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## Religious education in the Czech Republic in the context of contemporary socio-cultural changes<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

The article analyses the role of religious education in the Czech Republic within the context of contemporary socio-cultural changes, particularly the increasing secularisation and shifting societal attitudes towards religion. To better understand the complexity of these processes and their key stages in shaping Czech society, a historical and cultural perspective is employed. The end of communism in 1989 brought about significant economic and political changes, including the introduction of a democratic system and a free-market economy. This transition, combined with the opening up to Western civilisation, accelerated the secularisation of society. This shift is particularly evident in societal values and attitudes towards the family, religion, and the authority of various state institutions, including the Church. The article aims to highlight the complexity of the processes that have profoundly influenced the extent and dynamics of secularisation. Furthermore, it examines how contemporary religious education – both in schools and through parish catechesis – reflects the attitudes of Czech society, where Christianity holds a marginal social role.

**Keywords:** religious education, Czech Republic, secularism, socio-cultural changes.

## Edukacja religijna w Republice Czeskiej w kontekście współczesnych przemian społeczno-kulturowych

Abstrakt

Artykuł podejmuje próbę analizy roli wychowania religijnego w Republice Czeskiej w kontekście współczesnych przemian społeczno-kulturowych, prowadzących do wzrostu sekularyzacji i zmian postaw społecznych w podejściu do religii. Dla głębszego zrozumienia złożoności poszczególnych procesów i istotnych etapów kształtowania czeskiego społeczeństwa skorzystano z perspektywy historycznej i kulturowej. Koniec komunizmu w 1989 r. zapoczątkował przemiany gospodarczo-polityczne, były związane z wprowadzeniem systemu demokratycznego oraz wolną gospodarką rynkową. Otwarcie się na zachodnią cywilizację

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przyspieszyło proces sekularyzacji społeczeństwa. W sposób zasadniczy jest to widoczne na wartościach i postawach społecznych wobec rodziny, religii, autorytetów różnych instytucji państwowych, w tym również Kościoła.<sup>2</sup> Celem artykułu jest pokazanie złożoności procesów, które zasadniczo rzutowały na proces i stopień sekularyzacji, oraz jak współczesne wychowanie religijne (nauka religii w szkołach i katecheza parafialna) reflektuje postawy społeczeństwa czeskiego, w którym chrześcijaństwo odgrywa marginalną rolę społeczną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja religijna, Republika Czeska, sekularyzm, zmiany społeczno-kulturowe.

## Introduction

The Czech Republic is a country with a long and rich history, which since ancient times has been shaped by various cultures such as the Celts, Germans and Slavs. Throughout history, Christian faith, culture and tradition have also had a clear impact on shaping the identity of society in its southern neighbours. To this day, the Christian heritage is visible almost everywhere. Religious wars associated with the Hussite movement and Protestantism, which to this day are a great scar on the soul of the Czech nation, were a negative and at the same time significant factor in Czech history. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church was closely associated with the rule of the Habsburg monarchy, to which the majority of society did not have a positive attitude is not without significance. Thus, negative stereotypes of social attitudes aimed at both entities were naturally perpetuated.

In order to better understand the complexity of the contemporary social environment of the Czech state, the article briefly analyses the historical and social conditions that influence the nature of secularisation in the Czech Republic to this day. It then discusses the specificity of the religiosity of the contemporary Czech against the background of the ongoing changes and the resulting challenges to the process of transmitting Christian values. Finally, the article attempts to show whether and, if so, how the Church responds adequately to social changes.

## Historical and social circumstances of secularization in the Czech Republic

A deeper analysis of the Czech nation context of secularisation helps to understand that the often pejorative or indifferent attitude of contemporary Czechs towards the Catholic Church is not directly and exclusively related to contempo-

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<sup>2</sup> See Tomáš Petráček. 2013. *Sekularizace a katolicismus v českých zemích: specifické rysy české cesty od lidové církve k nejateističtější zemi světa*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 117–120.

rary trends. This state of affairs is the result of a long-term process influenced by a number of socio-political factors.<sup>3</sup>

In the 15th century, during the Hussite movement<sup>4</sup> and later during the Reformation, a specific current of scepticism and criticism of the church hierarchy took place.<sup>5</sup> A significant crisis of papal authority was evident, but also of the clergy as a whole. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) was followed by the so-called Counter-Reformation, under Habsburg rule, and forced Catholicisation was introduced. This resulted, in a deepening of anti-clerical attitudes to the Jesuit order in particular, which was mainly involved in this process.

In the 18th century, influential activists associated with the Lutheran and Calvinist currents convinced Emperor Joseph II to issue the Patent of Toleration on 13 October 1781, which legalised Lutheranism, Calvinism and Orthodoxy. The Emperor also tried to modernise Catholicism under the influence of the Enlightenment, abandoning practices considered “magical”, such as pilgrimage. He restricted the activities of religious orders, often ignoring the spiritual needs of the faithful. As a result of so-called Josephinism, changes made by the Emperor, the ideological and *de facto* position of the Roman Catholic Church in the Habsburg monarchy weakened. It was seen as one of the institutions of the state. This was an extreme approach to the role of the Church in society, but on the other hand it forced the Church and theology to adapt to the new political situation that had arisen.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, as a result of dynamic changes in Europe, such as the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), the end of the Holy Roman Empire (1806) and the bankruptcy of the Austrian state (1811), the idea of nationalism became a strong current in Czech society in the 19th century. Czech nationalism was based on historical successes, on the prestige of the medieval state. Czechs saw themselves as a significant European nation, deriving from the ideas of Hussitism and Protestantism. There was a change of emphasis in the perception of the identity of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Zdeněk R. Nešpor. 2005. Religiozita, ne-religiozita a antireligiozita v moderních společnostech: česká anomálie. In *Evropa a její duchovní tvář. Eseje – komentáře – diskuse*. Eds. Jiří Hanuš, Jan Vybíral. Brno: CDK, 111–116.

