

Spring 5-2015

# Nuancing Czech Secularism and Debunking Assumptions of Atheism: Finding Spirituality and Questioning Identity in a Culturally Christian Post-Communist Society

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**Nuancing Czech Secularism and Debunking Assumptions of Atheism: Finding Spirituality  
and Questioning Identity in a Culturally Christian Post-Communist Society**



A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
Bates College  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By  
Molly Paillet  
Lewiston, Maine  
March 30, 2015

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not have been possible without academic, logistic, and general support and brilliance from other people. Thank you to Jakub Kazecki for all of the guidance, editing, and organizational help, and for coaching me to create a better thesis. A huge thank you to Amy Strada, for helping me organize and coordinate classroom surveys/discussion sessions at her high school in Moravia. This project and my research trip would not have been as successful, or enjoyable, without her help. Filip Michalsky, thank you for being my interview guinea pig, connecting me to other interviewees and for being a Czech friend at Bates. Evan Cooper, for being a support system while we were both back abroad and researching for thesis (and during the whole thesis process in general, I'm glad we were in this together). Thank you to the Bates Off-Campus Study Office and the Cole History Fund for sending me back to the Czech Republic. Thanks to all the students at Střední odborná škola a Gymnázium Staré Město and all the people who let me interview them. Thank you also to Roman, Sarah Brock, Emily McIlvaine, Lauren Piccarillo, Terezie Jelínková and the whole family, Eliska Podzimkova, Monika Komjatiová and Radka Michalová.

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# Introduction

## Entry Points into Czech Secularism

At the first narrow turn on the tight spiral stairway, lugging my suitcase behind me—clunking and thumping each step, I found Jesus. Literally. I stood face to face with a giant wooden crucifix. Christ's downturned mahogany eyes met mine as I processed: *Here I am. I am in the Czech Republic: Prague, with my host family, in a stairway, with Jesus and their cat.* I spent fall of 2013 living in the Czech Republic. I struggled through the mouth contortions of the Czech language, took in the history and culture, and attempted to internalize what living in a different culture, and with a different family other than my own would be like. As a self-identifying cultural Jew and agnostic growing up with non-religious parents, I had no experience with Christianity or with a family culture of religious observation at all. My experience did not center on the religious activity of my host family, but in this new setting I was exposed to new religious aspects that heighten my awareness and interest in religion and secularism in the Czech Republic.

I soon realized that my Roman Catholic host family was unusual in the Czech Republic; the abundance of crosses in their apartment, and—excuse the pun, religious church attendance, did not reflect the secular normative majority in modern Czech life. Although Roman Catholicism is the most widely practiced and present form of Christianity in the Czech Republic, my host family as practicing Roman Catholics is a minority. There are religious communities, structures, and believers in the Czech Republic—the country has manifold Christian religious past that influences its culture and there are other smaller religious groups outside of Christianity in the Czech Republic, but the modern Czech Republic is one of the most secular nations in the world. Consistently in censuses and national polling, high percentages of surveyed Czechs do not

claim a religious affiliation, do not identify as religious, and express that institutional religious organizations should be given minimal support and funding from the state.<sup>1</sup> This data shows that each generation of Czech people is becoming increasingly detached from the role that a church would play, as a structure for power, organization and belief, in a traditionally religious society. The Czech Republic has a deeply rooted culture of Christianity, but this culture of Christianity is only manifest through traditions and represents Czech life and heritage, not religious participation. These traditions and heritage that are based in Christianity help make up the culture of the Czech Republic although they are not uniformly or overtly tied to active religious participation or belief.

My encounter with the wooden crucifix contradicted my preconceived notion that the Czech Republic was an atheistic country and prompted me to question and explore religious expression, lack thereof, and the potential for spirituality in the Czech Republic. When talking about religion in the Czech Republic I am referring to the dominant Christianity. I was curious if secularism and atheism in the Czech Republic went hand in hand or if religious disinterest and disassociation did not necessarily reflect non-religious, or non-spiritual beliefs. Was being religious in the Czech Republic more complicated than just identifying and practicing an established religion, and was Czech secularism more complicated than just disassociating with established religion?

This examination of secularism and questioning if secularism relates to atheism extends beyond just my case study of the Czech Republic. The connection between atheism and lack of

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<sup>1</sup> See available census data information at: Czech Statistical Office, <http://www.czso.cz/sldb/sldb2001.nsf/tabx/CZ0000>. See Eurobarometer Data, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_225\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf). For information about public opinion regarding the role of the church and church power see *European Values Study of 1999*: [http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/firmShowpage?v\\_page\\_id=4541013598567718](http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/firmShowpage?v_page_id=4541013598567718) and *International Social Survey Programme 1998*: <http://zcat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zcat.gesis.org/obj/fStudy/ZA3190>

visible religion is a point of continued interest for scholars and is a significant topic as many different societies are seeing a decrease in visible and traditional forms of religious participation. This evaluation of secularism and questioning its tie to atheism works to inform the larger social and theological work. The idea of present but less visible elements of religion in society can be explained with the concept of “Invisible Religion” that Thomas Luckmann argues.<sup>2</sup> The concept of Invisible Religion can be explained as alternate beliefs that people have, which are not identified within traditional religious terms and are therefore less visible. Luckmann extends the conception of religion even further to define religion as something that enables individuals to transcend their biological nature; this definition could fit broadly into other categories like culture. Luckmann and this view of invisible religion complicate how religion or atheism might fit into secular concepts and show that these specific questions relating to the Czech Republic also are vital in a large academic scope.

In my thesis, I attempt detail the character of Czech secularism and discover if there are spiritual aspects or ideas that permeate through Czech culture. I hypothesize that although the Czech Republic is largely secular; this secularity is more complex and is still influenced by Christianity. Even though the Czech Republic might be secular in its separation from the church as a prominent organization in its society, Christianity more broadly is an influencing factor in Czech culture life and is a part of Czech identity. I aim to distance the association of secularism with atheism by asking if secularism translates to atheism in Czech society.

I work to complicate the generalization of the Czech Republic as a secular country. Is the Czech Republic truly secular if so much of the culture and traditions are rooted in Christianity?

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<sup>2</sup> JOHN BOWKER. "Invisible religion." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. 1997. *Encyclopedia.com*. (March 27, 2015). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O101-Invisiblereligion.html>

My thesis is about people, their interactions with each other, their society and their understanding of their past, present and future. I approached my work with the initial hypothesis that spiritual outlets must exist outside of a traditional medium of an institutional religion in Czech culture. The Czech Republic might be nominally secular but there are religious and spiritual cultural elements within this secularism. The re-evaluation of Czech secularism leads me to understand and to contextualize elements of Czech identity and culture. If not in a religious context where do Czech people go to find sources of truth telling and mediums for personal reflection and connection to the world around them?

I will later explain in detail with literature reviews and a breakdown of my methodology how my research specifically differs from other work and adds to the existing studies in the field. But, I want to start at the very beginning to address the opening questions that even bring me to this subject. Why the Czech Republic? Why secularism, religion, and spirituality? Why does this research in this field matter, and why does my research in this field matter outside of this very specific context?

The Czech Republic has a long history of church distrust and anti-clericalism. The most recent influencing historical period that might have contributed to the sense of secularism is the communist regime that suppressed religious activity when it was in power from 1948 to 1989. Practicing religion during this period was risky, so actively religious people practiced in small underground groups outside of the public sphere. My host family was among this network of underground believers in Prague during Communism. I learned that my host father was imprisoned for three days for circulating religious *samizdat*, self-published and sometimes contraband texts, and that my host family once helped to hide a priest in their apartment. My host parents married young and then lived for the first few months of their marriage in the upstairs of



a neglected church building. The role of the religion was a cornerstone in their lives and continues to be. These stories fascinated me; hearing about my family's experiences imbued my interpretation of their religiosity with romance and edge while underscoring the fact that the people in the Czech Republic experience a living history in their daily lives.

These stories reiterated the idea that the people of the Czech Republic live within a culture that is still living through the very real memories and experiences of its past. The historical moments and markers of time in the Czech Republic are events that go beyond a notation on a page; these events hold memory, location, emotion, and still affect the individual and collective conception of identity in the Czech Republic since many Czech people have lived through so many changes in one lifetime. The changes between living in the past during Communism and living today in the Czech Republic help mark these two different periods in time and create a self-awareness of the passage and difference of time. The awareness of these changes perpetuates the idea of a Czech living history, which is absent for me in American culture. The smallness and intimacy of the Czech Republic as a small nation of people heightens this tangible sense of its history. This living history experience is especially notable for me as a cultural outsider; the smallness of the Czech Republic makes this living history an experience that is more uniform and applicable to society as a whole; it is a shared experience of the past. As an American, I don't feel a sense of a general or communal American living history. This might be because I have not lived through regime changes in the United States or because of larger geographic and cultural diversity in American society, which might dilute a sense of tangible change over time. The environment of the Czech Republic creates a microcosm of historical reality, this living history, and helps me to answer the question: why do I want to study and talk about religion, secularism and spirituality in the Czech Republic?

I study the Czech Republic instead of other nearby potential post-communist countries like Poland or Slovakia because of the Czech Republic's unique secular character, because of the sense of a living history that is present in the Czech Republic, and because of the tenuous and changing sense of national and personal identity which could help to contextualize my questions of religion, secularism and spirituality. The Czech Republic's secularism differentiates it from other more religious neighboring countries despite sharing similar histories of Communism. Even though geography and history knots post-communist countries together, there were and are differences between countries, like the significance and role of religion within society. The church in the Czech Republic was not a source of strong societal power unlike Slovakia and Poland.<sup>3</sup> One argument for this religious difference is that the relationship between religion and nationalism in each country is different. In Slovakia for example, religion functions as a nationalistic element of identity and is rooted in traditionalism where in the Czech Republic Roman Catholic roots are viewed in contradiction of nationalist desires during most of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This argument connects nationalism and religion and supports my idea that religion is tied to national and cultural identity; the fact that the Czech Republic rejects religion helps provide a window into its identity as a nation.

The fact the Czech Republic seems to be an island of secularism in a history of societies that ascribe to structures of traditional religion interests me. The secularity of the Czech Republic adds to the curious task of interpreting a unique Czech identity that is not wholly Eastern European, the history and experience of communism, or Western European, the growing capitalism and influence of globalization. Even the term "Central European" seems illusory and constructed. The personal identity of people living in the Czech Republic, their identity in

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Froese, "Secular Czechs and Devout Slovaks: Explaining Religious Differences," *Review of Religious Research* 46, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

relation to the Czech Republic itself, and the Czech Republic's national identity are influenced by increasing globalization which refocuses the Czech Republic in relation to the rest of Europe and the world. Within Europe is a desire to be perceived as Western European, and Western more generally; there is a sense of progress, power, and economic success associated with the Western Europe. The Czech Republic is so far one of the eleven post-communist countries to be included in the European Union.<sup>5</sup> This inclusion immediately shifts the identity of the Czech Republic westward despite geographic realities that settle the Czech Republic in Central Europe and its historical past that could determine the Czech Republic as Eastern European. Is the Czech Republic Western, Central or Eastern European? The hallmark secularism of the Czech Republic within the post communist countries could be interpreted as an indicator of Westernization. Yet there are also Western countries that are more religious than the Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup> Does this categorization of Western, Eastern or Central Europe significantly matter in the formation of Czech identity and the processing of questions about its culture in terms of secularism, religion and spirituality? These overlapping potential identities of the Czech Republic allow it to become an interesting case study in identity. Religion, spirituality, and secularism of other countries could be measured and used to help understand identity and society. Since the Czech Republic is categorized as secular there is more potential to question how and why these elements, religion, spirituality, and secularism, contribute to Czech identity.

The theme of national identity and identity in relation to other countries is not a new subject for the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic experienced a long history of being under the control of other powers and fought as a small country to establish its own national identity. The conflict and struggle of creating a Czech identity and nationalistic mentality with the past

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<sup>5</sup> "Countries." Europa.eu -. Accessed March 22, 2015. [http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/index_en.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Froese, "Secular Czechs and Devout Slovaks: Explaining Religious Differences."

experiences of being historically conquered create an interesting dynamic. The idea of the proud Czech nation being a nation made up of people who were historically conquered can be summed up in the title of Ladislav Holý's history of the Czech Republic, The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation.<sup>7</sup> This is an example of a continual effort for creating and understanding Czech national and personal identity within a historical and contemporary context and emphasizes that the topic of Czech identity has a deep rooted past.

