Leaving Religion Behind:
Varieties of Nonbelievers

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Introduction

The well-known anecdote of Gordon W. Allport can be taken as the starting point of our research and analysis of nonreligious individuals, or "nones," in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

> In Boston, a dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church was driving along a lonesome road on the outskirts of the city. Seeing a small Negro boy trudging along, the dignitary told his chauffeur to stop and give the boy a lift. Seated together in the back of the limousine, the cleric, to make conversation, asked, "Little Boy, are you a Catholic?" Wide-eyed with alarm, the boy replied, "No sir, it's bad enough being colored without being one of those things."[1]

There are two distinct categories revealed in this short dialogue. One is based on skin color, black or white, and the other is based on religion, Catholic or non-Catholic. Prejudices are societies' attempts to instill order in cultural and social relations and support societal orientations. Allport's anecdote demonstrates the most frequently used dichotomic categorization in these attempts: like the paradigm of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*,[2] one can belong either to one particular category or to its antithetical other. There are no other alternatives. Dichotomic categorizations provide societies, institutions, and organizations with a kind of feeling of security and controlling capacity. Political parties and religious organizations use routine dichotomies to fulfill their political or religious aims and stabilize their followers' community. The importance and usefulness of dichotomic categorizations is higher in societies living in insecure circumstances and in times of deep transformations. Dichotomic categorizations simplify a plural and confused reality and encourage communities and private persons to make decisions and to act.

Reality and lived experiences always elicit a kind of contrast experience regarding dichotomic categories. Encountering people living in various circumstances and the logic of their thinking strongly relativizes any simplifications. Either/Or attempts do not work. A concrete person can only be categorized into simple categories by destroying their uniqueness and personality. Simple dichotomic classes are abstract, but a concrete person's vernacular

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[1] Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 4.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (London: Penguin UK, 2004).

reality is always also factual. Although it is not realistic to live in societies without any simple categories, it is unrealistic to know the society we live in without meeting and knowing persons in their uncategorized uniqueness. Our current research focuses on the varieties of religious orientations. We want to go beyond their simple dichotomic categories and try to relativize their inherited and routinized prejudices. Our main aim is to explore the latent dimensions behind the categories of "nones" and "nonbelievers."

The social science categories concerning religions and religiosities are multifaceted. They are elaborated based on scholarly efforts, approaches, and theories. All theoretical models have their genealogy and, more importantly, arise in the realm of unique and particular societal experiences and observations. In all of today's essential category systems regarding typology and classification of religiosity, it is easy to find the mutual interactions between the original adventures and observations and the attempts of understanding and interpretations. In the actual process of this interaction between data and interpretation, the theory that we now take for granted emerged. Some prestigious theorists of religion developed their theoretical concept and classification system quickly, while others dealt with their data and observations over a longer period of time. In our recent study, we try to work rather slowly with our theoretical reflections and classifications. We argue for meditative patience in "dwelling with the data" and in reserving time for discussions.

Our option for slowness is partly motivated by Milan Kundera's book *Slowness*.[3] He tried to describe life in Czech society with a particularly slow rhythm. This was not because real life under communist rule was slow at all. The total mobilization of society after the communist takeover was very rapid in Czechoslovakia and the entire Central and Eastern European region. The totalitarian power enforced with violence created a new society, a new person, and a new thinking, including new categories and classifications. Kundera's message is inspiring because he reminds us of society's and culture's ordinary and organic rhythm. Knowing and understanding people and communities in their relation to religion and culture seems crucial to saving time for more extended observation. Concerning direct religious categories, another important source for a cautious approach is Tomás Halík's book, *Patience with God*.[4] He argues in a theological way that God requires us to persevere with our doubts, carry them in our hearts, and allow them to lead us to maturity. In his view, using the simple dichotomy of believer versus non-believer or faithful versus atheist has a destructive effect.

The disciplinary history of studying religious opinions, psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology is almost a century long. As a result of this extended time of theoretical investigations, we now have many varieties of finely elaborated religious classifications. In contrast, increased scholarly interest with respect to the nones arose only about two decades ago. There-

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[3] Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014).
[4] Tomáš Halík, *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

fore, we are still situated in the theory-generative turbulent period of mutual interaction between data and observations on the one hand, and theoretical approaches on the other.