<sup>4</sup> See Petr Čornej. 1987. *Tajemství českých kronik. Cesty ke kořenům husitské tradice*. Praha: Nakladatelství Vyšehrad; Petr Čornej. 2011. *Světla a stíny husitství: (události, osobnosti, texty, tradice): výběr z úvah a studií*. Praha: NLN; Petr Čornej et al. 2002<sup>8</sup>. *Dějiny země Koruny české I. Od příchodu Slovanů do roku 1740*. Praha – Litomyšl: Paseka, 153–202; Petr Čornej. 2013. “Vnímání husitství v české moderní a postmoderní společnosti”. *Historia Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis* 53 (1): 25–34.

<sup>5</sup> See Zdeněk R. Nešpor. 2004. Ústřední vývojové trendy současné české religiozity. In *Jaká víra?: současná česká religiozita/spiritualita v pohledu kvalitativní sociologie náboženství*. Ed. Zdeněk R. Nešpor, 26–27. Praha: Sociologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky.

<sup>6</sup> See Kamila Yeverková. 2010. Osvícenství a modernismus. In *90 let Církve československé husitské*. Praha: CČSH Praha 6 ve spolupráci s Náboženskou obcí CČSH v Praze 1-Staré Město, 9–10.

general public. Religious identity was transformed into national identity, reinforced by a scientific, empirical perception of the world. Catholicism was perceived as an oppressive element. The so-called “parish register Catholicism”, i.e. purely formal without religious practices, gradually spread. Thus, we can see that by the 19th century Czech society was already strongly secularized to a large extent, due to its own beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

We can attribute the high level of secularisation of Czech society to four main causes:<sup>8</sup>

- 1) As a result of the process of re-catholicisation, a rationalist and utilitarian conception of religion was emerging.
- 2) The Czech national revival had an anti-Catholic character. The national awakening manifested a great distrust of ecclesiastical institutions, especially the Roman Catholic Church, which was strongly linked to the Habsburg monarchy, that was condemned for all the wrongs committed against the Czech people. There is a break between the national revival and Catholicism.
- 3) The rejection of clericalism was the basis of the national-liberal ideas spread by the “Young Europe” movement.<sup>9</sup> It had a significant impact on the formation of modern Czech society and its attitudes to religion. The movement’s aim was to transform a statist society into a civil society, which included freedom and equality of religion and the separation of state and church. In the 1860s we saw the full alignment of non-Catholic religions with Catholicism, the abolition of the concordat and secularisation of education. Only the possibility of teaching religion was left to the Church. After the establishment of the independent state of Czechoslovakia (1918), an attitude of anticlericalism and anti-Catholicism was a way for the majority of the population to interpret national identity and to legitimise their own independence.
- 4) Value pragmatism of Czech society. President T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937) saw the reason for the religious indifference of the Czechs in the institutionalised and ceremonial religiosity of the Catholic Church. According to him, Catholicism did not emphasise faith as such, but the Church as an institution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nešpor. 2004. Ústřední vývojové trendy současné české religiozity, 26–27.

<sup>8</sup> David Václavík. 2010. *Náboženství a moderní česká společnost*. Praha: Grada Publishing, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Young Europe (YE) – an international revolutionary organisation founded in Bern in 1834 by G. Mazzini. Its aim was to unite Europe in free, republican states supporting each other. The YE opposed reactionary governments and the Holy Alliance, which perpetuated the Vienna order.

<sup>10</sup> See Václavík. 2010. *Náboženství a moderní česká společnost*, 72–73.

In the early 1920s, the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was struggling with an internal crisis among its clergy. The bishops had a negative attitude towards modernism, while the priests demanded that the Church takes on a more open attitude towards it. They founded the magazine *Právo národa* and the Unity of the Czechoslovak Clergy. The priests associated in this organisation demanded: the introduction of national languages into the liturgy, the abolition of compulsory celibacy for clergy and the acceptance of lay believers into administration of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

The Vatican rejected these modernist views. One group wanted a compromise with the Vatican and the other, the so-called radicals, founded the Club of Reformed Priests of the Unity of Czechoslovakia (*Klub reformních kněží*), which constantly escalated its demands. In 1920, under the leadership of Karel Far-sky (1880–1927), the Czechoslovak Church (CČS) was founded, and more than a million believers left the Roman Catholic Church. Those who were not satisfied with the structure of the Church left.