The struggle to define and process Czech identity is an ongoing theme. During Communism the Czech writer Milan Kundera offered up an interpretation of Czech identity in relation to the rest of Europe in his 1984 essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. Perhaps the environment of Communism created increasing introspection for Kundera, in his text he tried to reckon with the sense of Czech and Central European identity. Kundera's essay highlights the struggle of geographic and European identity that helps to frame Czech self-understanding; this is a theme that continues today. He suggests that the Czechoslovakia and other neighboring countries were the cultural life force of European and that through political oppression this vitality and strength has been dissolved. Kundera doesn't define nationhood by political boundaries but by shared experience, "Central Europe is not a state, it is a culture or fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be redrawn with each new historical situation."<sup>8</sup> I am interested in the culture and society of the Czech Republic that resulted from the shared decades of historical experience, and how this culture and society contributes to a sense of Czech identity.

Each country has its unique historical situation that helps to define its "culture and fate;" the communist regime in Czechoslovakia created a separation of a public and private spheres of

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<sup>7</sup> Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," (New York: New York Review of Books: 1984), 31:7.

activity. I question if these separate spheres continue to be present in Czech culture and influence the national and personal identity of Czech people. Under Communism the public life of a person was under scrutiny, they were expected to act in a certain way, attend public political events, and be a model citizen of the regime. Only in a person's private life could they speak freely and act without fear of judgment or suspicion. The white washed effect of a placated society outwardly demonstrating an approved lifestyle became the norm in Czechoslovakia. Communism in Czechoslovakia was not as harsh as the communist regimes in other countries, for example there were never food shortages in Czechoslovakia or mass communal outward displays of discontent or violent rioting—life under Communism was not pleasant, but it was survivable. This survivable quality of Czech communism created a culture of people who were publically muted. Within the later years under Communism, during the period of Normalization from 1969 to 1987, in Czechoslovakia there was a group of people who fell into the “grey zone.” The period of Normalization sought to reestablish the presence of the communist party and the role of Czechoslovakia as a part of the socialist bloc. Repressive policies were put into place to reverse the opening within society during the previous rule of Alexander Dubček. The grey zone consisted of the majority of Czechoslovak citizens. This term grey zone encompasses this majority of society; the citizens who conformed outwardly to the policies of Normalization and to the regime and by doing so gave up publicly expressing their opinions or countering those of the regime.<sup>9</sup> The title of greyness alluded to this sense of dulled expressed and contrived public life.

This grey zone experience is a detail of the Czech Republic's history that makes it especially interesting and relevant to think about in terms of modern national identity and in

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<sup>9</sup> László Kürti and Peter Skalník, *Postsocialist Europe: Anthropological Perspectives from Home* (Berghahn Books, 2009).

terms of my topic, how this relates to religion, secularism and spirituality. The grey zone made up a surface society of people who were living publically according to the regime. This time period is grey because of the outward monotony of living a life that was constructed by the communist regime. I want to see how Czech society today navigates the freedoms of personal and individual expression and how religion, secularism, and spirituality function outside of the grey zone. I am curious if the history of a separate public and private sphere influence how people today express their religious, secular, or spiritual beliefs. This history of a muted public sphere of expression and the divide between public and private sphere might even effect the categorization of the Czech Republic as secular. The divide between public and private lives might affect the polling and other data that characterizes the Czech Republic to be secular. For example the strong disassociation with public religious displays like church activity might affect a person's response to a polling question, and they might identify as a-religious because they do not attend a church. It is possible that the influence of religion is more a part of Czech life than these polls suggest since religion may be active but in a less public way. It is also possible that in a non-grey zone of liberated Czech people, especially as time passes and generations become more distanced from the culture of Communism, there is no longer a harsh division between public and private spheres of life and that this data is not influenced by a sense of inhibition or historical baggage.

There few sociological and religious studies on post communist countries available in English and the field itself is small even within publications in native languages. The censuses and polls that deem the Czech Republic to be secular are based in quantitative data that cannot explain the differences, details, and nuances of belief or the influencing factors of identity and historical experience that help contextualize this limited data. There are especially limited studies

from an outside perspective on these countries. The limited scholarship is another answer to the question, “Why study this?” and “Why the Czech Republic.” I approach my study of Czech identity and culture in terms of religion, secularism, and spirituality from a “Western” perspective as an American. My outside perspective, while creating some barriers of language and culture, gives me the benefit of increased cultural sensitivity. I am looking at the identity and elements of a culture outside of my own, so I am able to take in more details and not take for granted or assume cultural elements like a Czech researcher might since they know this subject and the Czech environment more internally. I am aware that my study and research are centered on my questions, which come from my own experiences, background, and acculturation. I am studying Czech identity and culture by focusing on religion, secularism, and spirituality. But, I am ultimately studying the middle ground where my interviewees meet with me in the shared linguistic space of the English language. In a way I am not only studying Czech perspectives on religion, secularism and spirituality within a culture and how this relates to Czech identity, but I am exploring the effects of English speaking acculturation and western influence on culture. I am seeing if my socialized versions and conceptions of religion, spirituality and secularism translate within a Czech context and if they are present as a part of Czech culture and life. This strange and intellectually challenging dynamic to my research makes this work worth doing as my work will not only hopefully add more to this field, but also add a different and new perspective as well as create a new entry point to understanding these ideas.

In Chapter One I consider the past to think about the history and the present Czech Republic. I look at moments of historical religious shifting to emphasize the fact that the Czech Republic may have always had secular inclinations. I reflect on the impact of communism in the Czech Republic and how this period could affect the secular state of the Czech Republic. In

addition to this historical contextualization, I present the different types of actual data used to categorize the Czech Republic as secular. Censuses, Polling, and qualitative studies have been used to show Czech secularism. I preface my own work by critiquing the religious sociology conducted on the Czech Republic. I look at other sociologist's and scholar's interpretations of data and their additional research in order to better inform my own understanding of the topic. I use past studies to help define the terms of religion, secularism, and spirituality that I use in my work.

Chapter Two centers on the methodology I use for interviewing and surveying research. I was fortunate to return to the Czech Republic for two weeks to conduct interviews. In this chapter I outline the questions I asked and provide the rationale for my questioning. I further acknowledge the biases I bring as an outside researcher and how this outside perspective presents weaknesses and strengths in my work. I also explain why I use a qualitative methodology and how this methodology has been used in other studies on my topic.

Chapter Three is a discussion of the results from the sixty-eight high school students that I surveyed. In this chapter I organize responses question by question. This chapter provides a case study of both age and region in the Czech Republic. The students I surveyed and met with in class were between the ages of 16-19 and they live in the south of the Czech Republic, Moravia.

Chapter Four is similar to the previous chapter; I discuss the interview results from my eighteen one on one interviews that I conducted in Prague. These interviews were more in depth and I was able to talk to a variety of people. In this chapter I reflect on the Christmas celebrations and atmosphere in Prague at this pre-Christmas time. This information and the many personal



perspectives allow me to nuance my thesis as well as gain insight and identify trends in thought and understanding of the Czech Republic as a secular nation.

Chapter Five steps back from the rich and spiraling information from interviewees to look back at the Czech Republic and my subject more broadly. Here I bring my personal experience in the Czech Republic and my academic exploration full circle. In this closure I acknowledge how Christianity is manifest in society through traditions. I discuss how traditions and a culture of secular Christianity play into Czech identity. I suggest different cultural aspects that could replace structured religion or the elements of spirituality, faith placement, and community structures in the Czech Republic. I attempt to explain why the Czech Republic is categorized as secular, and why this secularism is not as clear cut as the census data that suggests it in the first place. I conclude by exploring the idea of secularism and its associations versus a culturally specific Czech “somethingism” that is more inclusive and representative than the associations that the categorization of secularism conjure. I revisit the question of if the Czech Republic is atheistic as well as secular to dilute this association and explain a personalized and individual Czech approach to religion that could be misconstrued with atheism. I offer my interpretation of how religion, spirituality, and secularism contribute to Czech identity and speculate on the role and significance of spirituality within a secular Czech Republic.

## **Chapter One**

### **Tracing Secularism in the Czech Republic: Present Data, History, and Sociological Perspectives**

The goals of this chapter are threefold. I present the data that most scholars use to categorize the Czech Republic as a secular country. I explain the limitations of this data and talk about its strengths, which allow it to show that the Czech Republic is secular. Before I explain moments within the history of the Czech Republic that could contribute to the sense of secularism in the current Czech Republic, I review how the area of the modern Czech Republic was referred to throughout history to avoid any potential confusion when talking historically about the present day Czech Republic. Understanding these different moments in time when the Czech Republic was not an independent nation is important too when considering how Czech national identity could be influenced by the past. It is also important to remember that the collapse of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and its new reconfiguration as two separate nations, the Czech Republic and Slovakia was fairly recent. This political shift was lived through by a large part of the Czech population. After debriefing on the Czech Republic's past titular identities, I provide points of historical context that help contextualize why the Czech Republic might be secular.

I review and critique sociological and religious studies about religion and secularism in the Czech Republic. These studies utilize the data I introduced earlier to help explain Czech secularism as well as provide more background for me as I approach my own work in this field. In addition to providing background, this review allows me to understand secularism through interpretations that previous scholars working in this area employed and to work from the same ideological base as other scholars and sociologists who have examined this topic before me.

Some of the studies I look at go beyond analyzing the already foundation data on Czech secularism and add their own new research to the field. I build off of the methodology of other scholars and introduce how my own research differs and draws from previous research.

## **Looking at the Data that Defines the Czech Republic as a Secular Nation**

The Czech Republic is known internationally to be secular and a-religious. A multiplicity of data collected in the Czech Republic substantiates this claim and sets the groundwork for investigating and understanding the nature of Czech secularism. Censuses, polling by the European Commission's Special Eurobarometer (number 225), and data from the Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1998 and 2008 characterize the Czech Republic as one of the most secular countries in the world.<sup>19</sup> This data points out that the Czech Republic is becoming measurably more secular as time passes. These sources create a foundation of data that is solidly constructed. The foundation of data is based on surveying and polls that range in years, region, and cover large percentages of the population, as well as include different ranges of question types that allow this data to soundly qualify the Czech Republic as secular. This data is context and an entry point into sociological studies and the examination of Czech religion and secularism.

Aside from the background and context that this data provides, it is also useful to evaluate the types of surveying that makes up this wealth of data and see how these different

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<sup>10</sup> See available census data information at: Czech Statistical Office, <http://www.czso.cz/sldb/sldb2001.nsf/tabx/CZ0000>. More specific year by year comparisons (the data from the 1921, 1930, 1950, 1991, and 2001 censuses) can be found at: [http://www.czso.cz/csu/2006edicniplan.nsf/t/3D00462B10/\\$File/4032060119.pdf](http://www.czso.cz/csu/2006edicniplan.nsf/t/3D00462B10/$File/4032060119.pdf) information from the most recent 2011 census can be found at: [http://www.czso.cz/csu/2006edicniplan.nsf/t/3D00462B10/\\$File/4032060119.pdf](http://www.czso.cz/csu/2006edicniplan.nsf/t/3D00462B10/$File/4032060119.pdf) See Eurobarometer Data, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_225\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf). For information about public opinion regarding the role of the church and church power see *European Values Study of 1999*: [http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/frmShowpage?v\\_page\\_id=4541013598567718](http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/frmShowpage?v_page_id=4541013598567718) and *International Social Survey Programme 1998*: <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zacat.gesis.org/obj/fStudy/ZA3190>

surveying and polling methods function. I discuss the different types of data in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. This data is still somewhat limited in explaining the quantitative responses that point to a national secular attitude. Quantitative data asks questions with few possible responses. This is a weakness of quantitative data because the nuances of belief, opinion, and personal ideas are not possible to explore with such limited responses. This means that results from this data, although they are able to characterize the Czech Republic as secular, may not accurately reflect why Czech people believe what they do or how respondents may have interpreted the questions. Even outside of quantitative data are other potential limitations that do not allow data collected to be wholly representative of the Czech Republic.

The census data is the most representative in terms of the sheer number of respondents and the widespread geographic, socio-economic, and age range that it covers. Other data collection focuses on smaller groups of people and is not able to have the same representative value of large census surveying. Despite the limitations of non-representational surveying and polling, response biases seem to be unavoidable. Even polling and surveying that attempts to be wide reaching feel the effects of survey non-response rates, which are high in the Czech Republic.<sup>20</sup> An example of census data that points towards Czech secularity and also reveals the problem of a high non-response rate is the information from the most recent 2011 census in the Czech Republic. Of the ten million people in the country that the census attempted to survey, 34.2 percent identified themselves as “not religious,” 20.6 percent of people identified as “religious,” and 45.2 percent did not answer.<sup>21</sup> This factor of a high no-response rate is

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<sup>20</sup> Jindřich Krejčí, "Non-Response in Probability Sample Surveys in the Czech Republic," *Sociologický Časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 43, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>21</sup> Calculators done from the data provided from the 2011 census. This data can be accessed at <http://vdb.czso.cz/sldbvo>

recognized within sociological research and poses potential problems for future research. Reasons for this high survey non-response rate might be the increased demand for participation, or offer for participation in surveys and a response of decreased interest; a participant might feel “over-surveyed.” Another potential reason for this is lifestyle changes that make it more difficult to contact people directly and personally.<sup>22</sup> I recognize the reality of non-response rates in order to remember that the weaknesses that come from response biases within surveying are not the only weakness within a study. Even within wider studies that reach out to more people there is still a response bias present in the form of non-response.