Methodology

In this project, we embarked on conducting interviews with people who were disengaged from religions. The sample consisted of interviewees who had a nonreligious upbringing or a somewhat blurry but non-defining religious background and left religion behind.

Research into the nones is scarce in Central and Eastern Europe. Qualitative approaches to the nones in this region are even more difficult to find. Bubík, Remmel, and Václavík, the editors of the first comprehensive collection discussing freethought and atheism in Central and Eastern Europe, see four possible reasons for lack of research:

> First, scholarly interest after the re-establishment of the study of religion, understandably, has mostly dealt with filling the gap in the study of religious denominations […] and "forced secularization." […] Second, reinterpretations of national identity are often associated with religion, which renders the study of noreligion in a particular national context somewhat irrelevant or problematic. […] Third, […] studies of religion have been supported (and influenced in one way or another) by local churches. […] Finally, due to the close connections with Soviet ideology, "atheism," for many, still has negative connotations and is often understood within the framework of church-state relationships, persecution and criticism of religion and seen as the primary cause for the current rise of non-religiosity in post-Communist countries.[5]

In recent decades, records of previous surveys and censuses examining the indicators of religiosity show that a significant part of the population defined themselves as "religious in my own way," and another significant part defined themselves as "nonreligious." However, the results are repeatedly misleading. They mostly operate with generalizing categories characterized by a more indefinable "in my own way" or "not at all" attitude. We know, however, that the spirituality of the post-secular age is strongly characterized by the individual bricolage of religious practices, which extends beyond transcendence to the phenomena of the immanent world. Consequently, it is fair to assume that this individual diversity or *á la carte* character is true for the worldview of those who consider themselves nonreligious.

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[5] Tomáš Bubík, Atko Remmel, and David Václavík, eds., *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2020), 6-7.

From a methodological point of view, however, we run into difficulties. On the one hand, previous analyses in Central and Eastern Europe have not specifically examined the worldview of nonbelievers and their attitudes in detail and, on the other hand, that noreligion can only be revealed to a limited extent by quantitative data collection.

All individuals construct their identity and worldview from the available components of their own culture in an individual way; consequently, in principle, we should find as many different attitudes as individuals. Naturally, this is not the case. Individuals choose from a comprehensive set called "their own culture," so in "sorting" they often incorporate the same elements into their personal worldview and individual practices. As a result, we assume that the constructions from the given elements are organized into trends, which are determined by the significant moments of individual life events in addition to public culture, cultural memory, and attachments to certain institutions. Moreover, it is important to be aware that the category of "nones" has non-static characteristics, such as the components of "nonbelief," which may change in parallel with the development of personal life, cultural, and interpersonal experiences. Thus, within noreligion, even in the case of a single individual, shifts of emphasis may appear, that is, in the depth and intensity of nonbelief. Consequently, our task is to explore these personal attitudes and their driving forces among individuals who classify themselves in the overall category of the nones.

Through our qualitative approach, we compiled a semi-structured questionnaire and asked about the attitudes of the individuals who define themselves as nonbelievers. We were also interested in finding out what factors influenced their attitudes towards the image of religions and their perceptions of religions.

Many scholars have argued in earlier contributions for what we might refer to as the "nonreligious turn" – that there is an abundance of terms referring to the disengagement from religion. In accordance with them, we argue that noreligion and the nones are not a satisfying analytical category. Among others, Matthew Engelke refers to atheism, godlessness, and noreligion as troublesome words, especially if deployed in the hopes of having much analytic purchase.[6]

As expressed above, while the categories of affiliated, "religious in my own way," or nonreligious might suggest clear-cut and safe definitions, once we immerse ourselves in the analysis of the interviews with the nones, we discover the uncertainty of the multiplicity and ambiguity of lived religious and nonreligious experiences.