Some left and some joined the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ČCE). A significant part of the population remained without religion.<sup>12</sup> In 1971, the Czechoslovak Church (CČS) changed its name to the Czechoslovak Hussite Church (CČSH). In doing so, it unequivocally dissociated itself from the nationalist tendencies of the so-called First Republic (1918–1938), declaring its identity with the legacy of the Hussite movement and the Reformation. Biblical personalism was incorporated into the theology.<sup>13</sup>

In the second half of the 1920s, the anti-religious and anti-Catholic tendencies of political representation weakened. The separation of state and church did not yet take place, but some changes were made, especially in education. Religious symbols were removed from schools and compulsory attendance at certain religious practices was abolished. Religious instruction remained compulsory. In 1928, a “Modus vivendi” was signed with the Vatican, in which the Church declared that its activities would not harm the interests of the state, while the Czechoslovak state declared that it would be neutral in religious matters.<sup>14</sup>

During the German occupation in March 1939, Czechoslovakia was divided into Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, which became a German protectorate, while

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<sup>11</sup> See Václavík. 2010. *Náboženství a moderní česká společnost*, 76–81.

<sup>12</sup> Dana Hamplová, Blanka Řeháková. 2009. *Česká religiozita na počátku 3. tisíciletí: výsledky Mezinárodního programu sociálního výzkumu ISSP 2008 – Náboženství*. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 27.

<sup>13</sup> See Jiří Vogel. 2015. “Husova fundamentální eklesiologie v perspektivě biblického personalismu”. *Theologická revue: HTF UK v Praze* 86 (2): 158–171.

<sup>14</sup> See Drahomír Suchánek. 2002. “Modus vivendi: diplomatická jednání mezi ČSR a Vatikánem”. *Revue církevního práva* 8, 23/3, 205–224.

Slovakia was declared a newly independent country. The Catholic priest Jozef Tiso (1887–1947) became its president on March 25, 1939. The Holy See recognised Slovakia *de facto* and *de iure* as an independent state, which collaborated with the German authorities. For this reason not all bishops, priests supported the fascist government. A deeper analysis of this period is not the main topic of this article, but in general it can be said that many bishops, priests, consecrated persons, laity gave a great witness to Christian life.<sup>15</sup>

From the very beginning of communist rule in 1948, the struggle for atheisation began, religion was systematically eliminated from public life and education. On the one hand, numerous attempts were made to politically marginalise the church, including outlawing and repressing clergy and institutions; on the other hand, the communists deliberately worked to systematically disintegrate Czechoslovak society. Some clergy, from various churches, under physical and psychological pressure or opportunism, collaborated with the regime. To this day, this issue has not been fully resolved by the Church.<sup>16</sup> The aforementioned processes, problems and historical backgrounds have played and continue to play their part in creating a distinctive image of religious institutions and promoting distance from traditional forms of religion.

An important and significant stage for Czechoslovak society was the restoration of independence after 1989 and the introduction of democracy. The effect of these changes was, openness to the world and increased contact with Western culture, which do not always have positive connotations. Further trends that fundamentally influence secularisation processes are the increasing role of globalisation, a strongly rooted consumerist approach to life and modern values such as individualism or ideological pluralism. The above factors are influencing the systematic replacement of old moral structures, where the Church played a fundamental role, with new paradigms.

Religious education in Czech society must respond adequately to cultural and social processes so that it can continue to fulfil its mission effectively.

## 2. Characteristics of contemporary Czech religiosity

The Czech Republic is often considered one of the most secularised countries in Central Europe, which is confirmed by studies and analyses of religiosity and social attitudes in the region. There are more analyses conducted after

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<sup>15</sup> Václav Vaško. 1990. *Neumlčená. Kronika katolické církve v Československu po druhé světové válce 1*. Praha: ZVON, 57.

<sup>16</sup> See Tomáš Petráček. 2013. *Sekularizace a katolicismus v českých zemích: specifické rysy české cesty od lidové církve k nejateističtější zemi světa*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 86–93.

1989 in the Czech Republic including statistics of censuses conducted.<sup>17</sup> This section presents selected results from an international survey International Social Survey Program (ISSP).<sup>18</sup>

The 2018 ISSP study reveals scientifically interesting findings on the characteristics of Czech religiosity. They confirm the high level of secularisation in society. Important and significant findings for religious education have been published.

## 2.1. Low level of religious affiliation

Based on the historical and cultural background already presented, the majority of respondents participating in Czech surveys declared that they do not belong to any religious organisation. Some 66% of Czechs describe themselves as “irreligious”. This is one of the highest rates in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2. Religious practices

Active participation in various church services or other public religious practices is relatively low compared to Poland. Regular participation in religious services is declared by less than 10% of respondents in Moravia and Silesia in the Czech Republic. In Prague it is about 3%.<sup>20</sup> In Poland, on the other hand, approximately 38% of people attend religious services regularly (at least once a week).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g. Lucie Klůzová Kráčmarová, Katarína Dutková, Peter Tavel. 2019. “Everybody needs to believe in something: Spiritual beliefs of non-religious Czech adolescents”. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 11 (1): 65–73; Ladislav Rabušic, Beatrice-Elena Chromková Manea. 2018. *Hodnoty a postoje v České republice 1991–2017. Pramenná publikace European Values Study*. Brno: Masarikova univerzita; Mariusz Kuźniar. 2015. *Values and Lifestyle of Czech Families – a Sociological Research*. In *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*. Eds. Elżbieta Osewska, Józef Stala, 27–44. Kraków: The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow Press; Data z náboženské víry obyvatelstva. Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů za rok 2021 – Český statistický úřad. 2024. Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2021 – Pramenné dílo (26.11.2024). <https://csu.gov.cz/docs/107508/3206501d-67cb-848c-ee52-2f59fcb12617/17200024.pdf?version=1.2>, 85–93.