Data from the Social Surveys Program, ISSP data, is somewhat limited since this was a voluntary survey. This surveying offered similar quantitative responses like the census but it attempted to gauge responses by offering a spectrum of answers that could provide more detail than a census response.<sup>23</sup> Compared to data collected from a census, this group of respondents is not representative of the population of the Czech Republic. However, even though the ISSP data represents a smaller sample size, its methodology is useful to better understand the nature of secularism in the Czech Republic. The weaknesses of a census, the narrow questioning and quantitative methodology, are based in its need to be efficient since it is surveying such a large pool of people. The ISSP data is able to collect more varied data; this benefit makes up for the fact that ISSP data is not as wide reaching or representative as census data.

The responses from the Special Eurobarometer Social Values, Science, and Technology publication provide more detail than the basic questions of religious identification that the census asked respondents. This study based its information from interviews conducted in interviewee’s native languages in their homes. Like the ISSP data, this data has a weakness of response bias

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> to see the examples of questions that this survey asked, go to: <http://www.gesis.org/?id=893> and <http://www.gesis.org/issp/issp-modules-profiles/religion/cumulation/>

and is not able to be broadly representative. However, this study asked a multitude of questions that provide more insight into the topic of Czech religion and secularism. This many-pronged approach of questioning respondents is this study's biggest strength. For example, instead of only asking, "Do you believe in a god?" this study asked questions that attempted to get at a larger sense of spirituality like, "how often do you think about the meaning of life?" This study also asked questions about people's belief in science and the environment to help gauge social values and what a society sees as valuable information. These questions are not directly linked towards the study of secularism of religion in the Czech Republic but helped me to see a larger social attitude that Czech people might have, and how this attitude and worldview could relate to religion or secularism and connect to a sense of identity. Eurobarometer data is also useful because it shows responses to questions in comparison to other countries in order to create clearer contrasts and points of distinction. The comparison of data helps posit the Czech Republic as secular.

Quantitative data collection is easiest to collect information for a large pool of people. What is missing in the data that characterizes the Czech Republic as secular are more qualitative and investigative accounts that would give more insight and detail rather than act to sort out answers. Qualitative surveying has much more potential for finding out why people believe what they do and is able to better explain its findings rather than presenting long list of percentages and numbers and then basing a hypothesis off of the data at a distance. Within the scholarship about Czech secularism authors attempt to explain quantitative data and give it context to allow it to become more meaningful as well as approach the data with questions in mind or studies of their own. Before I synthesize the approaches to understanding Czech secularism and the

scholarship in the field. I need to provide background to explain why the Czech Republic might be a secular nation in the first place.

## **Historical Overview of the Religious Shifting in the Czech Republic**

The Czech Republic was not always the Czech Republic; what we know of today as the Czech Republic were lands that were not always called that name and had different borders. I will briefly explain the time frame and different names that the area of today's Czech Republic fell under in order to avoid confusion when talking about the Czech Republic's history and past. Starting at the beginning, Celtic and then Slavic people initially settled the geographic area of the Czech Republic. In 1035 the areas of Moravia and Bohemia (today's southern and northern regions of the Czech Republic) were joined and the Czech crown lands established.<sup>15</sup> During this period the Czech lands were recognized as a part of the Holy Roman Empire and known as the Kingdom of Bohemia. After the Hussite wars, the Kingdom of Bohemia was integrated into the Hapsburg Monarchy after 1526.<sup>16</sup> The Kingdom of Bohemia was a part of the Austro Hungarian Empire until after World War One when in 1918 it became Czechoslovakia.<sup>17</sup> In 1993, a few years after the fall of Communism in the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechoslovakia split into two nations, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.<sup>18</sup>

One might assume that the history of Communism is largely responsible for creating a secular atmosphere and a culture that disassociates with religion. However, the Czech Republic has history of distancing itself from religion and using religion differentiation as a way of identifying and distinguishing itself from other neighboring lands.

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<sup>15</sup> W. Mahoney, *The History of the Czech Republic and Slovakia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*,74.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,140.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*,251.

Initially the Czech Republic was Roman Catholic. As a result of its inclusion in the Holy Roman Empire, the Czech lands were rooted in the Catholic religion. The first example of religious shifting and potential distancing or disassociation from Catholicism was when the Kingdom of Bohemia shifted from the primary influence of Roman Catholicism during the Hussite Wars in the early 1400s. At the center of the Hussite movement in the Czech lands was Jan Hus. Jan Hus was a Czech priest and philosopher who helped to spearhead what is now termed as the Hussite movement, which was a Protestant religious movement against the pre-established tradition of Roman Catholicism. He was burned at the stake but is still celebrated in Czech history as a leader and as a man who was willing to take risks for his beliefs. After the death of Jan Hus there were battles between the Catholics and the Protestants. This warfare introduced Protestantism, a new non-Catholic branch of Christianity into Czech culture. Looking at this history in terms of religion milestones, this Protestant introduction could mark the first departure from a long established Church and create a precedent for an environment that allows for religious shifting. Catholic scholars and European historians have shared the belief that Czech anticlericalism may be rooted as far back as this Hussite movement during the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

Even though today the Czech Republic is not a Protestant nation, Jan Hus and the Hussite movement remain emblematic in Czech culture and could point towards a social value of respecting people who go against dominant power, religious or otherwise. Perhaps because of geographic smallness of the Czech Republic and mentality of national smallness coming from the history of other nations to controlling its lands, Czechs might idolize the radical actions of individuals from their small nation who were willing to stand up for their beliefs. This mentality

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<sup>19</sup> Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society," *Sociologický Časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 40, no. 3 (2004).



of the “little Czech and the great Czech nation” could provide a narrative that exists today where Czech people feel a strong sense of national loyalty and pride but as individuals do not feel empowered or do not feel representative of their country.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Protestant representation, the Czech Republic remained mostly Catholic under the rule of the Austro Hungarian Empire from 1867 to 1918. The Catholic presence was solidified by the Roman Catholic victory at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 at the end of the Thirty Years War. Roman Catholicism was the main religion of the Czech Republic, it morphed into a more nationalistic version when Czechoslovakia formed in 1918 and broke with the Church of the Austro Hungarian Empire to set up its own Czech Catholic Church. The creation of Czechoslovakia’s own Czech Catholic Church was a way for Czechoslovakia to perpetuate its new autonomy and nationalism.

When Czechoslovakia became independent from the Austro Hungarian Empire in 1918 its leaders deemphasized the Catholicism associated with the Austro Hungarian Empire. The foundation of Czechoslovakia came in part from a nationalistic movement where it was necessary to distinguish Czechoslovakia as different from its previous role as a part of the Austro Hungarian Empire. In a 1910 census it was found that 79.1 percent of people in the Austro Hungarian Empire were deemed Latin Catholics, and another 12 percent of people were categorized as Eastern Catholics.<sup>21</sup> This data underscores that Catholicism was dominant in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1918 when Czechoslovakia gained independence, it moved away from the Catholic Church to create its own churches. Lutheran and Protestant faiths were

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<sup>20</sup> This is the title of Ladislav Holý’s historical and modern overview of the Czech Republic. The idea of “the little Czech and the great Czech nation” helps me formulate how Czech identity today might be influenced in a very personal and individual way by its history. This idea also begins to get at the difference in a national identity and a personal identity, which I explore later on when I interpret my research data.

<sup>21</sup> Cölestin Wolfsgrüber, "The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), 2:, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02121b.htm>.

combined to create the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. Czechs adopted this new church, stayed Roman Catholic, identified as Czech Catholics, or renounced religion in general. At this time religious identity was being replaced by national identity so there was less focus on identifying religiously; deemphasized religion and the new plurality of religious options introduced may have reduced religious identification in Czechoslovakia.<sup>22</sup> This history of religious splintering and growing anti-clerical sentiment provided the atmosphere for further secularization during Communism and shows that there are deeper roots for secularism in the Czech Republic that go beyond its most recent past.

Communism promoted a social religion within its regime that replaced the structural controls like a community and moralistic functions that religion might instill in a more traditional society. Religious institutions could be seen as organizational threats to the communist regime. The regime elevated atheism as a belief system that promoted science and pragmatism as modes of progress for the Czechoslovak people. Scouting groups, community parades, and sporting activities pushed the regimes' beliefs within the public sphere and replaced the group building that a congregation might create. Religion in this period, unless one practiced religion in their private life, was absent and religion was out of sight and out of mind. The government seized church property and land, even the physical presence of religion in terms of its tangible influence (the physical presence and power of church buildings) lessened. In this way the communist regime contributed to secularism by lessening the power of the church and its involvement with the government. No doubt forty years of Communism, from 1948 to 1989, influences Czech culture and attitude towards religion. This period of time normalized religious disassociation.

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<sup>22</sup> Nešpor, "Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society.", 284.

Methods of socialization, like schools, taught the children of this period the secular accolades of the communist regime and produced an increasingly secular generation.

There were still small groups practicing religion, but being outwardly religious or associating with a church could be dangerous. One interviewee I spoke to told me about his experience getting married in the sixties in Czechoslovakia. His wife grew up in a Christian family and she wanted to be married in a church. Weddings at this time were not valid from Church services alone. My interviewee told me that he was not religious and most everyone he knew was not religious either. For him the idea of being married in a church was important for the memories and feelings of his soon to be wife and was less sterile than a union in a city hall. The couple went to get married officially in a town hall but then sent out invitations for their wedding with their family and friends in a church. My interviewee put up the invitation at his workplace and told me that several friends and colleagues came up to him and expressed their concern. By publishing the fact that he would have a church wedding he was putting himself and his family in danger. This is an example of the disassociation and distancing from religion and outward displays of religiosity under Communism.

Although some people did still attend church services and practice, this was dangerous and people's public lives were under scrutiny. Most often those who were religious tried to practice in secret and in their private sphere. This interplay and danger of public versus private spheres of life was a crucial element during communism. How people acted in public reflected their political alliances and opinions; participating in government organized activities, events, and national holidays was essential for people to create an image of their national pride and agreement with the regime. Only in private circles could people interact and speak freely. Because of the separation of public and private behavior, underground dissident circles and

religious groups existed in small scale and private networks. For example within the religious community, groups circulated and self-published religious works that the regime did not allow. These contraband publications were called *samizdat*. Religious *samizdat*, though taken less seriously than strictly political *samizdat*, could be punishable with jail-time, loss of employment or seizure of documents like identity cards or passports.

Communism alone was not responsible for creating a contemporary secular Czech Republic. Before Communism many Czechs associated nominally with religious institutions but did not actively practice or practice within a church building. Historically, religion in the Czech Republic underwent periods of shifting and change; being actively religious was never a stronghold of Czech identity. There is no statistical data collected during the period of warring between the Protestants and Catholics, so there is no way to truthfully know the extent that religion was significant in the lives of Czechs from generations past to measure which part of Czech history is most influential in creating a secular culture.

From the more recent religious past, there are remaining elements within Czech culture today. But, these elements are national and historical, heroes like Jan Hus and the church architectures that create fairytale landscapes throughout the Czech Republic, and although these remaining elements help to characterize the Czech Republic they do not dictate a strong religious significance. The Christian culture is left over in tradition and in physical reminders, but of the old and historic churches, most are unoccupied. With a religious past that hints at preexisting secularism as a precursor to Communism, it is not surprising that forty years of intentional religious distancing may have help to expedite the process of secularization in the Czech Republic.

The evidence for the claim that the influence of Communism created a secular society can be recognized by the difference in belief between generations. The older generation of Czech people are much more religious than the younger generation who grew up during Communism. Continuing this cycle, the most recent generation of Czech who were born from parents growing up during Communism is even less religious compared to their parents and grandparents.<sup>23</sup> The increasing secularization might not be strictly caused just by the rule of Communism in the Czech Republic. Other countries secularize without a Communist past. While there may be other elements that helped to perpetuate and shape secularism in the Czech Republic, the forty years of Communism is undeniably a part of this contemporary reality. Looking at the Czech Republic today with this historical context allows me to begin to contextualize and question the details of current Czech secularism later in my interviews and surveys.