The current study is based on ten (10) Czech (marked as CZ) and ten (10) Hungarian (marked as HU) interviews. The semi-structured interviews followed the preset research question of understanding the worldviews,

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[6] Matthew Engelke, "On Atheism and Non-Religion: An Afterword," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 59, no. 2 (2015): 135.

spiritual practices, and lifeworlds of nonreligious individuals (referred to as nones). The interviews were conducted based on a previously discussed set of questions in order to make comparisons possible between the Czech and Hungarian data.

The Landscape of Religious Unaffiliation or "Nones"

The psychologist William James wrote:

> Some persons, for instance, never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the center of their spiritual energy. They may be excellent persons, servants of God in practical ways, but they are not children of his kingdom. They are either incapable of imagining the invisible; or else, in the language of devotion, they are life-long subjects of "barrenness" and "dryness." Such inaptitude for religious faith may in some cases be intellectual in its origin. Their religious faculties may be checked in their natural tendency to expand, by beliefs about the world that are inhibitive, the pessimistic and materialistic beliefs, for example, within which so many good souls, who in former times would have freely indulged their religious propensities, find themselves nowadays, as it were, frozen; or the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful, under which so many of us today lie cowering, afraid to use our instincts. In many persons such inhibitions are never overcome. To the end of their days they refuse to believe, their personal energy never gets to its religious center, and the latter remains inactive in perpetuity.[7]

Perhaps today, a century after William James, we could add that some people do not reject spiritual and religious ideas but are unable to accept only one faith as binding and true. They are unable to do so intellectually and emotionally. It would be interesting to examine further the degree of certainty given to them by the beliefs they have created for themselves. Do some people have an "innate" inability to be orthodox, that is, to find security in a well-defined and relatively closed system? Doesn't the offer of a strictly defined system raise doubts?

In the first part of this paper, as a way of blurring the dichotomy between the religious and the nonreligious, we used our comparative data to explore further categories within the nones. Through the analysis of our empirical material, we were interested in the trends and main features of individual religiosity history. Nonbelievers or nones is a large and vague category that

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[7] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 204-205.

can be quite difficult to characterize as a whole. Based on the conducted interviews, we were able to develop basic categories and open up the multiple varieties or subgroups of nones. Looking at the recurring patterns and degree of losing religious practices or leaving religion behind, at least four distinct categories within the nones could be developed. The nuances and differences between these categories are illustrated through some representative interview excerpts. We have not yet conducted enough interviews to complete and finalize this categorization, and we believe there are more categories. We would like to point to the problem that the nones are a highly colorful group and, as a result, it is analytically difficult to categorize them into one group as there are huge differences within the group. In conclusion, the colorful and multiple characteristics of the nones can be best grasped through empirical/ethnographic analysis.[8]

a) In the first category, we identify individuals who slowly and gradually leave institutional religious practices behind but still have a connection to churches through life-cycle ceremonies, rituals, and liturgies (baptisms, weddings, funerals). These experiences are not necessarily positive; however, we did not encounter any explicit anti-religious or anti-clerical comments in interviews of individuals who were grouped in this category. The significance of social expectation should be highlighted at this point. Several individuals expressed that there is a need to satisfy the expectations of elder family members by participating in life-cycle ceremonies.

HU01
No matter what I believe and what I think, there is a social expectation, and the family has an expectation as well, so this has an effect on us. We will have our wedding next year and we will also have a Roman Catholic wedding. I'm also a little afraid of that because I didn't practice my religion, which is an important aspect.

b) The next category can also be characterized by those who are gradually leaving institutional practices behind; however, new practices emerge through irregular religious or spiritual impulses with other religions.

HU03
My mother was a party member, so I didn't really go to church; my grandmother was the one who took me to church from time to time or showed me some kind of religious rituals, so I got to know the religion through her. In the parental home, for that reason, religion as such was not a topic at all. [...] I loved going to church with my granny because it was so intimate, so magi-

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[8] Naturally, all the interviews are anonymous in order to protect the identity of the interviewees. The source of the material is coded with CZ for the Czech Republic and HU for Hungary.

cal, but I was no longer interested in faith matters. I did not go to catechism classes either, I was only baptized, that's all. […]

- What influenced your worldview later in life?