<sup>18</sup> The International Social Survey Program (ISSP) surveys on religiosity in the Czech Republic were conducted in: 1991, 1998, 2008 and 2018. Through these surveys it is possible to analyse changes in attitudes towards religion and spirituality in Czech society over several decades. In the Czech Republic, 1,400 respondents took part in the most recent surveys. The results of these surveys have scientific relevance especially in the context of secularisation and the specificity of Czech religiosity.

<sup>19</sup> Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika* (16.11.2024). <http://nesstar.soc.cas.cz/webview/index/en/nesstar/-SDA.c.nesstar/-esky.d.1/ISSP.d.3/N-bo-enstv-ISSP-2018-esk-republika/fStudy/ISSP00026>. Ver. 1.0. Praha: Český sociálněvědní datový archiv, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.14473/issp00026>.

<sup>20</sup> See also FIELD DATA from a survey of those attending Sunday Mass, prepared by the Department of Data Analysis and Processing at the Czech Bishops' Conference (The last survey was conducted in October 2019).

<sup>21</sup> See Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika*.

### **2.3. Spiritual Convictions**

An interesting Czech phenomenon is that, despite low religious affiliation, some respondents believe in “something higher”. However, belief in a personal God remains relatively low at 29%. This compares with 86% in Poland. Even fewer people believe in eternal life, at around 25%. In Poland, however, 65% of respondents do.<sup>22</sup>

### **2.4. Religion and daily life**

Czechs consider religion to be primarily a private matter, they are also sceptical sometimes even displaying a negative or aggressive attitude towards the role of the Church in public life or politics. Only 15–20% of respondents believe that religion should play an important role in public life. In Poland, by contrast, some 60% of respondents feel this way. This difference stems from the separate histories and cultural heritage of the two countries. In Poland, religion, especially Catholicism, is strongly linked to national identity and the history of the struggle for freedom. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, long-lasting secularisation and the Church’s negligible influence on everyday social life have contributed to the perception of religion as a private issue for most respondents.<sup>23</sup>

### **2.5. Generational changes**

According to ISSP research, younger generations show a higher proportion of respondents having an indifferent attitude towards religion. This is a clear influence of contemporary social trends that accelerate and perpetuate the secularisation process of Czech society. We can therefore speak of two factors that have a fundamental influence on this: education and the mass media.

### **2.6. Education as a factor in secularization**

An interesting indicator, for the topic at hand, seems to be the level of education in relation to religiosity. In the ISSP study it was found that people with higher education identify less with religion in contrast to people with lower education. In the case of people with primary education, about 25% declared a religious affiliation. In contrast, this figure was only 15% for those with higher education. The implication is that a higher level of education corresponds to

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<sup>22</sup> See also ISSP 2018.

<sup>23</sup> See also ISSP 2018.

a negative attitude towards religious dogma and a greater openness to alternative views.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.6.1. Education and religious practices

Research has shown that less participation in religious practices can be reported among people with higher education. Regular participation (once a month or more) was declared by 12% of respondents with primary education and 6% of those with higher education.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.6.2. Secular education in schools

According to the facts already presented above, it is clear that education in the Czech Republic has a secular character, where religious education is offered primarily from a historical or cultural perspective, not as catechesis, which is an optional subject.

Currently, two laws regulate the teaching of religion in public schools. These are *Act No. 3/2002 Coll. on Churches and Religious Associations*<sup>26</sup> and on *Act 561/2004 Coll. the so-called School Law*.<sup>27</sup> According to the aforementioned state school laws, religious instruction is an optional subject (one hour per week). In theory, the parents of pupils must declare in writing that they wish their children to participate in this subject. From the age of 15, this is done by the pupils themselves. The school is obliged to organise religious instruction lessons for at least seven pupils. By law, it is also possible to organise classes for an inter-class or inter-school group. The condition is a formal agreement between the schools, which, among other things, regulates the reimbursement of the costs associated with this teaching.<sup>28</sup>

In church schools, the situation is different; religious education is either compulsory or optional. In the optional system, the student has the option to choose between religious studies and ethics. Students theoretically have the option of taking a baccalaureate exam in religion, although in practice this option is chosen by a negligible percentage of students.

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<sup>24</sup> See also ISSP 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See also ISSP 2018.

<sup>26</sup> See Register of registered churches and religious associations kept by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (23.8.2024). [http://www3.mkr.cz/ens\\_internet/](http://www3.mkr.cz/ens_internet/).

<sup>27</sup> See Act No. 561/2004 Coll. (Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. školský zákon) (23.8.2024). <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-561>.

<sup>28</sup> See Zábaj Horák. 2011. *Círky a české školství: právní zajištění působení církví a náboženských společností ve školství na území českých zemí od roku 1918 do současnosti*. Praha: Grada Publishing, 181–182.

## 2.7. The media as a factor of secularisation

A further factor that, according to ISSP research, accelerates and perpetuates the process of secularisation in the Czech Republic is the influence of the mass media on society.