### **Religion in the Sociological Field of Study: A Literature Review**

This raw surveyed data I introduced earlier that characterizes the Czech Republic as secular prompted other researchers to conduct further studies or to interpret this data in order to help explain it. There is a recent resurgence of interest in religion and religiosity that has created a boom of sociological study especially in the specific category of post communist sociological work. There are gaps for sociologists, historians, and religious scholars to fill. There is little work done about religion and society in the Czech Republic, and even fewer texts available in English and languages other than Czech. I look at what other Czech sociologists working in the field of religion have to say on the topic of secularization, religion, and spirituality. I examine these sources critically to see where the strengths and weaknesses of these projects lie, and how

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<sup>23</sup> B. Beit-Hallahmi, *Psychological Perspectives on Religion and Religiosity* (Taylor & Francis, 2014), 91

these strengths and weakness relate to my own work and understanding of the subject. These additional perspectives nuance my interpretation of data and help me to move forward with my own work.

The sociologists' works that I examine emphasize the neglect of religious sociological studies in the Czech Republic and other post communist countries. Authors recognize that categorizing the Czech Republic as secular solely based on census data and other quantitative data without sound explanation or other studies might misconstrue the reality of how religion and secularism function, or what people actually believe in the Czech Republic. Of the scholarship available on secularism and religion in the Czech Republic, Zdeněk R. Nešpor prevails in the field with multiple articles on the subject. Zdeněk R. Nešpor wrote *Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society*. He collaborated with Olga Nešporova to write *Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation*. Nešpor worked again with another Czech sociologist, Dana Hamplová, to publish *Invisible Religion in a "Non-Believing" Country: The Case of the Czech Republic*. Hamplová herself has written articles on the funerary beliefs and practices of Czechs, which I reference later in my discussion of Czech conceptions of afterlife. These texts complicate the issue of assumed secularism within the Czech Republic. The last text I review is *Religion and Secularism in the Czech Republic* by Dušan Lužný and Jolana Navaratilova. These texts contend, in different ways and with different slants, that the Czech Republic may be one of the most secular nations and are the main articles that I examine to build a foundation of how notions of secularism and religion in the Czech Republic have been approached and discussed.

In *Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society*, Nešpor acknowledges that religion is an unexamined area of sociology in the Czech Republic. He suggests that the reason

that religion is understudied is because of a widespread and false assumption of non-religiosity based on the experience of “violently atheistic propaganda” during communism and the suppression of “public religiosity.”<sup>24</sup> This means that scholars falsely assumed that during communism and after organized religion played a small social role that there weren’t entry points to study religion in post-communism and assumedly atheistic countries. Nešpor argues that a broader view of religion can be applied to the Czech Republic. He coins religion as a “kind of symbolic universe, producing major and fundamental cultural values and norms, and for some people affecting almost every form of personal and social behavior, including the behavior in political and economic spheres.”<sup>25</sup> He exemplifies this definition with the Czech Republic’s inclusion into the European Union and its “Europeanization” of Czech faith and religion. Although he introduces this provocative idea of religion in relation to “Europeanization,” Nešpor doesn’t fully flesh out this idea aside from mentioning that outside and foreign forces massively influence religion in the Czech Republic. He mentions the Czech Republic’s identification in terms of its place within Europe to potentially connect and explain this type of identity with religion. In my own research I push this question of religion in the Czech Republic in terms of national identity and ask interviewees their perspective on their inclusion into the European Union and how they define themselves in relation to other European countries.

Nešpor, like the other authors I examine, presents some of the data typically used to qualify the Czech Republic as secular. He noted the decline in religious identification between a 1991 and a 2001 census where despite the opening of the Czech Republic there was no “religious resurrection.”<sup>26</sup> He explains this decline with the potential that the older generation of more religious people in the Czech Republic had died or that Czechs might be religious in a different

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<sup>24</sup> Nešpor, "Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society.", 278.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 280.

way than could be measured with church affiliation and self-religious identification. The concept of “believing without belonging” was termed by Grace Davie and could be applicable to the people of the Czech Republic and reflect a religiosity that a census would not be able to discern.<sup>27</sup> The strength of Nešpor text is his idea that although Czechs have been historically anti-clerical this does not mean that Czechs are anti-religious. He supports this claim with examples of “religion-like symbolic universes” that people sought out during communism, like protest songs.<sup>28</sup> He asserts the Czechs today are in the process of “spiritual shopping” where they are navigating a privatized version of religiosity and spirituality. He also references other sociological work examining the trends of religion to agree that in the Czech Republic as in the other European countries modern religiosity is transforming to a version of religious expression and understanding that is “oriented towards life.”<sup>29</sup>

There are few case studies and qualitative examinations done in specific regions and towns in the Czech Republic that attempt to add to the pre-existing data about religion and secularism in the Czech Republic. Zdeněk R. Nešpor in collaboration and Olga Nešporova wrote *Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation*. The authors conduct their own study of qualitative data collection and local ethnographical research in the town of Česká Lípa in Northern Bohemia. This study was modeled after the Lancaster University Kendal Project in Great Britain. The town was chosen because of its similarities in its ability to represent the Czech society more broadly, as the Kendal Project did in the UK. The town of Česká Lípa is a small to medium sized town and is a regional center. The authors chose this town for the variety of religion and spiritual expression present; they claim that most, if not all, variations of Czech

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<sup>27</sup> P.L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) , 71.

<sup>28</sup> Nešpor, "Religious Processes in Contemporary Czech Society." 284.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.



religious and spirituality can be found in Česká Lípa. Despite the inclusion of these different spiritual and religious representations, Česká Lípa is in one of the most secular regions of the Czech Republic, Northern Bohemia, and there is not a strong traditional religious presence from the Roman Catholic Church. These authors see this caveat as strength since there might be more New Religious Movements present without the presence of a Catholic Church. However, these authors contend that their study is by no means wholly representational of the Czech Republic.

The authors surveyed the available churches and other religious and spiritual organizations in the town and then attempted to create a mode of separating out different models of believing. People were selected randomly for interviewing and interviews were semi-structured and informal; interviewers asked interviewees about their background (if they were brought up with religion or not) and if they believed in a god. Interviewees were also asked if they believed in horoscopes or in supernatural powers. These questions intended to find out if a person identified within a traditional religion or if they might identify or believe in alternative and New Age sources that could make up New Religious Movements.<sup>30</sup> To address the interests of the study, these questions were effective in that they helped interviewers categorize the variations of religious and spiritual belief of their interviewees. These questions were somewhat limiting in that interviewers only had short conversations with people on the street in passing and were not able to delve deeper into the rationale behind a person's belief or hear personal anecdotes or longer family histories. There was also a response bias in this study since participation was voluntary and this study cannot be representational of all of the Czech Republic. From these street interviews the authors devise a threefold categorization to encompass the belief systems they encountered. The three groups within society that the author

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<sup>30</sup> Olga Nešporová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation," *Sociologický Časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 45, no. 6 (2009), 1223.

decided on as these categorizations were traditional religionists of various denominations, followers of New Age Movements, and the “rest” of the population.

The structure and implementation of this case study in Česká Lípa are key for helping me to format my own case study of the interviews I conducted in Uherské Hradiště and in Prague. I also interviewed and surveyed using a series of qualitative questions. The qualitative approach of this study helps to credit and validate my own research methodology. The strength of qualitative data collection is that it lends itself to explanation and the answers that respondents give are often contextualized and this contextualization and rationalization is shared. My format for interviewing was more personal than the interviewing in Česká Lípa since I interviewed pre-arranged interviewees in cafes and did not ask for responses randomly on the street. This allowed me to have longer, more in depth interviews where I was able to ask many question and have my interviewees speak freely to go in different, tangential yet related, topical directions. Interviews were typically an hour and fifteen minutes long, although there were some interviews, which were shorter and longer. The shortest interview was thirty minutes and the longest was two and a half hours. Like the surveying in Česká Lípa I asked a variety of questions that were not all directly about religion. I also used the same partially structured and less formal approach like the researchers in Česká Lípa. I wanted respondents to be comfortable taking the conversation in new directions and not feel tense when answering personal questions.

While the authors of the Česká Lípa study intentionally picked this town as to be representative of the multiplicity of potential religion and spirituality in the Czech Republic, I chose the town of Uherské Hradiště to be a counter to the Bohemian and city respondents I would encounter in Prague. I was interested to see what a more traditional area of the Czech Republic thought about religion, secularism, spirituality and their identity as Czechs.

*Invisible Religion in a "Non-Believing" Country: The Case of the Czech Republic* by Dana Hamplová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor adds to the understanding of the causation of a person's religious beliefs and attempts to uncover the source of the secularism in the Czech Republic. This article looked at education and socio-economic status in relation to religious belief. Hamplová and Nešpor used data from national censuses, international surveys and a specialized national survey on the de-traditionalization and individualization of religion from 2006. These authors looked at socio-demographic characteristics on religiosity within this study to determine that worldview founded more on a person's religious socialization or absence rather than socio-demographic characteristics. The authors lay out three goals, to provide the reader with contemporary information on the ir/religiosity of the Czech Republic, to compare the Czech Republic's historical and recent development with other countries, and by doing so to lastly contribute towards a theoretical discussion on the role of religion in later modern societies. The authors explain that the census data explaining ir/religiosity is limited since it only asks about religious identification. The ISSP data asks more detailed questions, for example about the possibility of an afterlife, the belief in supernatural powers, good luck charms, horoscopes and other non-religiously affiliated sources of potential truth telling.

These questions found that Czechs identified more with alternative versions of spirituality that did not align with traditional religious intuitions. For example there was a high belief in reincarnation not just from people without church affiliation, but also from those who identified with a church.<sup>31</sup> This additional data that probes deeper than the census material available provides more room for questioning about spirituality and alternate and personalized religious belief in the Czech Republic. Their study of these documents concludes that influence

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<sup>31</sup> Dana Hamplová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Invisible Religion in a "Non-Believing" Country: The Case of the Czech Republic," *Social Compass* 56, no. 4 (2009), 6.

of socio-demographic characteristics on religiosity is weak. The authors conclude that religious socialization or absence there-of is more important to determining a person's worldview. While this article does not radically shake the field, it helps to provide more cultural context for other researchers. I take this perspective that socialization is important and powerful to influence private lives and to dictate behavior and belief. I take the importance of socialization within a culture into my understanding of Czech society and into my own research. Based off of this study I asked interviewees about which parts of the Czech Republic they considered to be more religious and prompted descriptions of what types of people might engage in New Age religions or spiritualities during interviews if the conversation went into that direction. I was aware during my own interviewing of this study and of potential pre-conceived notions associating religion to demographics or socio-economic status that my interviewees might consciously or sub-consciously, truly, or falsely hold.

Dušan Lužný is considered to be another up and coming sociologist in the nation specific category of religious sociology, he collaborated with Jolana Navaratilová for an article in the *Czech Sociological Review* entitled *Religion and Secularization in the Czech Republic*. Within this work Lužný and Navaratilová depart from the previous questioning if the Czech Republic is actually as secular as reported to explore how secularization should be defined in relation to the Czech Republic. These authors separate their examination from the previous articles that questioned religious belief of Czech people to examine the secularity more conceptually. While this difference in approach may at first read seem to be a rephrasing of the same methodological attempt it is not. Lužný and Navaratilová don't simply define secularism as the decline of religions, but as the decline of power that religious institutions have over a society. Within this definition there is room for the growth of new religious activity and a multiplicity of spiritual

mediums. Likewise this definition extends to include those who might identify as Christian but do not identify with the agendas or the power of a church within their society.

To make these points Lužný and Navrátilová look at the forms of religious identification and examine data that asks questions about belief in connection to and separate from church attendance. The authors examine data about the responses of believers and non-believers on the political and economic activities of churches. They saw that the power of churches has declined and there is less support from the public for funding, or church property claimed under communism, to be given or re-given to churches.<sup>32</sup> The authors maintain that based on their definition of secularism that the Czech Republic is one of the most secular countries regardless if individuals believe in religious or spiritual ideas. They assert the idea of Structural Differentiation, which outlines the structural trend within modern society where there is a decreasing importance of “big traditional religious organizations typified by churches.”<sup>33</sup> Going into my own work I take this idea of secularism as a societal element, not as a necessary decline in religious belief.

