODS) signed the agreement on restitution with the representatives of 16 churches on 22 February 2013 (“Stát podepsal s církvemi smlouvu,” 2013).

However the case of the Church Property Restitution Bill has not been finished yet since the opposition political parties took the agreement and the law to the Constitutional Court (“Stát podepsal s církvemi smlouvu,” 2013). As the leftist parties claimed, the principles determining the extent of the property to be restituted are not clear and the churches will get the billions of crowns unjustly: “ČSSD would prefer this property to remain public and the cultural property created by the hard work of generations – usually by coercion from the state and often also from the church – to stay preserved for citizens.” (Czech Social Democratic Party, 2013)

At the beginning of June, 2013, the Constitutional Court finally rejected the complaint against the Church Property Restitution Bill (Constitutional Court, 2013; Šafránek, 2013).

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 Initial Concluding Remarks

The two cases of the legal fight over the ownership of the St. Vitus Cathedral and of the Church Property Restitution Bill reveal the complexity and ambivalence of the relationship between state power and religion in the Czech Republic. The attitude of the state towards the Roman Catholic Church and the position of religion and the Church in the public sphere of Czech society are far more complex than the simplifying statement about the high level of secularity in modern Czech society suggests. Even though we observe the statistically demonstrated decrease of indicators of individual religiosity, the extent of secularity on the societal level seems to be rather ambiguous. From this point of view the case of the Czech Republic corroborates the statement of Karel Dobbelaere: “One other problem is that the scholars who jump from the individual to the societal level commit an ecological fallacy. (...) we cannot equate a decline of personal involvement in religion – in churches, denominations, sects or cults – with societal secularization.” (Dobbelaere, 2003, p. 49)

The example of St. Vitus shows another noteworthy phenomenon: it is the interaction of societal level of religiosity with the individual level of religiosity of the political representatives, who are attempting to participate in the public significance of the sacred site. The interaction becomes apparent when one takes into consideration the information on the individual religious views of the Czech political representatives, and confronts it with their involvement in religious ceremonies that take place in the Cathedral. Let us recall the religious rituals accompanying the presidential inaugurations of Václav Havel and Miloš Zeman, and the state funeral for Havel. In these cases the ambivalent personal relationship of the presidents toward Christianity in general and toward the Roman Catholic Church in particular has been publically discussed. Havel’s affiliation to Christian worldview and the atheism of Zeman were debated. Some of Havel’s close friends publically denied their participation in the state funeral for Havel. The late president, according to some of his friends, was not member of any specific Christian church: “The office of the president is connected to no church. If any church or party attempt to usurp him [*i.e. Havel*] (...) I deeply regret it and I do not intend to partake in it,” (“Uhl nepřišel do katedrály,” 2011) as said by Petr Uhl, who belonged among Havel’s closest friends (Note 7). Zeman’s affirmed “tolerant atheism” has been also discussed in relation to his prayer to God during his presidential inauguration (“Zeman v Boha nevěří,” 2013).

The cases of presidential involvement in religious rituals reveal the mutual relationship of individual and societal levels of religiosity: the individual religious worldview (or perhaps a lack of it) does not necessarily prevent the public officials from participating in religious life on the public, societal level (Note 8).

Generally speaking, there is no doubt that religious and secular spheres are more and more separate, the role of religion in the public sphere is gradually decreasing together with the economic and political powers of the churches. Nonetheless, political representatives of the Czech state continue their cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church and religion still plays – more or less openly – a significant role within Czech politics.

The most recent development in the Czech political scene seems to validate the data provided by the European Values Study as presented by Rosta (2012, p. 105): the rejection of separation of politics and religion has a decreasing tendency in all central European countries, but in the case of the Czech Republic the recent decade

brought a significant change of attitudes towards the involvement of religious leaders in politics. From 1999 to 2008 the number of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the thesis “Religious Leaders Should Not Influence Government Decisions” decreased considerably, from 79 % in 1999 to 49 % in 2008.