### 2.7.1. The impact of the media on attitudes towards religion

ISSP's research highlights that the media in the Czech Republic play an important role in promoting the secular worldview of the state. 60% of respondents unequivocally declared that the media have a more fundamental influence on their worldview than the Church or clergy. On public television, religion is mostly presented in a cultural or historical context, rarely as a spiritual issue that is timeless and still relevant.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.7.2. The impact of the Internet and secularisation

In younger generations, there is a strong correlation between frequent Internet use and the lack of interest in religious issues. Those who use the Internet daily are 30% more likely to declare themselves as being non-religious compared to those who use the Internet negligibly.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.7.3. Low presence of religious topics in the public media

The proposed religious programmes on public television and public radio have little resonance. ISSP research shows that as many as 70% of respondents have never or very rarely encountered religious programmes in the media. This result clearly shows the marginalisation of religion in the public space.<sup>31</sup>

### 2.7.4. Interdependence of education and the media

The cited studies indicate that a higher level of education, combined with secular media coverage, has a major impact on the secularisation process, specifically among the younger generations. Among those with higher education who use the Internet on a daily basis, practically as many as 75% described themselves as non-religious. In contrast, among those with primary education and at the same time with limited access to the media, the percentage of respondents declaring themselves to be non-religious was 40%.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika*.

<sup>30</sup> See also.

<sup>31</sup> See Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika*.

<sup>32</sup> See also.

The collected data clearly shows that Czech media and education play the key role in shaping of a modern, secular society. Traditional religions, on the other hand, are losing their importance both in the public space and in private life. The above fact reinforces and perpetuates the process of secularisation.

## 2.8. Secular spirituality in place of traditional religiosity

According to the ISSP survey carried out, an increasing number of people describe themselves as “believers, but not declaring their affiliation to a particular religion”. Thus, an interest in existential and ethical issues is apparent, but without a clear reference to institutional religious structures.<sup>33</sup> Interest in spiritual practices unrelated to traditional religions (meditation, yoga, astrology or other forms of self-development), is a phenomenon that occurs in Czech society, but its scale is relatively limited. In the 2018 ISSP survey only about 10–15% of Czechs declared that they were interested in spirituality, but without any correlation to the traditional form that the Church proposes.<sup>34</sup>

This group was dominated by younger generations, people with higher education and residents of larger cities. The different style and dynamics of metropolitan life influence the easier penetration of global trends related to alternative forms of spirituality.

Although secular spirituality is an interesting phenomenon from a sociological point of view, the overwhelming part of Czech society, however, remains non-religious and shows no interest in either religion or alternative forms of spirituality.<sup>35</sup> Czech Republic one of the most secularised countries in the world. Analysis of the surveys reveals two clear trends.

- Individualisation of religion – the majority of the Czech population who declare themselves to be believers practise on an individual basis and rarely in the community of the church. This is due to a general reluctance to belong to official church structures, sometimes even the lack of trust in the hierarchy and the perception of religion as a personal matter.
- Growing importance of secular ethics – in Czech society, many people trade religious moral principles for civil ethics based on humanistic values and human rights.<sup>36</sup> Czech schools have introduced ethical education as an additional subject in the curriculum. Its aim is to teach pupils social and moral skills, such as critical thinking, empathy or respect and

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<sup>33</sup> Tomáš Halík. 2006. Otázky a pochybnosti. In *Český ateismus: příčiny, klady, zápory*. Eds. Knížnice Spolku evangelických kazatelů, 47–54. Benešov: Eman.

<sup>34</sup> See Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika*.

<sup>35</sup> See Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). *Náboženství (ISSP 2018) – Česká republika*.

<sup>36</sup> See Ludmila Muchová. 2015. *Morální výchova v nemorální společnosti?*. Brno: CDK.

regard for other people and their worldview. The subject serves to reinforce the values of humanism, basic human rights based on the principles of pro-social behaviour. In line with the experience of other OECD member countries, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport considers the introduction of the subject as an important step towards the systematic development of the moral side of students' personalities.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. Current Challenges for Religious Education

Religious education in the Czech Republic takes place on two levels either in public schools, including church schools, or in parish or other communities. According to the Report of the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic, religious education in public schools was attended by 31,229 students in 2022. Catechesis offered outside school (e.g. in parishes) was attended by 15,810 children and young people.<sup>38</sup> In schools, religious instruction is not confessional in nature. In addition to the messages conveyed, the religion teacher must respect the principle of worldview neutrality. The current Religious Education Curriculum of the Roman Catholic Church in grades 1st – 9th of primary school was approved by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic on June 2, 2004 with effect from 1 September 2004 under No. 20 924/2003-22, and was approved by the Church at the 49th plenary session of the Czech Episcopate on April 9, 2003.<sup>39</sup> The subject aims to help students formulate important questions about the basic values of life, the enable them to implement the knowledge gained in everyday life. The subject aims at creatively confronting a student with scientific and religious (Christian) worldviews in order to foster his/her ability to make informed choices in the search for his/her own value in life. The programme offers access to the biblical message, the teachings of Christian churches and their traditions, and opens up the possibility of living in a relationship with the church. The course is designed for all inter-