It was not something, but somebody. There was a person who led me towards spirituality. It's a very interesting mix of myself, religion and spiritualism and […] everything. Yes, my friend was the one who was very spiritual, I was involved in many of these more spiritual things. […] My faith system is something that I have created. This is very special. I believe there is something that moves us from above.

CZ04
I'm a classical Christian from South Moravia. I was forced into Christianity. When they make you go to church, that's the standard in South Moravia, so the form of religion is created by parents, or society, you have to deal with it. You see the form of that compulsion to go to church. At the same time, your internal questions are more personal. When your parents, actually your mother, make you go to church because she goes there, you go there so your mother won't be unhappy. Then you get an aversion to that religion. That's where you meet only those people who have only some form, like the artificial authority, like the vicar. He tells you something, but he doesn't care about you psychologically. You go to confession, he hears you, but he doesn't know the context, he doesn't know what's going on. It's just a form or a dogma.

c) Individuals representative of the third group have completely turned away from religion and left it behind for good. However, this turn away did not couple with feelings of aversion against churches or anti-clericalism in the interviews.

CZ10
I grew up in a Catholic bubble, only my dad was an evangelical Christian. I've been involved in various activities of the unofficial church since I was 12 years old […]. I thought a lot about my faith at the age of about 30. I guess that's when I grew up. Gradually, I discovered that I didn't really have many arguments for my belief in the existence of God. These years of pondering ended with the realization that I had no relevant argument for the existence of God, and I became a complete atheist […]. My conversion to atheism took away rather than brought anything. It took from me the meaning of life, the hope of life in fullness, life eternal in God […]. It brought a certain sense of honesty. It freed me from the need (duty?) to spend a certain amount of time praying every day.

d) In this category, individuals grew up without a religious upbringing and, later in life, realized the need for certain religious/spiritual guiding principles. Through their life course they seemed to be open to religious ideas

and, later in their life, they evolved spiritually and embraced certain religious/ spiritual forms.

Even in a country with an official atheist ideology, and in a family where there are already weak or no religious traditions, it seems that eventually the seekers will find some of what survives in his/her country, either in the form of the once prevailing religion, or in some new spiritual currents. Only in some cases will there be a definite and permanent conversion. Even after conversion to the prevailing religion, after a while, other spiritual orientations may be influential. The result may be a personal syncretic religion where one influence prevails.

CZ1

I wouldn't say I'm religious, nor would I say I'm an atheist. If I'd gotten more familiar with it, I might as well have a religion. But other than that, I'm of the opinion that religion, whether Buddhism or Christianity or whatever, can certainly make sense. I think it's more about nurture if you grow up in it. I didn't grow up in anything like that, nor have I yet decided to resort to anything like that or care about it anymore. So I can't say I'm against the taste, but that's the way it is. I just don't have it yet, maybe I will someday. Maybe I see it a little bit as a crutch.

CZ2

I evolved more in opposition to those values that were in the family. With parents who were more atheist, grounded in the everyday. I was actually influenced by a teacher who turned out to be a secret nun. We had her for math, we weren't really supposed to get into any subversive stuff under communism. But somehow it happened. That's when I realized gradually that she had influenced me in some way. Then there were friends growing up in some crises. They brought me ideas that led me to Christianity. I went from that to Zen in some way. Then into a mad sect, and out of it into some greater freedom. They were individual characters who appeared, perhaps for a brief moment in their lives.

CZ3

I had a classic feud between my mother and mother-in-law, and my grandmother. Grandma was officially Orthodox, but she's more of a seer, a healer, an interpreter of cards […] she believes in all sorts of things, she believes in aliens, and she's a much-practiced de facto healer. My mom was originally an atheist, raised in a Russian environment, who, after moving here because of her interest in homeopathy, traditional medicine and meeting various Russian people here, converted to Orthodox Christianity and gradually became more and more orthodox. My grandmother's dad was first a hedonist and a man who read a lot of science fiction books and philosophy. It shaped my view of the world a lot in terms of humor and human approach to all religions. And finally, I have a brother who's an Orthodox priest in Russia and who we can argue with in different ways on the Internet. I would just say

I'm religious in my own way. From heresy to pantheism to some kind of, as they called it in school, new age convenience store where you pick what you like. So I see things there that I don't like a lot, that I believe in, but as a result I'm close to Taoist teachings, philosophy, to pantheism, to neo-paganism. I'm not close to a church.