The seeming paradox of a highly secularized country on the one hand and the involvement of traditional religious bodies in the Czech politics on the other hand can be resolved by applying the following theoretical tools of the sociology of religion: the concept of secularization and the concept of collective memory.

### *5.2 The Concept of Secularization*

The theory of secularization has many forms and modifications, yet it is possible to proceed from the classical definition of secularization by Bryan Wilson. He understands secularization as the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance (Wilson, 1966, p. xiv). Wilson’s understanding of secularization apparently generalizes the historical development of religion in Europe with its conflicts between secular and religious powers. In this historical process the state systematically restricted the economic and political influence of religious organizations, particularly of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Czech lands this historical development is reflected in the attempts to define Czech national identity with anti-church or anti-Catholic (and last but not least anti-religious) rationale.

Broadly speaking, the role of the Roman-Catholic Church in the process of establishing of the Czech nation is evaluated as rather negative from the point of view of the Czech nation builders of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was apparently the opinion of a significant part of Czech society who perceived the Roman Catholic Church as “anti-Czech” and, on the contrary, praised the tradition of medieval Czech reformation movement (the Hussite movement) as the pillars of Czech national identity (see Nešpor, 2008, pp. 46-48, pp. 62-63). The anti-Catholic concept of Czech history can be summarized as follows: after the glorious period of the Hussite movement and the Czech reformation, the nation declined with the establishment of the Habsburg monarchy and particularly with the debacle of the Bohemian Revolt against Habsburg rule in 1618–1620. The subsequent Baroque period together with the governmentally supported dominance of the Roman Catholic Church is evaluated as the “the Dark Age” of Czech national history.

The historical situation of religion in the Czech lands is further complicated by the Communist regime with its atheistic and anti-religious policy. The stereotypical images of the Church were repeated and further developed by the Communists after the party took power in 1948 (see Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009). They used and dispensed these ideas supplemented with the Marxist-Leninist promotion of atheism. The Roman Catholic Church was persecuted because of its “reactionary” and “anti-popular” character (see Kaplan, 1993; Mišovič, 2001, pp. 90-101).

On the one hand the persecution of churches by Communists has intensified the impact of secularization and influences the long-term decrease of declared religiosity. On the other hand the persecution of churches between 1948 and 1989 has justified the call to rectify the injustice towards religious organizations and legitimized the process of restitution of the church property. This leads to the following situation: in the highly secularized society where all indicators of religiosity on the individual level are decreasing, the Roman Catholic Church becomes a wealthy institution and major owner of real estate.

### *5.3 The Concept of Collective Memory*

The concept of secularization can explain some aspects of the historical development of the relationship between the state and the Church and the decrease of individual, declared religiosity. Nonetheless it cannot explain some important contemporary phenomena such as, for example, the close cooperation between the secular state and religion, between certain political forces and religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church. The secular – political sphere and religious sphere and its proponents have some significant concerns in common, and that is the reason why they cooperate closely.

Generally speaking, the collective memory (see Halbwachs, 1992) is connected with the membership in a specific social group which provides ideas and concepts that are to be remembered, and – often even more importantly – to be forgotten. The collective memory is, of course, constituted under specific historical circumstances.

From the point of view of religion as a form of collective memory, the situation in the Czech Republic can be seen as an attempt by the state and the traditional churches to preserve, control, and re-produce the collective memory. Collective memory contributes to the integration of the society and has – with no doubt – considerable political potential. Religion as collective memory functions as “a chain of memory” (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). It is a tool for connecting the past, the present and the future: religion makes it possible to interpret the past, understand the present and plan the future. It provides a way to integrate the most diverse phenomena to the great story which begins with creation of the universe. It can also harmonize the present – and present day politics, of course – with the eternal order of the universe. Religion provides continuity which transcends history:

“This continuity transcends history. It is affirmed and manifested in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future.” (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p. 125) That is the reason why modern secular states or secular politics use some elements of traditional, institutionalized religions, e.g. during the funerals of statesmen or during subversions of politics and society.