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<sup>37</sup> See Česká školní inspekce. 2016. Tematická zpráva – Etická výchova v předškolním, základním a středním vzdělávání (Čj.: ČSIG-2245/16-G2) (19.11.2024). [https://www.csicr.cz/Csicr/media/Prilohy/PDF\\_el.\\_publikace/Tematick%C3%A9%20zpr%C3%A1vy/2016\\_TZ\\_eticka\\_vychova.pdf](https://www.csicr.cz/Csicr/media/Prilohy/PDF_el._publikace/Tematick%C3%A9%20zpr%C3%A1vy/2016_TZ_eticka_vychova.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> See Výroční zpráva Církve římskokatolické za rok 2022 (16.11.2024). [https://cbk.cirkev.cz/public/media/files/47/source/orig/46891\\_vyrocní-zprava-cirkve-rimskokatolické-za-rok-2022-fin.pdf](https://cbk.cirkev.cz/public/media/files/47/source/orig/46891_vyrocní-zprava-cirkve-rimskokatolické-za-rok-2022-fin.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> See Sekretariát České biskupské konference. 2004. Osnovy k výuce náboženské výchovy římskokatolické církve v 1.-9. ročníku základní školy. Praha.

ested students. It also includes participation in educational projects. It is designed to help students develop social competences, such as the ability for intercultural dialogue and an understanding of multiculturalism.<sup>40</sup> Because of the weak religious interest, religious education in schools mainly fulfils a cultural, not a spiritual function, and to some extent meets modern social needs. Religious studies are often offered, which act mainly as a helpful tool for learning about and understanding other cultures and other world views.

An interesting alternative is church schools, which are intended to be environments where the church is “authentically experienced”.<sup>41</sup> The arrangement of religious instruction in a Catholic school is regulated by diocesan instructions; the specific form of instruction is a part of the school’s educational programme. Where confessional religious instruction is introduced as a compulsory or elective subject for all pupils, its programme is also approved by the competent diocesan authority.<sup>42</sup> According to the 2022 Report of the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic, the Roman Catholic Church runs 120 schools and educational institutions.<sup>43</sup>

Catechesis in the Czech Republic takes place in families, in parishes, and sometimes at school as an after-school interest group or within parish groups. The catechesis programme is written according to the guidelines of the Framework education programme for Primary Schools. Methodological support is provided by the diocesan catechetical department.<sup>44</sup>

In the context of prevailing secular attitudes, religious education faces many difficulties. Despite the fact that new forms of family organisation and the re-interpretation of traditional family roles are evident in the Czech community,<sup>45</sup> empirical research still confirms a relatively significant influence of ones family in shaping life value of the younger generation.

The Church therefore needs flexibility and the ability to adapt to new social and economic realities. Certainly, emphasis should be placed on supporting

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<sup>40</sup> See Ludmila Muchová. 2011. *Budete mými svědky. Dialogické rozvíjení křesťanské identity ve světonázorově pluralitní společnosti – pedagogická výzva*. Brno: Kartuziánské nakladatelství a vydavatelství.

<sup>41</sup> See Sekretariát České biskupské konference. 2015. *Dokument o směřování katecheze a náboženského vzdělávání v ČR*. Praha: ČBK.

<sup>42</sup> See also point 42.

<sup>43</sup> See Annual Report of the Roman Catholic Church for 2022.

<sup>44</sup> See Sekretariát České biskupské konference. 2021. *Dokument pro náboženské vzdělávání dětí v České republice*. Praha: ČBK.

<sup>45</sup> See Radek Tichý, Martin Vávra. 2012. *Náboženství z jiného úhlu*. Brno: CDK, 41-42; Antonín Paleček, Roman Vído. 2014. “Náboženské vyznání v České republice z perspektivy inter- a in-generační transmise”. *Naše společnost* (2): 24–35.

families to be able to adapt to the new socio-cultural heavy challenges. The phenomenon that the younger generation between the ages of 30 and 35 does not see the need for religious education in their children seems worrying. In the case of traditional religiosity, there is a reference to the inheritance of religious identity in the family. Only one-fifth of traditional believers developed outside the family. In non-traditional forms of religiosity, faith is not always inherited in the family.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

In the future, Christianity in the Czech Republic will certainly not be the core value for the general public. According to the research discussed, the certain key challenges for the Church are:

##### 4.1. The crisis of traditional family forms

In many cases, religious upbringing in families is in practice limited to basic ethical advice that parents spontaneously pass on to their children. Many parents prefer a stress-free upbringing and therefore shy away from imposing anything on their children, including religion, in order to allow their children to explore on their own through education and the production of a worldview.

The structure of the Czech church to date seems to reflect this. In addition to diocesan centres for family support, there is also a National Family Centre under the Czech Bishops' Conference. These centres attempt to co-create a pro-family climate by organising conferences, seminars, cooperation in the development of programmes and facilities for families and their members. These activities are undertaken on the basis of analyses of the current position of families in Czech society, from the perspective of the Catholic Church. The national centre actively seeks cooperation with the state authorities, the Parliament, the Senate, political parties and NGOs, and the media.<sup>47</sup>

In Czech society, where the process of secularisation is very strong, in the pastoral vision of the Church, the issue of families would also absolutely have to be one of the main priorities in the future.

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<sup>46</sup> See Tichý, Vávra. 2012. *Náboženství z jiného úhlu*, 29–33; Paleček, Vido. 2014. “Náboženské vyznání v České republice z perspektivy inter- a intragenerační transmise”, 24–35.