- How has your view of religion changed over time?

CZ9
From atheism to theism without a specific religion.

- Are there specific events or specific time periods when you recall a change or shift in your religious or nonreligious view of the world?

CZ9
A few years after the outbreak of bipolar disorder, a strong inclination toward Christianity. I was with the Jesuits at St. Ignatius, they recommended reading the Bible and contemplation. After a while, I realized it wasn't my way. (That was 16 years ago.) It changed again a year ago. It had to do with a minor attack of my disease, but it was based on it regardless of the disease, it just hastened it. It continues to this day. It's a gradual process, probably associated with maturation/aging, observing life around and within. I was intrigued by the texts of Eckart Tolle (close conception of E. Tomáš, a modern Czech yoga teacher and spiritual leader, inter alia connecting and interpreting different religions and picking up their common points). […] I believe that the life that animates my body will continue in some other form, something else will emerge from atoms and molecules, but, yes, it will carry the same "consciousness."

e) There is another category which we can call "diffused" based on Cipriani's term "diffused religion."[9] People stand in a parallel way on the outside of the traditional religious organization and, at the same time, on the inside of this organization. They are, for the most part, no longer religious but are atheist, despite their deep socio-religious interconnectedness.

- Do you connect with others who share your beliefs and view of the world?

CZ10
(from Catholicism to atheism)
This is one problem with my deconversion. I know two people with similar fates. The religious people don't understand what my problem is, for the nonbelievers it's all completely Dada. I am very much alone in this

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[9] Roberto Cipriani, *Diffused Religion: Beyond Secularization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

fundamental view of the world. I sometimes discuss this with the two friends mentioned earlier.

- Where do you normally associate with others with a similar worldview or belief?

This is another slightly sad aspect of my deconversion. Most friends are religious, I feel at home here. I've tried going to various skeptical/atheist societies, but I've never felt very comfortable there. My heart was still Catholic. I try to support groups actively promoting science and critical thinking. And at the same time, I go to church sometimes, I support my parish. Because here are my roots, here are the people I love.

Remnants of Religious Worldviews or Practices as a Coping Mechanism

In this chapter, we would like to highlight the most characteristic dimensions of the spiritual lives of the religiously unaffiliated. Although the nones turn away from forms of institutional religiosity, certain spiritual mechanisms or resources necessary for them to "cope with life" remain. One of the most important of these spiritual resources is prayer, understood as a universal magical praxis. As articulated by Drescher, prayer has historically been maintained and identified by religious institutions.[10] However, in her book, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of the American Nones,* we learn that many American nones see prayer as an important part of their spiritual lives, with some of them praying quite regularly.

> Prayer for Nones is often a spiritual technology of empathetic imagination, that is, drawing the person who prays into more deeply felt relationship with others, both human and nonhuman, natural and, less frequently among those who spoke with me, supernatural.[11]

Further important mechanisms include the ways in which spiritual practices are used in order to cope with death and grief and the search for meaning and beliefs in the afterlife. All these coping mechanisms are understood as plausibility structures, a pragmatic way of making sense of and navigating through life.

The persistence of prayer or ritual in people who are moving away from their original religious background is not surprising. We also find the need

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[10] Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 158.

[11] Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 171.

for ritual and prayer among atheists. As William Irwin, professor of philosophy at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, writes:

> Legend has it that the physicist Niels Bohr had a horseshoe hanging above his door. A colleague asked him why, to which he responded, "it's for luck." The colleague then asked him if he believed in luck. Bohr reassured him that as a scientist he did not believe in luck. Puzzled, the colleague asked again why Bohr had the horseshoe hanging above his door. Bohr responded, "I'm told that you don't have to believe in order for it to work." […] It is possible to be a praying atheist, a "pray-theist" if you like. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism offers a prayer for the "four immeasurables" – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – that some atheists may find appealing […][12]

a) Prayer as magic praxis.