This basis of sociological work and perspectives on Czech secularism lead me to the next chapter. In Chapter Two I expand on my own methodology that I used when researching in the town of Uherské Hradiště and while conducting interviews in Prague. Entering into my own research, I keep in mind the strengths and weakness of different types of data collection. I know that by using qualitative data that my responses will not be as easy to sort and to categorize. However, I embrace this challenge because for my purposes, qualitative information is the most productive way to find out as much as I can about my interviewees beliefs. The way previous

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<sup>32</sup> Dušan Lužný and Jolana Navrátilová, "Religion and Secularisation in the Czech Republic," *Czech Sociological Review* 9, no. 1 (2001), 94.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.,94.

authors have framed Czech secularism helps me keep in mind its definition and free myself of associations of atheism as I continue into my own work.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Research and Interview Methodology**

While there is a multitude of data that says that the Czech Republic is largely secular, I wanted to collect my own qualitative records to find out what Czech people thought of religion, spirituality, and national secularism in their own personal lives. I was curious to see if these ideas that seem to characterize Czech national identity, as an a-religious and largely secular society, for outsiders of Czech culture were also internalized by Czech people themselves in their own identity creation. Likewise I wanted to find out how the dominant Christian traditions of the past were used in a Czech context and understood by the people who practiced them and celebrated Christian holidays. Americans are familiar with campaigns to “keep Christ in Christmas;” is there a similar push for religious awareness in celebrating Christmas in the Czech Republic? Are Christian traditions separated from their religious and institutional origins, and how are these holidays celebrated? Despite the categorization of being a secular country where do Czech people find a sense of spirituality or the elements of organized religion, like community, or a “truth telling” source? I devised a set of interview questions to address these points and to help identify secular, religious, pagan, spiritual or other influencing factors in how Christianity is present in Czech society.

The studies I read are mostly focused on religion and secularism. In my work I add new elements of questioning religion and secularism in terms of identity and the search to locate and explain spirituality within a secular Czech culture. The idea that influenced me to try to locate secular spirituality is the idea that spirituality is not inherently linked to religion and that religion and secularism are not polarized concepts. Within both religious and secular thought are layers of spiritual, and faith-based and belief-oriented expression. Secularism is often associated with

atheism but secularism is a distancing from the influence of institutional religious structures in everyday life, not necessarily a denouncement of any type of religious belief. The Czech Republic is also thought to be more atheistic, so I wondered if this was really the case. I created my question set with the idea in mind that a person could be secular but religious or secular and irreligious with any combination of self-identification as a spiritual or non-spiritual person. I went into this research with the idea that all humans are on some level spiritual, in that they find moments in their life for deep reflection and have moments of connection to the world around them. I distance the association of spirituality as religiously linked.

Even ideas like faith, which are deeply religiously connoted can be separated out and become more inclusive. In defining faith theologian Paul Tillich simply said that faith was a “state of being ultimately concerned.”<sup>67</sup> This general definition leaves room to question what being ultimately concerned means. Thinking about what individuals or a society is ultimately concerned about opens the door to understand how a person’s identity and the culture, religious or non-religious influences, and spiritual or non-spiritual perspectives creates an “ultimate concern.” Even the term holiness, which is religiously connected, at its etymological base only means something that is out of the ordinary, and separate.<sup>68</sup> Although holiness in this definition may have meant that something was separate and out of the ordinary in the sense of describing a god, this idea of separation and extra ordinary can be taken out of this religious context. The lines between religious connotation and outside application of this term can be blurred if a person reconsidered “holiness” as a feeling or appreciation of the extraordinary, or the sense of awe that is universal. Looking at the ideas of faith as an ultimate concern and the thought of

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), [Page 4].

<sup>68</sup> O.T.B.D.P.H.B.U.T.S. Dayton, *Holiness and Ministry : A Biblical Theology of Ordination: A Biblical Theology of Ordination* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 13.



holiness as an experience or recognition of something that is out of the ordinary allows me to secularize my approach to looking for spirituality in my research.

To understand how religion, secularism and spirituality functioned in Czech life I devised an interactive qualitative interview question set. I entered my research with the assumption that Czech people were culturally secular but with the perspective that each individual had their own conception of religious, spiritual, and secular elements and that there would be a variety in the responses of my interviewees. I tried to create a way to locate and identify a medium of secular spirituality in my interviewees. I wanted to see where interviewees found a sense of spirituality that might be found in a traditional church setting; I was also open to the idea of interviewees identifying spirituality with religion. Going into this research I had the sense that although the Czech Republic may be secular by name that all people experience some sort of connection to the world around them and experience spiritual feelings, whether these spiritual feelings are linked to religion or not.

When I was studying in the Czech Republic I noticed that many of the host families and other Czechs that I interacted with had a strong connection to being outdoors in nature. Seeking out nature and environments of reflection can create an atmosphere of spirituality. Although my identification of this trend was merely anecdotal, it helped me devise a starting point for my interviews. The assumption that spirituality exists for all people in alternative ways than just a religious context as well as the landscape of the Czech Republic, full of the old architecture of impressive churches in Prague and the many scattered and largely unused churches throughout the countryside, inspired me to come up with a creative way to attempt to locate a sense of personal spirituality within my interviewees.

I started each of my interviews off with a description of a typical religious setting that might evoke a sense of spirituality, but phrased in a way that would not make it obvious that I was describing the interior of a church. I intended to start with the traditional association of religion and spirituality as joined and then separate the spiritual aspect from the religious in order to broaden the concept of spirituality and have it apply to all interviewees in some form. I had participants listen to and read this description. I asked interviewees to locate a place in their lives that my spiritual description matched. To create this description I spent time in the Bates College chapel. I tried to find a way to describe the atmosphere and experience that a place made for spiritual and religious produces for its visitors.

I am aware that although I was attempting to distance my definition from religion and the space and rituals attached with religion that by creating my description in the Bates Chapel I was creating a description of spirituality that is rooted in my western conception of what spirituality looks and feels like. I was also asking my interviewees to identify a place that fit my Western idea of a spiritual location that I have been socialized to connect with how I see the idea of spirituality. It is possible that my association with spirituality is also present in the Czech Republic since the Czech Republic, like other countries and people who interact with each other, has experienced globalization. I would be curious to see if a Czech conception of spirituality would be possible to create and what differences in responses might be if a Czech researcher presented a description of a place tied to their conception of spirituality.

Anthropologists and religious scholars have considered the elements that are necessary to create a religious or a spiritual place. Often to create a religious space a sense of community must be fostered as well as a place of separation from daily life. Based on Tilich's idea of holiness as simply an expression of something out of the ordinary, I understood that a spiritual

setting creates a sense of separation from day to day life and allows for a place, thoughts, and feelings that seem to be out of the ordinary. Navigating a sense of space that is outside of the norm or daily activity relates back to various sociologies of space and how people interact with the different types of spaces they embody and the different types of space in their lives. By day to day life I mean the space that is considered to be a “first space” that includes the physical and literal space of tangible and daily life that society creates.<sup>69</sup> I am interested in accessing a space that is outside of the “first space” to help explain and locate spirituality. I am assuming that by separating from the ordinary and lived experience of day to day life I can locate a sense of separation and a special quality that comes from this separation in order to help explain and think about spirituality. The space that spirituality would embody would make up a personal space that might be within the space of daily life, but is somehow also separated.

Personal spaces that become sources of spirituality often have connections and associations for individuals. This relationship to a place can be explained by the experience of “place attachment.”<sup>70</sup> Place attachment is the idea that a place becomes significant for a person either through socialization of this place, for example the elevation of certain buildings, monuments or religious sites based in social historical or cultural significance, or that a place holds personal value based in experiential or referential connection for an individual. Locations offer a physical aspect of grounding and can be a point of tangible connection for people to relate to and understand themselves by. Pilgrimages to holy sites are an example of a place relationship that helps define a person’s identity as well as a place attachment based in both experience and socialization. Places within a culture help to form identity. In my attempt to locate spirituality I

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<sup>69</sup> Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*: Wiley, 1992, 29-43.

<sup>70</sup> Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Places," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24 (2004), 385-396. <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/yjevp>.

am also attempting to locate a significant place that could help be a source of identity or somehow show cultural and socialized values within a society.

Place in relation to religion and spiritual belief is especially relevant to the Czech Republic. Church property was seized during communism and traditional religious and spiritual places were secularized as state property. Even before the state seized church lands, many of the churches were out of use anyways. An employee at the Strahov Monastery in Prague explained that in the past the number of parish churches put a burden on Czechs and Slovaks in rural areas where communities could not pay church dues and that there has always been a complicated relationship with the physicality of religion in the Czech Republic. The reclamation of Church property is still an ongoing and controversial political issue in the Czech Republic today.

After trial and error, I came up with a description that I hoped conveyed a sense of reflection, self-awareness, calmness, and distinction from other places and moments. This is the description that I read to my subjects:

*Imagine a place where you feel a sense of calm and self-awareness. This space is quiet, large, and bigger than you; it envelops you and makes you feel small, yet you become a part of the space too. You are more aware of your body and of yourself. You don't want to make too much noise or move too quickly; you are cautious. You connect to this place. You feel alone in your thoughts, but you are peaceful and aware of your surroundings. This space can be either light or dark. It is somehow different from a normal environment. Maybe the lights flicker and change, maybe this place smells slightly different, maybe this place is warmer or colder than usual. Something about this place makes it distinct for you. There might be other people around you, but they do not interrupt your moment. You feel alone yet involved in your surroundings. You leave this place more centered, feeling different from when you arrived.*

While creating this description and designing my interview questions I was aware of the fact that I would be conducting all my interviews with non-native English speakers. The topic of spirituality and religion in English for native English speakers is abstract itself so I wanted to be careful that the wording of my questions and description were not lost in translation. I attempted to use words in English that were straightforward and would be able to paint the image of spirituality without confusing meaning. I used words to characterize the physical feelings of the space in order to try to create a full sensory experience of the description. I described the physicality of the space with the words, light, dark, warm, cold, and large, to help apply feeling to place. I attempted to access this space beyond the “first space” that I mention above by using words that go beyond the physical involvement within a socially constructed space like alone, peaceful, aware, and involved. I avoided idioms and metaphor and addressed my listener directly within the description of my location. This use of “you” in my description was intended to single out the listener and have them feel alone in this description so that they would be able to access a personal space.

I created a word box of Czech translations for the more abstract words and phrases I used to help overcome potential language barriers. Translations are included under the text of the rest of my questions set. I was also aware of the cultural context in which I asked this question relating to locating spirituality. As I follow up question later in the interview, I asked all interviewees if they considered themselves to be a spiritual person. Nuancing this element of spirituality that I hoped to identify in the places that interviewees located is the reality that many Czech people consider spirituality intrinsically linked to religion and separated from practicality, a quality that is considered to be quintessentially Czech. This perspective and culture of religious disassociation makes it more difficult to highlight and pinpoint concretely if a person or a culture

would label themselves as secularly spiritual, even if they have spiritual feelings or places in their life.

For the second part of the interview I asked my interviewees a series of questions that were intended to help me identify their personal beliefs and to see how they saw themselves in a larger Czech, familial, and personal context. Each question was designed to lead into the next in a conversational and comfortable way and leave room for my interviewees to provide personal anecdotes. I intended interviews to be structured, yet flexible, and above all comfortable for interviewees.

This is the skeleton of interview questions that directed my interviews:

1. What makes you Czech? What is an essential part of your Czech identity or Czech identity more broadly?
2. Do you identify with a religion?
3. Is your family religious?
4. How do your religious beliefs differ from your family's?
5. Do you believe in a god?
6. Do you believe in an afterlife?
7. Do you believe in evolution?
8. Where in the Czech Republic are you and your family from?
9. What sort of religious traditions do you practice and/or how do you and your families celebrate Christmas?
10. Do you think that religion is a part of Czech national identity?
11. Are there "secular saints" (people who are elevated to be iconic with no connection to religion) in the Czech Republic?
12. How do you think religion changed after 1989?
13. Religious people might go to a church to find a sense of community and other people who think and feel similarly to them. Where do you find a sense of community?
14. Where do you find your morals and your sense of right and wrong?

15. Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

**to flicker** / poblikávat ..... **distinct** / výrazný.....**to interrupt** / přerušit  
**involved** / zapojený.....**centered** / vyrovnaný.....**secular** / světský  
**community** / komunita.....**morals** / mravnost.....**spiritual** / duchovní  
**self-awareness** / sebeuvědomění.....**to envelop** / obklopit  
**be aware** / být si vědomi... **evolution** / evoluce  
**cautious** / opatrný.....**surroundings** / okolí.....**essential** / nezbytný  
**to identify with** / ztotožnit se.....**belief** / víra.....**afterlife** / posmrtný život

I devised this list of interview questions to connect back to my original questions and to help my topic expand in different and natural directions. I started with question one, “what makes you Czech?” to refocus my interviewees and help them explain their identity through a Czech lens after they listened and matched a place to the spiritual description. I wanted to see how interviewees associated or disassociated with their idea of their own national character.