<sup>47</sup> See Národní centrum pro rodinu, *Výroční zpráva 2023* (19.11.2024). <https://www.rodiny.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vyrocní-zpráva-NCR-r.2023.pdf>.

## 4.2. Low level of interest among young people

Young people who are educated in public schools are rarely interested in religion for the various reasons discussed in the article. As a result, they perceive it as a certain archaism, or it has negative connotations, mainly due to the negative perception of the Church in Czech society. The very name of the subject sometimes arouses negative reactions: *Výuka náboženské výchovy Římskokatolické církve* (Teaching Religious Education of the Roman Catholic Church).<sup>48</sup> In response to this, some catechists and educationalists are proposing to change the name and the curriculum of the subject to meet social requirements. It would mainly involve an introduction to the world of Christian values and culture, which were at the root of the foundations of European civilisation. Catechisation, on the other hand, would mainly take place in parish or other communities.<sup>49</sup>

## 4.3. The absence of institutional support from the state

Religious instruction is not a compulsory subject in public schools, which means that Christian families, including Catholic families, have to look for alternative sources of religious education as in most schools the subject is not offered by the school due to insufficient enrolment in the subject. Most parishes offer catechesis, but a small proportion of young people participate in such classes. This is dictated by today's lifestyle of living, working and studying, which places great demands on families and the students themselves. Large parishes in larger cities with secondary schools, high schools and university centres offer catechesis within the framework of children's groups or youth groups. There it is more about human, intellectual, religious and community formation, combined with free time (weekend stays, holiday camps) something in the manner of Salesian oratories. In smaller parishes, the situation is radically different. There is a decline in the number of religious enrolment according to the regions. In a particular way, we can speak of the missionary areas of the dioceses of Litoměřice, Plzeň, České Budějovice.

According to church statistics from 2021, 70% of children and young people catechised in the Czech Republic live in Moravia. Also, of the children attending catechism in schools, the vast majority, 84%, live in Moravia.

In the Czech Catholic church province, 2 out of 5 children are catechised outside of school (in parishes, religious orders, religious movements, etc.). In

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<sup>48</sup> Teaching of religious education of the Roman Catholic Church, author's transl.

<sup>49</sup> See Report on the meetings of the Catechetical Commission of the Czech Bishops' Conference for the year 2024. Archives of the Secretariat of the Czech Bishops' Conference.

Moravia, on the other hand, as many as 3/4 of the children participate in school catechesis. This may be due to the pastoral strategy of a particular diocese, the knowledgeable choice of parents or organisational issues.<sup>50</sup>

According to data from the end of 2023, 46,801 people are catechised, of whom 30,872 are in schools and 15,929 in parishes. It should be noted that the majority of those catechised are under the age of 15, so there are more of them than young people in the further statistics.

According to 2019 data, the number of church-attending aged 15–29 (Visitor Survey) was 41.4 thousand, representing 2.57% of the national youth population of this age (out of 1.613 million people). More than 5,000 people attended the national youth meeting in Hradec Králové (2022). This represents 12% of those attending church on Sundays aged 15–29. The World youth meeting in Lisbon (2023) was attended by 3,177 young people from the Czech Republic.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.4. Digital cultural space

A great idea for the Church in secular Czech society is its presence in the space of mass media. How to create a good, positive image of Christianity in the media. Those that have negligible viewership or audibility. For example, TV Noe is regularly watched by only 2.5% of people or Radio Proglas is regularly listened to by 1.6% of people in the Czech Republic.<sup>52</sup>

The great and current dilemma remains the question of how to talk about faith, Christian values in an adequate manner in the mass media space? How would religion, faith, spirituality be presented in the media? What could new forms of communication look like in the digital space (memes, religious blogs, religion in social networks)? How could religious themes be present in computer games? Creating interesting religious mobile Apps that would propose themes between entertainment and devotion.

At the moment, due to the constant lack of professional and well-prepared didactic, pedagogical, mass media facilities, lack of finances, the situation in this regard is not something to be proud of.

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<sup>50</sup> See Field Data Prepared by the Department of Data Analysis and Processing at the Czech Bishops' Conference.

<sup>51</sup> See Field Data Prepared by the Department of Data Analysis and Processing at the Czech Bishops' Conference.

<sup>52</sup> See Field Data Prepared by the Department of Data Analysis and Processing at the Czech Bishops' Conference.

## 5. Conclusion

The facts presented in the article evoke mixed feelings. Czech society is strongly polarised for many reasons, most recently because of the war in Ukraine. The nostalgia of the older population for the “lost communist paradise”, i.e. social guarantees, is obvious. Younger generations experience many uncertainties and do not remember the period of unfreedom. Many politicians exploit this and strongly polarize the society. Moreover, according to the available sociological analyses, it can be said with absolute certainty that contemporary civilisation is declining in terms of values, economy, innovation, mentality and ethics. As society is, so is the local church, made up of concrete people and is part of the Czech nation. Some might see the current situation in Czech society as disastrous for the churches, for Christian values, and might call for radical conservative methods. Those who call for a return to past times in all churches are not few. But it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not the way. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis directly encourages the Church to regularly discern and to be able to reassess its customs and traditions. While some of them are strongly rooted in history and were important and valuable in past times, they may not be perceived in the same way today and may not have the same meaning because they no longer fulfill the same role as they did in the past. There are church approaches or rules that worked well in the past but may not have the same educational effect today and may be losing their original meaning.<sup>53</sup> In a similar way, Tomáš Halík encourages the Church not to be afraid to respond to the needs and lifestyles of contemporary people. We should also critically discern and evaluate the resources and energy that the Church puts into traditional forms of pastoral care.<sup>54</sup>