- Either in a religious or everyday sense, do you think prayer works?

HU01
It's called differently in many religions, but you find it pretty much everywhere. Prayer, mantra […] or just it is also in self-help books that you say that I want to achieve this and that – it is similar to the law of attraction. So it is there, and it works, because obviously, if you focus on something and control your energies that way, it will obviously work. Now we can call that prayer, but it still works.

HU10
There are many kinds of prayers, depending on religions. That if we break down what prayer means, what prayer really means […] when we pray, in my opinion, we focus our attention on a particular line of thought. And I think that kind of focus is key, a prayer can be equated with meditation, for example.

- Do you think that prayers work?

HU05
I have mixed feelings. There were times when it worked. I didn't pray in the usual, proper way. But obviously, I also had moments when I begged for something […] not to God, but to the universe, the world, to make it better or make something better to happen. It has worked many times, there have been

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[12] William Irwin, "Prayer for Atheists: Prayer helps even if you don't believe in God," *iai news*, December 10, 2018, https://iai.tv/articles/prayer-for-atheists-auid-1181 (accessed November 8, 2022).

times when I have asked unnecessarily. I think prayer can work, but I haven't figured out why or what conditions are necessary.

CZ6
(A convert from atheism to Catholicism at age 18, alternately practicing, influenced by Buddhism, believes in reincarnation. Now, after a complex mental crisis lasting three years, he is returning to normal life.)

The thing about Catholicism is […] I always have these periods where I go to confess and then go to the sacraments and then maybe nothing for a long time because I feel like I'm not really living up to the Ten Commandments. So I'm going to let it go and pray my little prayers again and hope God understands. Then I have a period of coming back and not missing Mass. When I was in the asylum, there was supposed to be a Mass, but because of the Covid-19 virus, there wasn't. So I was doing my little Sunday moment […]. But other than that, I take communion, it's really strong. I'm absolutely thrilled.

CZ1
I've always seen prayer a little bit as if you're nurturing yourself, that actually, when you're praying, you're performing a ritual, and the more accurately and more often you perform that ritual, the more certain you are of why you want to perform it, just like when you love a person and the more energy you devote, the more you love, the more the relationship gives you, so I see it that way.

CZ1
(about meditation) I've tried it, I'm tempted, I like the idea, I tried it on my own first, but I've always gotten into uncomfortable lucid dreams, so I had to let it go. I'm trying to run different videos now where they go through meditation and I certainly believe that, I think that's exactly the kind of mental cleansing or something like that. Or a job of self-consciousness, probably more of that. I think that's fine.

CZ 9
God has no shape and form, God I think is everything around us and in us. I don't have it in any dogmatic way, I pray to God, the late mother-in-law (to "keep an eye" on my friend in distress), in the morning I greet our pear in the garden, thank Mother Earth for its firm footing. Cool, huh?

b) Coping with grief and loss.

HU01
[…] when I first met with grief, I couldn't really process it. Obviously, it was a Catholic family, a Catholic ceremony, we went to Mass afterwards. […] It was then, for the first time, that I felt I believed more in my religion and believed more that the person who had died had been placed in a place of,

say, heaven. And then it was obviously easier to process because I had the belief that yes, he was in a good place and there it was good for him.

HU03
It helped me a lot when I lost my mother. If then I hadn't believed that she was out there and took care of me from there, then […] I would say it straight out, I would have gone cuckoo.

c) Life after death.

- Do you believe in resurrection?

HU06
I don't know. It is so elusive to me. So, it's easier for me to grasp the fact that we die and we move into a different form of existence, a different state of consciousness, than the fact that we're dead, we're dead, and then all of a sudden we lived, it is over, that was it. It may be so, I don't know, but it's elusive for me.