The next three questions were used to detail and record my interviewee’s relationship to religion. By asking what other family members and parents believed I was able to get a better feel for generational belief differences which might help me address questions about how Communism could change religious belief and expression. I was curious to see if data suggesting that the older generations of Czech were more religious held true for my interviewees. I also asked this question because of the research done that suggested religious socialization rather than socio-economic situation or demographic information influenced religious belief.<sup>71</sup> I wanted to see if interviewees were socialized into a religion because of their family, and if so if they identified more strongly with their family beliefs. This question could also show personal

<sup>71</sup> Dana Hamplová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Invisible Religion in a “Non-Believing” Country: The Case of the Czech Republic," *Social Compass* 56, no. 4 (2009).

religious affiliation and identity based on family history and upbringing that people could identify with and claim to be religious rather than not identifying with church attendance and expressing non religiousness. By asking where interviewees were from I was also able to better understand and compare responses to regional qualities. The Northern Czech Republic, Bohemia, is generally regarded as more secular and more industrial where the south, Moravia, is a more traditional agricultural region.<sup>72</sup> This question also helps me consider how interviewees answered questions about their own identity and if they felt that their hometowns were significant in their own self-conception.

Question number five, “do you believe in a god?” is especially relevant to my thesis. This question aims to get past the sort of religious identification connected to institution and traditional Christianity and give interviewees a space to express alternative beliefs and separate the belief in something outside of this world from a religious context. This is a significant question because the characterization of the Czech Republic as secular is often misconstrued and the Czech Republic is characterized as atheistic. Secularism and atheism are not the same; I made this question to clarify belief from secular characteristics. I was curious with this question to expand on the traditional norms of Christian theology in Czech culture; I wanted to see if interviewees believed in a god or gods outside of a Christian framework.

I asked about personal traditions surrounding Christmas to see if Czechs identified the way they celebrated as religious, and to see the differences and similarities in the ways that families and individuals celebrate and think about Christmas. Christmas and Easter are the most

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<sup>72</sup> Census data qualifies this claim. It is also interesting to note the historical differences between Moravia and Bohemia that could contribute to this slight difference in religiosity. Moravia accepted the rule of the Austrian Hapsburgs and may have accepted the Catholicism of this rule more than in Bohemia. Information on Moravia can be found at: *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Moravia", accessed March 27, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/391877/Moravia>.



celebrated Christian holidays in the Czech Republic; I wanted to know if people went to church to celebrate these or what their regional and local customs were. The church in the Czech Republic is becoming less important in the ritualization and celebration of milestones and holidays. Funerals are increasingly secular and even weddings are trending away from religious services and are not being held in churches as often.<sup>73</sup> This question helps to get at the role and perceived importance of the church within society and Czech culture. I discovered that there are many folk customs surrounding Christmas, which are not religious. This question prompted the next, if religion was a part of Czech identity.

The Czech Republic's population consists of mainly Christians. Is this history of Christianity in the Czech Republic a part of national identity despite the fact the Czech Republic is considered to be secular? I wanted to find out if celebrating Christian holidays made interviewees see the Czech Republic as a Christian nation. This consideration of religious identity relates to the changes that the Czech Republic experienced. I asked interviewees if religion in the Czech Republic changed after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when communism crumbled and people could express themselves freely, including practicing religion. Since most of the people I interviewed grew up in a post communist society I was curious to know if they thought that there was a change in their society, if their families spoke about the past with them, and how they saw themselves as the first generation to grow up in a democracy. Since the Czech Republic was generally secular during communism I wondered if people actually thought that there had been a change in religious expression after 1989. After the Velvet Revolution there was an infiltration of other global ideas and practices, missionaries, eastern religions, and alternative religious groups found new interest from Czech. This boom in new ideas seems to have only

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<sup>73</sup> Olga Nešporová, "Believer Perspectives on Death and Funeral Practices in a Non-Believing Country," *Sociologický Časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 43, no. 6 (2007).

been brief however, and even if people who previously hadn't attended church started to go most of the people who lived secularly before continued to live without any new religious influence in their lives.

Creating community and codes of conduct are ways that religion has functioned traditionally in a society. Religion can shape a person's identity by placing them within a community and giving them a role in context of this community or way of believing. Religion can offer a sense of communalism, group thought and practice and could create an identity for its believers; this function of religion can be explained with the phrase "life-as" religion.<sup>74</sup> "Life-as" religion creates an identifier within congregational life and creates a role for individuals within a community context. A church member lives "life-as" a congregant, or "life-as" a member of a specific branch of religion, as a churchgoer, a choir member, a priest etc. in the context of a structural system all related to an ultimate higher and otherworldly power. "Life-as" a member of a specified religion provides a model of behavior in conformity to a "higher, common, authoritative good."<sup>75</sup> These "life-as" categories result in individuals living according to and in harmony with their specific social roles and the expectations that come from their adherence to these roles and having a resulting sense of self within a community.

I asked my interviewees where they find a sense of community as well as where they created their moral code and sense of right and wrong. I wanted to see if people were able to self-consciously locate these elements in their life and in their society and outside of a religious context. What types of roles did the different communities create for Czechs within their identity? Was the idea of religion as a "life as" role creator significant in the Czech Republic? I wanted to know where interviewees would point to for the origins of these personal parts of their

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<sup>74</sup> P. Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Wiley, 2005), 31.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

identity and life. It is difficult to describe how an environment creates a society of people who think have a sense of values and morals. Governments establish law codes and different institutions attempt to create ideal ways to live within a society. People experience socialization through their family life, school, and other outside influences. But to get at the root of where these different standards of behavior come from is nearly impossible and only speculative. People are products of their environment and societies.

In order to try to understand these complicated ingrained cultural norms I asked questions about community. In my one-on-one interviews I asked in my image identification section what people felt and thought about their Czech-ness in relation to the rest of Europe. How did being a part of the European Union affect their identity, or what they considered their nation's political and cultural orientation to be in the relation to the rest of Europe? I asked if interviewees considered themselves to be a part of Western, Central, or Eastern Europe.

After discussing these questions with my interviewees, I went on to the third and final part of my interview process. I showed interviewees a series of images for them to react to, discuss, or identify as a wrap up to my interview. Images can be found in the Appendix.

The images were:

1. A picture of Santa Claus at a mall
2. A photo of Moravian traditional costumes on folk dancers
3. An image of the Czech Republic with the deep blue and ring of gold stars of the European Union overlaid on the country outline
4. An image of Vaclav Havel
5. An image of Dr. Seuss's The Grinch
6. An image of a woman meditating
7. An image of St. Nicolas the devil and an angel for St. Nicolas's Day
8. An image of the Czech spring tradition of witch burning

I used an image set to mix up the form of my interview and to keep my interviewees sharing about their lives, ideas, and experiences. The images relating to Christmas helped interviewees share stories about how they experience Christmas time as Czechs. One way that Czechs seem to uniformly celebrate Christmas is with the celebration of St. Nicholas's Day on December 5<sup>th</sup>. In the Czech Republic there is no Santa Claus who brings presents on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Instead, Czechs celebrate St. Nicholas' Day. Children are judged for their behavior by a devil, an angel and St. Nicholas, they also are prompted to recite a poem or rhyme to please the trio of visitors. Parents pay neighborhood teenagers to dress up as these three figures and to visit their house. This tradition is much darker than an American "naughty or nice" Santa interaction. The person dressed up as the devil carries a potato sack that they use to drag the child to hell with them if they were bad during the year. The devil character in some cases receives a list of behaviors from the parent and can reference specific instances when their child was bad. At the end of this interaction the child usually receives a candy from St. Nicholas and goodies from their parents, sometimes though they are given a potato from the devil. It is not Santa who brings presents either, but baby Jesus, Ježíšek. These differences allowed my interviewees to comment candidly on the image of the American Santa and talk about how this Western custom might influence their Christmas traditions. Likewise the inclusion of the Grinch image allowed me to ask interviewees about their Christmas icons and media around Christmas.

The image of witch burning and Moravian dancing also related back to ideas of national and cultural identity as well as a traditional past. The dancers represent a folk history that was prevalent in southern areas of the Czech Republic. These traditional dances and festivals still take place but they are limited to the Moravian region and often those outside of Moravia have no personal connection to these types of folk traditions. However, this image is still an emblem

of Czech identity and representative of an attachment to the past. The witch-burning image relays a more widespread Czech tradition that comes from long standing pagan Slavic roots. Burning witches or burning winter is a community activity to celebrate the changing of the seasons. This tradition is more common outside of major cities but even people within cities will go to the countryside to celebrate a witch-burning. I was curious to see the different takes on these two different but historically rooted Czech customs.

The woman meditating segued me to ask interviewees if they had any experience or thoughts on mediation and other new age type practices or eastern religions. Yoga studios, Buddhism, healthy eating, and vegetarianism are trends that have cropped up in bigger cities that may reflect secularization by means of globalism and interacting and embracing outside influences from other cultures. There are various forms of New Religious Movements in the Czech Republic and a variety of less traditional beliefs associated with new spirituality or the occult as was presented in Zdeněk R. Nešpor and Olga Nešporova's *Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation* in their study of Česká Lípa that I discussed in my literature review section. Although visible in major cities, I suspected that even these practices might be stripped of a spiritual or religious connection. For example yoga is a trendy workout, but there might be more of an emphasis on the fitness element of yoga and the potential for self-awareness and meditation. While in Prague I attended three yoga classes and was surprised to find that the instructor directed class through a microphone, and that the classes had the energy of an aerobic workout video. This was only one example of one experience and one type of yoga class of many that could be found in Prague. I take this experience with a grain of salt, but included this image still to inquire about other cultural influences within Czech culture.

I used an image of Vaclav Havel to get interviewees to talk about national icons and about their cultural identification more. Havel was a famous dissident, playwright, and president of the Czech Republic. He is one of the most beloved figures in Czech history and only recently died three years ago. Havel spoke extensively on the power of freedom in society and the need for personal expression without control. He interested me for my project as well because he discussed how during communism the Czech Republic faced spiritual oppression since people were unable to express themselves freely. I associate Havel with a sense of freedom and the idea that personal expression is a hallmark of a free society. I was curious to see if my interviewees had this same association with Vaclav Havel. This more loose idea of spirituality in Havel's vehement personal expression (he wrote many plays and used art as a medium to voice his thoughts) interested me; I wanted to hear if Havel conjured any sort of spiritual association for interviewees.

Following Vaclav Havel was the image of the Czech Republic as a member of the European Union (a blue shape of the Czech Republic with the circle of European Union stars overlaid). This image allowed me to ask interviewees about their opinions on the E.U, and their national identity in relation to the rest of Europe and to the rest of the world. The European Union is a controversial topic for Czechs since their inclusion into the European Union is still recent. The Czech Republic became a part of the European Union in 2004 and is in the process of preparing to introduce the Euro as a new currency. This shift and absorption into the E.U and eventual adoption of the E.U will shape the national identity of the Czech Republic. Czechs seem to either be enthusiastic about being a part of the E.U. (there are perks like traveling with ease through other E.U. countries and exchange programs for students like Erasmus) or feel like the E.U. is a necessary evil and just another mode of oppression. I also asked as a follow up to the

discussions that this image prompted if the Czech Republic was a part of Eastern, Western, or Central Europe, and why.

## **Interviewee and Survey Sample Information**

My data set comes from eighteen one on one interviews that I conducted and the written responses and group discussions from the six high school classes (sixty four students) that I lead through this activity in the Moravian town of Uherské Hradiště. My interviewees were mostly young Czechs in their twenties and a handful of older individuals: Czech professors, academics, and professionals related to my topic. I interviewed professors who taught about the Czech Republic in European History, a theology professor and a translator of Buddhist texts, and a medieval manuscript curator who worked at a monastery. The one on one interviews were based in Prague, although not all of my interviewees were from the Prague area. I used contacts from friends who studied abroad in Prague as well as some of the connections and friends I made while living in Prague. Once I started interviewing people, my interviewees connected me with other people that were willing to speak with me and even advertised what I was doing on their Facebook pages to gauge levels of interest among their social networks. I met with a Czech student at Bates, his friends, and even the Czech friend of a friend who gets her haircut by the same woman as I do in Denver. I contacted professors and asked for other suggestions of who to contact. By the time I was in Prague and interviewing I was overbooked with more messages of interest flooding my email mailbox; I had to turn interviewees down for lack of time.