If these ideas, the prophetic appeals, are narrowed down to the area of religious formation, we must necessarily ask whether the current adherence to teaching religion in public schools is producing the desired results. The statistics clearly show that interest in this type of teaching is steadily declining. The subject of teaching the religion of the Roman Catholic Church is seen as something that the state must allow if it respects religious freedom. The existence of the subject is based solely on the right of parents to demand religious education for their children at school. Therefore, in practice, the only partners for school principals are the parents of the children. In most cases, school principals do not respond at all to parish offers regarding religious education in their schools. Participation in religious instruction at school has been until now a reason for “labelling” children,

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<sup>53</sup> See EG 43.

<sup>54</sup> See Tomáš Halík. 2021. *Odpoledne křesťanství: Odvaha k proměně*. Praha: NLN.

sometimes by other classmates, sometimes by teachers. Many religious parents do not enroll their children in religious education because in an urban environment children have a large number of sports activities and extra-curricular clubs, which are often more important to children and parents than religious education. In their defense, it should be mentioned that the reason for this is sometimes the negative experience of parents with the poor level of religious education. Children receive very little information at school that enables them to learn about the religious roots of European culture, even though knowledge of one's own culture is a clear prerequisite for children's enculturation and their ability to live in dialogue with other cultures. Moreover, this aspect is also not sufficiently reflected by the educational community.

I believe that it is appropriate to consider a change in the current approach on this issue. In 2004, the Czech Parliament adopted the so-called School Law<sup>55</sup>. All churches in the Czech Republic have twenty years of experience in this area. All teachers of religion, from different churches, try to do their best, but it is a nationwide "trial and error" based not only on the catechetical but also on the teaching skills of individuals.

Perhaps it is time to admit that the era of classical religious education in schools is over and that the reality in Europe has changed. Moreover, in the Czech context, the separation of church and state has occurred, and it can be assumed, according to the priorities set by the churches, that catechetical and pedagogical potential will soon be no more, because there will be no possibility to study the field of religious pedagogy and catechetics. Only one faculty has a field of study called "teacher of religion" as a part of the specialization in social science.<sup>56</sup> Courses within churches, for example in individual dioceses, never take a scientific approach, that is, those who teach it also develop the discipline scientifically, and thus innovate it. Courses may offer a maintenance of status, but they do not teach lecturers to work scientifically. This can only be done in the university within a broader, scientific discourse where the field is currently under threat. This sorry state of affairs has left the churches in a quandary, with church leaders on the one hand trying to maintain an ecclesiological model of religious instruction. On the other hand, there is pressure from below for a multicultural understanding of the world and unbridled religious freedom. Demanding the introduction of the teaching of spirituality in schools without a specific religion. This is the model currently demanded by non-Christian educators. It is therefore a warning to all churches in the country. At the same time, according to sociologi-

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<sup>55</sup> Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. Zákon o předškolním, základním, středním, vyšším odborném a jiném vzdělávání.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.ucimenabozenstvi.cz/>.

cal statistics, it is an obvious preference for private religion, in which everyone believes what he or she wants. If the churches do not start working positively with this phenomenon, this approach may establish itself as more open and more suitable for general education. On the other hand, the legislative enshrinement of religious education in this hypothetical case seems to be an advantage for the churches.<sup>57</sup>

Catechesis in parishes seems to be an interesting alternative for religious education, especially because religion is not the teaching of theology, it is a help on the way to God not only for children but also for their families. It is rather a community of children and young people. The Gospel is glad tidings, and so too it must reach children and youth not as information but as a transmission of the *Depositum fidei*. Above all, this means experiencing the Church as a living community of faith (education in the faith, common prayer, liturgy, working together, games, weekend and holiday visits, intergenerational cooperation, selfless service for the benefit of our neighbours). The parish as a community is a family, so it is important to give children the experience of a big family. It is not important what amount of knowledge the children take away at the end of the school year, but that they enjoy and keep coming. What they will not be able to take in this year, they will understand in a year or two. Only theological information is not enough for a young person, but they need to be excited about their faith. The only criterion for success, then, is that the catechist passes on to the next year all the children entrusted to him.<sup>58</sup> This idea corresponds to the old wisdom of the American poet and civic activist Maya Angelou<sup>59</sup>, who said, “*people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*” While not directly aimed at teachers, this statement is often used in pedagogical contexts. Its message emphasises the importance of empathy, kindness and support in interpersonal relationships, including the educational process.

Therefore, it seems that this option may be an interesting alternative for the future of religious formation of children, youth and adults in the Czech Republic.

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<sup>57</sup> Similar postulates were consulted across churches, especially with Michal Kaplánek, Ludmila Muchová, Noemi Bravená.

<sup>58</sup> This approach was applied by catechist Ludmila Vyskočilová in the Roman Catholic parish of Prague – Stodůlky.

<sup>59</sup> Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a prominent American poet, writer, actress, singer, director, and civil rights activist.

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