CZ1
I don't quite believe in reincarnation, I'm sure I do in life after death, I'm just not sure if it's in the form we imagine. I think there may be other forms of life. We don't just have to live like humans or caterpillars. I think we can function in some other way, probably a little unconscious, or rather, I see it as energy. The energy that's in us will be elsewhere, we could be in the wind or anywhere. I think that part of my identity and personality is only kept in this body, but part of my consciousness is kept in the overall consciousness, so certainly in what, what will outlive me, so I don't think identity will outlive me, I think consciousness will outlive me.

CZ4
I think I've developed a very rational approach. But then again, if I have any problems, there's this church, so I pray to Christ again. That form of religion, dogmas like the statues of angels in the church, to me, does not constitute contact with a higher power. When I walk in the woods, I get these feelings. Maybe it's some kind of psycho-hygiene thing, but I don't have someone (I don't need) to broker it for me. I can solve internal conflicts on my own, and in Buddhism, when you have problems, there is nothing there to help you. It's very universal, and there's nothing in Zen Buddhism that you can refer to. Maybe it helps if you know you can switch off to something. You need some external form. So when I have problems, I pray to God, but no one even in those churches gave me a form of that direct camaraderie with a higher power.

CZ5
That's just what I like about the Jewish point of view, because according to Judaism, we don't know what's really coming. Here, it's very vaguely defined as the world to come, with no indication of what it's going to be. As it will be, with that world being better, this world has somehow been corrupted. Our responsibility is to try to put it together to make it better than what we got. Yes, I believe in the immortal soul, but it certainly has no concrete form. That is why I like the view of Judaism, which deliberately has no concrete ideas about the other world in this regard.

CZ7 (a Zen/Buddhism/Taoism supporter, originally from a communist and atheist family)

- Do you believe in the existence of a soul? Or do humans have souls, or is consciousness created only by biological reactions in the brain?

People demonstrably – as you can see by the fact that we write to each other – have some mental manifestations. So it can certainly be argued that humans have a soul, part of it is consciousness, and all of this is being created on the basis of biological reactions, a carrier carrying an information system and functions that we barely understand yet. But a whole bunch of those phenomena are entirely tied to a living biological substrate, and only what has been biologically or memetically replicated survives. Nothing like the "immortal soul" has been observed yet.

Institutional and Communal Dimensions

The third dimension we explored is the institutional background of religious orientations and preferences. By institutional, we understand the typical religious institutions such as churches and denominations and, more widely, all other types of institutions, like movements, cults, friendship circles, etc. As Peter L. Berger, among many others, underlined, private persons and society are creative with each other. This means that private persons explain themselves in society, thereby creating society with the same act. Meanwhile, they are created by society. This understanding of the knowledge transfer in modern societies is very relevant for analyzing the institutional dimension of religious orientation. Although private persons possess an exceptional feature in their religiosity, they are still sharing their worldview and *religionview*. As members of a particular society, they are still encountering a variety of religious or quasi-religious orientations and give particular answers.

To sum up, many of our respondents reported having mostly negative and alienating experiences with religion during their childhood, e.g., with the Holy Mass, the crucifix, cold church buildings, etc. If they mentioned any

positive aspects of their religion, they did so only from an outsider perspective, after having left their religion behind.

HU06
It was the first of its kind […] and then we went to church for the Good Friday Mass, which is not exactly a child-friendly story.

HU04
There were crucifixes everywhere on the walls, with Jesus on it, elaborated quite nicely. And for a child under the age of ten, that was pretty horrifying. We were also taken to church by our grandparents, which experience was also horror-like.

HU06
There was an old farmhouse, well, a house of prayer. It was called a chapel. It was not a real chapel, but an old house. I still have the scent in my nose, it was a very nice, whitewashed, very nice, clean, chunky, thick mud-walled building. Sunday Masses were there, and catechism classes were held there on Sunday afternoons. I also attended catechism regularly in that one or two years.

HU05
I didn't have a bad feeling that I had to hand out a newspaper or go to church now.

It is not only historical/mainline church institutions that can be alienating, new religious movement settings and youth religious small communities (n.b.: modern religious settings) can be alienating as well.