I interviewed people from Northern Bohemia, Moravia and from central and outlying Prague. Moravia is typically more traditional and more religious. I was aware of this difference when I interviewed students in Uherské Hradiště. Some of my Prague interviewees were from

Northern Bohemia; several were even originally from Slovakia but had been living in the Czech Republic. While collecting data that would be equally representative for all regions in the Czech Republic was not possible, I was happy with the regional diversity of my interviewees. I also made a point of discussing with interviewees which regions they thought to be more religious, secular, or traditional and why. Generally my interviewees identified Moravia as most religious and traditional and Bohemia in general as less religious and less traditional. Some interviewees pinpointed Northern Bohemia as most secular since the people living in that area have continually struggled economically. I was aware that interviewing English speaking Prague residents may have influenced my data set. In Prague, like most other city dwellers around the world, people tend to be more liberal and have exposure to more different ideas and people, which may have influenced their responses.

The fact that I was interacting with proficient English speakers might indicate that my interviewees were more educated since they were proficient in a non-native language. The level of English fluency of my interviewees and the students I surveyed also gets back to my point that I am also unintentionally confronting how my Western comprehension of different concepts like spirituality are understood and accessed in Czech society. I was aware that the generally young population that I interviewed (aside from the older professors and professionals that I interviewed) had a post communist perspective, which could increase their exposure to Western ideas and culture. I sought out this young perspective because as the Czech Republic becomes increasingly more secular overtime, I was curious to interact with the most recent generation of Czechs. Initially I intended to interview young Czechs and an older family member of friend but I soon realized that under time constraints and language barriers this might be logistically impossible. I attempted to reconcile this change by asking my interviewees how their beliefs



compared to older family members so that I could get some of the same perspectives that I would have if I interviewed their older family members or friends that were from a different generation.

When interviewing high school students in Moravia there was a clear language barrier, and social setting that may have influenced my responses. I interviewed students ages 16-19 in their English classes. These students had a varying degree of English language knowledge and the dynamic of each classroom influenced how students responded. Some students were nervous and shy to speak in English about this topic, while other groups of more confident students spoke out in the class discussion and asked clarifying questions about the wording and meaning of the questions I posed. This dynamic could have been a result of many different things, maybe the culture difference inherent in my questions was as unarming as a language barrier or maybe students were unprepared to think about these ideas on a whim. I quickly realized that certain normative ideas in American culture were not as present in Czech culture. For example the idea of community is a concept ingrained in American culture that is not present in Czech culture and might even be negatively connoted because of its similarity to the word “communism.” I found myself explaining the idea of community to the student groups and to my individual interviews. I will tap into these cultural differences that could have affected my surveying and interviewing in more detail later when I discuss the responses and results from my interviewing.

The last element of my research while in the Czech Republic was my general awareness and observations of Christmas displays in Prague. I used Christmas as a case study for potential evidence of secular, spiritual, or religious elements in Czech culture since I was in the Czech Republic leading up to Christmas, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. I went to various Christmas Markets, walked through the several shopping centers in Prague, attended a Christmas party with my hosts, and was aware of infiltrating Christmas themes and details throughout

Prague. I wanted to see if there was a heightened sense of commercialism present during the Christmas period. Likewise I searched for the presence of Santa Claus (a potential indicator of creeping Western influence) and looked for marketing potential for Czech culturally based Christmas traditions like devils or angles from St. Nicholas's day or even a commercialization of Ježíšek. Since I was only in Prague during these two weeks I was unable to compare what I observed to the commercial activity during other times of the year. However, I could compare what I saw and experienced to the types of Christmas festivities, advertisements, and commercialism that I have experienced living in the United States. I was also able to match up anecdotal information and extrapolate from my interviews and surveying what sort of Christmas time activities that might relate to commercialism, like cookie selling and baking, were important in Czech culture.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Part One: Survey Responses and Class Discussions in Moravia**

Interpretations from interviews with Czechs and group discussions/surveys in classrooms in Moravia help me address my hypothesis, that although the Czech Republic is largely secular; within this secularity are layers of spirituality and religious identification. These interviews, discussions and surveys help me to define how religion and secularism in the Czech Republic relate to personal and national identity. My sample size was not equally representative of every region and every age group in the Czech Republic. However, the experiences, family histories, and perspectives from class discussions and the surveys I collected allow me to better explain the nature of secularism, spirituality, and religion and how these concepts relate to identity within the contemporary Czech Republic. The data in this chapter comes from my research in Moravia and is made up of the answers on survey worksheets that students completed while we discussed the different questions together as a class. Data is qualitative, but unlike in my one on one interviews I was not able to have every student explain their answers to me. In this way, although students did not have a set of options of responses to choose, my data reflects some of the limitations that a quantitative data set might since I was unable to clarify answers with each individual to understand exactly what they meant.

I will discuss each question I asked interviewees, the responses I gathered, and my interpretation of these responses starting first with the data I gathered in Moravia. I lead six English classes, sixty-eight students total, through my question set at Střední odborná škola a Gymnázium Staré Město (Secondary Technical and Grammar School in the Old Town). Students were between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. This old town district of Uherské Hradiště is in the Zlin region of the Czech Republic in the southern larger region of Moravia. Moravia is

typically considered to be the more tradition and more religious region in the Czech Republic. The old town district of Uherské Hradiště draws students from the town itself and from surrounding smaller villages, which are also typically more religious and traditional than larger metropolitan areas.

### **Responses to Ambiguous Description of a Spiritual Location**

The description of a spiritual place yielded many answers, some super specific with stories attached and other responses were more vague locations that almost anyone could experience. Despite the individuality of responses, there were some underlying themes that I was able to categorize answers into. These themes were: places in nature, personal spaces, places that create an atmosphere of isolation or literal perspective by providing views, and places that foster connection. The first two categories of places align with my discussion of a spiritual space that occupies a place outside of the “first space” of daily life. The third category allows me to consider social values that are a part of Czech identity; closeness and loyalty within small private groups like family structures or small networks or friends and the value of private expression. The second category could also fall into this consideration of social values if I assert that aloneness and private space are valued within Czech culture. I will discuss how these categories of responses could reflect cultural values and identity later on.

For the places in nature category students answered: alone in the woods, in a park, in a garden, by the sea, at a beach, outside at night, and on hills and mountains. These subcategories included the personal details of how students experienced their place, for example “in a garden” was “in my father’s garden, by the fence near the sheep with my shoes off.” Students identified the specific woods, oceans, trees in their gardens, and views from the hills and mountains in the locations they gave to match my description. In the personal spaces categorization were

responses like: in a quiet flat, in a bedroom, at home, in the bath and reading, or listening to music. One student told me that her space was a wardrobe in her parents' room where she used to go as a small child because her brother cried all the time and since she shared a room with him she and needed a place to think.

Places that create an atmosphere of isolation overlap with the places in nature and personal places categories. For some students the experience of nature was what connected them to the spiritual description, for other students the experience of being alone, either in nature or in a personal space, made them match their location to my description. The nuance of a place that creates a point of perspective was a trend in the outdoors locations mentioned. Hills and mountains were mentioned repeatedly. Another student recalled an experience in Croatia overlooking a beach of people as their location. The last category, a place that fosters connection, included responses like: with friends, in a concert, at the soccer stadium, with family at a cottage, and in a favorite teashop or pub.

These responses from students supported my idea that spirituality was an identifiable and present force that young Czechs seek out even though they may not consciously consider these experiences in these locations as spiritual. Only one student said that they did not have a place that they could identify with the description. This student added that, despite having no place that fit this description in their life, they would like to find a place like this. Additionally, no students identified a church or a traditionally religious establishment as their location despite the fact that this surveying took place in Moravia, a typically more religious area of the Czech Republic.

I lead each class discussion with the help of a Czech English teacher. A factor that could have influenced my responses from students was how the discussion flowed in class and the input from their teacher. For example, one of the teachers told the class that his place that

matched the spiritual location was the end of a yoga class. A different teacher talked about this description as a description of heaven. Teachers sharing their own answers could have influenced how students thought about their responses. However, I don't think though that this would have significantly changed responses since the nature of the class activity was discussion based and many students shared their responses aloud with the rest of the class. Typically responses were shared after students had a few minutes to write so that they probably did not go back and alter their answers after hearing other classmates.

### **Responses to “What makes you Czech? What is an essential part of your Czech identity or Czech identity more broadly?”**

The next question: “What makes you Czech?” prompted regional, national, and generational discussions of students' ideas about Czech identity and stereotypes. Students mentioned many negative qualities that they associated with Czech identity as well as a strong sense of Czech pride. Students identified traditions and language, especially for Moravia, as qualities that made them Czech. Food, culture, and traditions were mentioned repeatedly. Students said that in Moravia people were more open, more traditional, and more proud of their local region. Festivals and traditional costumes were mentioned as a source of common regional identity; students attend these festivities in local villages. Moravia also is the grape growing region of the Czech Republic and holds wine festivals where these local traditions also appear.

The quality of cleverness as a Czech trait was brought up multiple times with varying connotations and explanations. Some students identified intelligence and handiness as Czech qualities; there is an expression that Czechs have “golden hands,” so that they are able to mend things and be crafty. This notion of craftiness and working with what you have relates to another quality, practicality, which students identified. These interrelating qualities may come from the

Czech Republic's history of Communism. Under Communism people needed to survive off of what was available to them and look out for their individual interests. One student said that a Czech person is Czech because if they are at a hotel with a buffet they will eat and eat even if they are not hungry because they are practical and will want to benefit from the situation. This relates to the negative connotations students brought up about Czechs as jealous of other people, and sneaky and cunning rather than "clever." These negative connotations of "craftiness" may also come from the history of Communism, when it was imperative to keep to yourself and look out for your own self-interest and not that of your larger community. A Czechoslovak saying during Communism was, "if you do not steal from the state, you are robbing your own family."<sup>76</sup>

Students identified personality traits as specifically Czech. Being more private, publically reserved yet privately open, and blunt were widely agreed upon characteristics. Students explained that small talk was not as prevalent in Czech culture and that the pleasantries of answering, "How are you?" with a simple "fine" or "well" was not always an assumed response. When asking how other people are it is not unusual in the Czech Republic to get negative responses. Students also identified Czechs as pessimistic. But other students identified a dark humor as a hallmark of Czech character and emphasized that sarcasm was very normal. Lack of confidence and national pride were two characteristics students identified as Czech which seem to contradict each other. This contradiction relates back to the idea of "the little Czech and the great Czech nation."

One student brought up the idea that Czech people do not care about each other. He may have been referring to our discussion of Czech people as publically more reserved and standoffish. When discussing this question, one student said, "We don't care about each other."

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<sup>76</sup> R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After* (London: Routledge, 2002), 252.

To which another student interrupted him and aggressively said, “No maybe *you* don’t care about other people!”

No students mentioned any type of religious history or religion as a part of what made them Czech. Some students did mention that the history of the Czech Republic and the grandness of cities like Prague make them Czech and make them proud to be Czech. All students I surveyed identified as Czech. When introducing this question I made the point of including the idea of people as Czechs without being born in the Czech Republic. I asked if being born in the Czech Republic made someone Czech and I added the caveat that maybe you weren’t born in the Czech Republic but asked students what makes them Czech anyways. No students shared that they were not originally Czech. This could either reflect a very homogenous society or a society that is dominantly made up of native Czechs so that non-native Czechs do not feel comfortable identifying as an outside. This is all speculation since I did not have individual profiles of each student, so I have no way of knowing all students’ backgrounds.

### **Responses to “Do you identify with a religion? Is your family religious? How do your religious beliefs differ from what your family believes?”**

These first two questions were able to foster conversation before I had students answer the next series of more personal questions. The questions, “Do you identify with a religion?” “Is your family religious?” and “How do your beliefs differ from your family’s?” helped me to contextualize student’s religious belief in relation to family beliefs and the older generations’ religious attitude. Thirty-one students firmly answered no that they did not identify with a religion. Ten students firmly answered yes. Twelve students answered with “yes partly” or “a little bit.” The remaining eleven students answered with either “I don’t know” or an alternative answer like “I have my own way of believing.”



Students who were religious answered that their families also identified religiously and students who firmly answered that they did not identify with a religion generally had less religious families also. Most students who mentioned a difference in familial belief said that the older member of their families, especially grandmothers, were more religious than the rest of their families. This relates to the idea that the older generation of Czechs is typically more likely to be more religious and traditional than younger generation. It was interesting to note the prevalence of students singling out grandmothers as most religious. This could reflect a more female involvement within community structure religion or could simply reflect the reality that women live longer than men. There are a greater number of older Czech women alive than Czech men, so there are more religious women as a function of their bigger population size. Students also identified family members and themselves as “believers” who did not attend church. Other students mentioned that the only time they go to church is for a wedding or a funeral. Some students who firmly answered yes that they identified with a religion said that they went to church regularly. More students reported going to Church on Christmas when they usually did not attend services.