The political potential of traditional religious institutions and their role in the process of re-producing “the chain of memory” became apparent several times in the modern history of the Czech Republic. Even though – considering the increasing level of individual religiosity – political representatives could ignore the traditional religious institutions, it is not that unusual that they are integrating the churches to the political and public life. The visits paid by the Czech presidents to the Cathedral represent a very good example.

It is obvious that from this point of view the state needs religion since it upholds, re-affirms and re-creates the collective consciousness and the unity of its citizens or nationals (see Durkheim, 2001). From this point of view, the cooperation between the state with its political representatives and the churches is well understandable. It is not surprising that the political representatives seek ways of controlling and supporting traditional religious institutions – e.g. by reinforcing their economic position. The restitution of church property is perceived as redress of persecution of the churches by the Communist regime. It will, beyond doubt, lead to the economic and power reinforcement of traditional churches, above all of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is also why there exist some well-trying methods of cooperation between and coexistence of the state and religion or the state and the church. Moreover, the state also uses the church as provider of religious and social services.

#### 5.4 Final Concluding Remarks

Rather as a paradox, the secularity of the individual level and the persisting importance of religion on the societal level can be considered a good example of the complexity of the roles of religion within modern societies. It would be misleading to describe the Czech society simply as “secular” or “irreligious” – such an ultimate statement could be seen a good example of “ecological fallacy”, as defined by Karel Dobbelaere (2002, p. 49).

The ambivalent nature of church-state relations becomes apparent in modern history in general and in the modern history of the Czech Republic in particular. Since we are about to deal with such a complex, multiple-layer phenomena, we cannot yield to the temptation to explain it by a single theoretical concept. There is no doubt about the fact that the Czech society is highly secularized at the individual level, but the societal functions of religious institutions keep their significance. This ambivalent and complex position of religion in the public sphere of the Czech Republic may be interpreted by different theoretical approaches. Both concepts – the concepts of secularization and of the collective memory – can be applied to explain diverse aspects of religious life in the modern Czech Republic. The concept of secularization explains the tendencies towards separation of state and religion and the decrease of religiosity at the individual level. The concept of collective memory provides an explanation for – somehow paradoxical if seen from the point of view of the theories of secularization – the attempts of the secular state to preserve and strengthen the role of religion. It is because religion upholds tradition and contributes to the integration of individuals into the collectivity. We may assume that traditional, institutionalized religions will continue to enter the public sphere of the Czech society in the future, and their role surely deserves further scholarly interest.

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## Notes

Note 1. The concept of “public sphere” is defined by Jürgen Habermas: “By ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. (...) Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion (...). We speak of a political public sphere (...) when the public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the state.” (1997: 105)

Note 2. This paper is based on the conference presentation “Religion and Politics in the Czech Republic: The Roman Catholic Church and the State”, presented at The Third ISA Conference of the Council of National Associations: “Sociology in Times of Turmoil: Comparative Approaches”, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, May 13–16, 2013.

Note 3. For summarization and analysis of church, state and society relationship in post-communist European states refer to Zrinščak (2011).

Note 4. According to the Census of Population and Housing carried out by the Czech Statistical Office in 2001, the total population of the Czech Republic was 10,230,060 (Czech Statistical Office, 2001).

Note 5. For the history of the Cathedral refer to Kuthan and Royt (2011). The overview of the history of the Cathedral in this paper is based mainly on this monograph.

Note 6. The royal and imperial ideology of Charles IV is described by Havlíček (2005).

Note 7. The spiritual and philosophical worldview of Havel is comprehensively treated by the account of Martin C. Putna (2011). Putna also treats Havel’s relationship to Catholicism (c.f. Putna, 2011, pp. 220-221).

Note 8. Of course, the “depth” or “authenticity” of such participation cannot be questioned in a scholarly account.



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