HU08
But I felt like I got in there that I had no place there. […] It was visibly fun, good community, but not attractive for me.

HU10
After that, I met a group who called themselves Essenes, and I was able to identify with these doctrines for a very long time. Then, when I was confronted with hierarchical or bureaucratic things at the time, similar to how in the case of Christian religions, with which I could not identify, I moved away from this religious group as well, as I did not feel well in it.

HU10
I continued to look for what I could find myself in, and I had found the moral value system I could identify with at about the age of 17-18. This is called modern witchcraft or the Wicca religion.

In contrast to formal and institutionalized relations, informal relations with people or groups are mentioned consistently with positive connotations.

HU10
Explicitly positive relationships, specifically good relationships, can be said that […] this is also an interesting wording to make friendly relationships. What does a friend mean to me? It can be said that these are usually the closest non-blood relationships around me.

HU08
It all added to my personality. For my rebirth without death.

HU06
I got into a circle of friends a good ten years ago, about ten to eleven years ago, who are not religious but live their lives in an atmosphere inter-woven with such spiritual thinking. That's why I took part in a couple of such occasions. […] I didn't stay there permanently, good relationships, good friendships were born from that experience, we visited for a while.

HU01
He is more involved with these spiritual practices. He is this "fire-walking" type […]. I am not so much involved in these practices, however, we discuss our thoughts and influence each other in a way.

- Do you connect with others who share your beliefs and view of the world?

CZ09
Rather, I find it so with existing friends, and oddly enough, we agree with some of them on many things, which is surprising. On the other hand, I don't seek out friends based on beliefs. I like to write about these things with my friends.

Conclusion: Ecclesial and Pastoral Remarks

After outlining the dimensions of leaving and finding religion, it is useful to come back to our introductory remarks. As we have argued, simplistic categorizations are useful and comprehensive in politics and in maintaining institutional interests. Churches, as institutions, have interests in two different respects: first, the self-understanding of churches as societal entities; second, the consequence of a church's identity concerning the fulfillment of its mission in society. Without wishing to refer to the various theoretical considerations concerning churches and their social positions, it is crucial to be aware of the regional characteristics of the ecclesial-political identity of churches.

In both Czech and Hungarian societies, church representatives seem to have a kind of hard pressing collective spiritual status. The sources for that

are clear and simple. The previously mentioned memory of persecution pushed churches to the margins of society. Church representatives and theologians also use an inherited dichotomic categorization in their thinking about a church: church members and institutions on one side, and society with unchurched, areligious, or anti-religious individuals on the other side. This kind of ecclesial categorization evokes and enforces a feature of the outside society as secularized and hostile. Churches think they should assert themselves against the "outside" society. In the Czech Republic, the outside society is understood as atheistic; in Hungary, it is seen as nonreligious.

The main consequence of this type of dichotomic approach is the fundamental logic of church mission. Churches think they have the divine goods, and they should carry them "abroad" to hostile societies. The societies outside of the churches do not have the grace or the divine goods, and the more fully secularized societies do not even seem to need the grace. Dichotomic categorization of society did not allow churches to have an intensive dialogue with society. This type of ecclesial understanding of society and culture is reminiscent of the time of conflict between the Catholic Church and the modern period in the nineteenth century. The Catholic Church's representatives, headed by the Pius-popes, used to communicate with society and with the Zeitgeist in a kind of unquestionable manner, but the Catholic Church as an institution rapidly lost its position of power. This basically self-dependent situation of the Church led to an apologetical ecclesiology and missionary strategy, which is, *mutatis mutandis,* the same matrices of self-understanding and teaching logic we observe in Central and Eastern European societies today. Although these societies are very different regarding the level of religiosity, their ecclesiology seems to be very similar.

From the social scientific point of view, and based on the recent study, we argue for a non-dichotomic understanding of society, not least in the interest of a more appropriate understanding of the chances of church mission. If churches were able to recognize the varieties of religiosity and nonreligiosity in society, they could be more involved in the recent public discourses about the main reason and values of living together.

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