These answers support the idea that Czech people are culturally Christian although they may not be religiously active or consider themselves as Christians. There is no clear set of qualification, practices, or beliefs that would categorize a person as religious. This data also supported the regional character of Moravia as more religious. Although the number of students identifying firmly as religious was less than the students firmly stating no or questioning their religious identification, there was still a sizable group of students that affirmed their religious identification and commented that they attended church.

### **Responses to “Do you believe in a god?”**

Sixty students responded for the question “do you believe in a god?” Twenty-two students said that they did not believe in a god. Ten students said “No...but...” and then offered a different explanation of something they might believe in. Some responses to the “No...but...” categorization were that students didn’t believe in a Christian god, that students thought about the idea of guardian angels, and that students believed not in god but in something out there. Nineteen students answered a straightforward “yes.” Sixteen students answered with “I don’t know” or “maybe.” Some students indicated believing in natural forces rather than a Christian god. One student said that she did not “believe in a god with a capital “G”,” another student said that he believed in Norse gods like Odin. While a large number of students identified as atheists most students had some belief in a god or a power greater than themselves. The “no but...” categorization was something of a middle ground between the firm “no” and the “I don’t know.” The amount of variation in answers and possibility of a god that did not ascribe to Christianity is significant and underscores that a simple designation of atheism or non-religiosity is not comprehensive enough of a title to assign to these responses and to the broader character of Czech secularism.

### **Responses to “Do you believe in an afterlife?”**

The next questions, “do you believe in an afterlife/what do you think happens to you when you die?” elicited excitable double underlined responses as well as comments, explanations, pure doubt, and definitive certainty from students. Eleven students answered only with a “no.” Ten students responded with “I don’t know but I don’t think so.” Fifteen students answered, “I don’t know” but with caveats that maybe there would be an afterlife. Four students responded that this is a subject that they don’t think about. Four students responded that they

hoped so. Seventeen students answered yes and some of these “yes” respondents gave a descriptions of what they thought an afterlife would be like.

Responses ran the gambit through reincarnation, heaven and hell, and being returned to nature. These responses for the most part did not align with the Christian ideology of a heaven and a hell. Students mentioned spirits and souls, ideas that might fit into a context of an alternate spirituality or more New Age Religion, rather than talking about heaven and hell. These responses might indicate an alternative approach towards spirituality or thinking about life after death that doesn’t ascribe to strictly Christian ideas. The depth of thought in the responses also could indicate that this is an idea that students think about and that they want to come up with their own understanding of themselves in relation to the unknowns of the world around them. One student said that something must happen to souls after death because the world is far “too small for new spirits.” Another student mentioned that an afterlife might be a reincarnation or a new existence without memories. A student mentioned that there would be a “big place in the sky.”

The students who firmly said no also offered explanations for their reasoning. One student said that afterlife was only a thing in films and that we probably have one life to live and one chance to live it. Another student said that it didn’t matter if there was an afterlife or not, other students said that they “didn’t care” if there was an afterlife and one student suggested that after we die “nothing will happen and it will be boring.” These responses harken back to the idea that students brought up that Czech people are very pragmatic.

### **Responses to “Do you believe in evolution?”**

I asked, “Do you believe in evolution?” Forty-nine students said firmly that yes they believe in evolution. Seven students said maybe. Six students said no. One student said, “I don’t know.” One student said, “I never think about this.” This question may have been misunderstood because the seven “maybes” and six “no” responses seem too high to fit with the idea that the Czech Republic is a society of pragmatic people that value science. However, I don’t know how this question could have been misunderstood because the word for evolution in Czech is very similar, “evoluce.”

### **Responses to “What sort of religious traditions do you practice and/or how do you and your families celebrate Christmas?”**

The next question we discussed was about how students celebrated Christmas. On the survey forms I asked which Christian holidays students celebrated and if they went to church to celebrate these holidays. All students identified Christmas as a holiday that they celebrated and most students identified Easter as well. The second detail of the question, if students went to church or not to celebrate these holidays, was not answered by all of the respondents. Twelve students responded that they attended church on Christmas. Some students specifically stated that they celebrated Christmas and Easter because they “were nice holidays” and not for religious reasons; one student said that she celebrated Christmas but “without church or god.”

This question brought up a multitude of Christmas traditions that I had no previous knowledge of. It is typical in the Czech Republic to celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve with family and to cook a meal of carp and potato salad. Families decorate Christmas trees; some go to a cemetery with candles to remember lost relatives, sometimes families will attend a church service (although less so with the younger generation of Czech people), cooking gingerbread and

“vanoce” (an eggy Christmas bread) leading up to Christmas is common. In the Czech Republic little baby Jesus, Ježíšek, brings presents on Christmas Eve during or after the Christmas dinner. Ježíšek appears after the sound of bells; no one knows what exactly he looks like or how he gets into the house. Despite asking what he looks like, a question that seemed absurd to me as an outsider (how could you not imagine from images in art history what a little white baby might look like?), students were unable to answer me.

Some of the lesser popularized Czech Christmas traditions I discovered were mainly folk traditions. Cutting an apple to see what shape would appear, and then using this shape (a star for good luck and a cross for sickness) as a predictor for the coming year is an old Czech tradition. Some families melt iron together and watch the shape that the metal takes in water and interpret these shapes as omens for the coming year. There is a tradition where women throw shoes behind their back and depending on where the shoes land and what direction the shoes face the shoes predict when a young woman will leave her family home. Similar to this tradition is a tradition where small candles are placed inside of half walnut shells and then floated in water. Depending on the path of the walnut vessel and how it floats will determine (or illuminate) a person’s future in the coming year. Most of these traditions are not taken as fact, but students brought them up as traditions that they take part in yearly or remember practicing as small children with their family. Even if students did not practice these folk traditions they knew all of the details of them. This suggests a cultural literacy of tradition relating to Christmas that is unanimously known.

Students taught me about a tradition of fasting during Christmas Eve day in order to “see the golden pig.” Fasting during the day to enjoy a big Christmas dinner is common and the mythology of seeing a golden pig adds a whimsical twist to this tradition. I asked students why a

pig, and if the pig interacted with them in anyway once they saw it. Students were unsure of the details of the golden pig tradition and no students admitted to having seen the pig. One student said that in her family potato salad for her Christmas dinner her mother always hides a whole lemon with a face drawn on to be a “golden pig.”

From the enthusiastic responses and the long discussions we had about personal traditions and Christmas celebrations, it was easy to see that Christmas time was a special time of the year for these Czech students. These traditions and celebrations no doubt are a large part of growing up as a Czech, and help to shape Czech identity past childhood.

### **Responses to “Do you think that religion is a part of Czech national identity?”**

When asking students in my survey if religion was a part of Czech identity I was wary of the fact that this question might be interpreted several different ways. Some students answered based on the fact that they did not consider the people of the Czech Republic to be religious. Other students answered based on the fact that Christian traditions are a large part of Czech culture (this question followed the discussion of Christmas traditions). Other students still may have interpreted the question differently, and the issue of language here may have made clarification more difficult. With these potential limitations for the question in mind I sorted through the different answers from the surveys.

Twenty-two students responded that yes religion is a part of Czech national identity. Twenty-four students responded with a solid no. Eleven responded with “I don’t know” or “maybe.” Within these “yeses,” “nos”, and “maybes” were additional comments. One student responded that “yes, but only in Moravia.” Another student said that the history of Christianity was a part of Czech identity. Several students responded by comparing the secular nature of the

Czech Republic to other nearby countries that are more religious like Poland. Several students commented that the Czech Republic used to be more religious.

### **Responses to “How do you think religion changed after 1989?”**

The previous question related to the next I asked in my survey, “How do you think religion in the Czech Republic changed after 1989?” The Czech English teacher who I mainly worked with in the classrooms attempted to engage students with this question. After lots of prompting from their teacher, only a few students hesitantly volunteered ideas. Their teacher looked at me and whispered almost shocked, “they don’t know about 1989!” In 1989 the Velvet Revolution swept through Czechoslovakia, Communism ended and Czechoslovakia became a parliamentary republic. Forty-one years of communist rule came to an end. Free elections were held in June of 1990 and Vaclav Havel, the previously imprisoned dissident and playwright, was elected as President. The students I surveyed were all born after this watershed event in Czech history. Both their teacher and I were surprised that students did not know more about how their country changed when Communism dissolved.

Twenty-two students responded that they didn’t know how or if religion changed in the Czech Republic after 1989. Eleven students responded that the Czech Republic became less religious after this year. One student commented that maybe more people became atheists because during Communism because believing in a god was helpful and now that people were free after the fall of Communism maybe they didn’t feel like they needed faith in something outside of their society. Another student noted that the younger people became less and less religious while another student commented that after 1989 people were too lazy to go to church on Sundays. Some students said that they thought religion changed because people were free to go to church and practice whatever they wanted to. Seven students said that religion became

more open. Other students said that there was no change as a result of the Velvet Revolution. Ten students said that there was not a change in religious practice in the Czech Republic after 1989.

Although there was an influx of missionaries and other religious and cultural practices into the Czech Republic, it is true that a society that acted one way for forty-one years during communism did not all of a sudden change beliefs or their expression of their beliefs. One student summed this thought up nicely, “some people were still communists, and some people went to church. People changed their lifestyles but didn’t care much about religion.” Other students responded that the Czech Republic changed but did not address the question if there was a religious change along with the political change.

I discussed the hesitancy for students to assert opinions about this topic with some of the other teachers at the school. It may have been a function of the students’ age that they were not interested in the history of their parents’ generation. Maybe many Czech families do not talk extensively about the past with their children. It is possible that this generation of young students doesn’t associate at all with the recent past of Communism and therefore really doesn’t know much about it. Or, maybe students were just being shy or felt patronized.

### **Responses to “Are there ‘secular saints’ in the Czech Republic?”**

While students had little to say about 1989 and possible changes in religion in their country, they had plenty to contribute about the “secular saints” that exist in their culture. I explained the idea of a secular as a person in society who is elevated to almost a god-like level of respect. A “secular saint” could be alive or dead, but they must somehow be held in great esteem.



I asked students to identify figures that are elevated to iconic statuses in their culture who could be seen as almost godly or saint-like despite not being connected to religion.

The most common responses were, Vaclav Havel, T.G. Masaryk, Karel Gott, Charles IV, and Jaromir Jagr. Vaclav Havel was the iconic first president after Gustáv Husák resigned from office following the Velvet Revolution. T.G. Masaryk was the founder and president of Czechoslovakia after World War One. Karel Gott is a popular singer born in 1939 who is a Czech emblem of pop culture. Charles IV founded Charles University in Prague and was a central figure in Czech history. Jaromir Jagr is Czech hockey player who plays for the NHL. A few more alternative singers were offered as icons but in class discussion students decided that the previously mentioned people were more likely to be considered by the general population as secular saints.

This question was initially intended to point me towards potential sources of truth telling in Czech society; I wanted to identify the people and the ideas they represented that could replace a religious structure. Although Vaclav Havel, T.G. Masaryk and Charles IV are iconic historical figures that impacted the Czech Republic I am not sure that they are sources of truth for Czech society. Since the Czech Republic is a small nation, people seem to be very proud of the accomplishments of Czechs. Jaromir Jagr plays hockey in the United States and has not lived in the Czech Republic for years, yet he was still mentioned as a secular saint. This question allowed me to identify Czech icons but it did not radically refocus how I view Czech secularism or society.

### **Responses to “Where do you find a sense of community?”**

The next question attempted to locate where young Czechs might find a sense of community. Religion in a congregational and traditional setting offers a sense of community and

a place within society for its followers. In a secular society where might people go to find a sense of place? The two most common answers were with friends and with family; these two answers were the most often to overlap as well.

Fifteen students responded that they find a sense of community within their family or at home. Fifteen students said that they find community with friends. Fifteen students said that they find a sense of community when they are in a favorite café or in a pub with other people. Twenty students responded with communities they were a part of that centered on a shared extracurricular interest. Students responded that on their various sports teams, soccer and ice hockey being most popular, and in other music or arts group that they felt a sense of community. Folklore choir, LARPing (live action role playing), online games, and time spent in the library were also given as places for community feeling. Twenty-one students responded that they find a sense of community at school. Several students mentioned a specific person with whom they felt a sense of community, usually a family member, close friend or boyfriend or girlfriend. Four students said that they feel a sense of community through their church.

A small personal sense of community might make more sense in the Czech cultural context. When studying abroad I worked in a small town in Northern Bohemia where I volunteered with a children's community center. I asked my translator about the city and the group of children living there. I was asking about the group that the center served using the term "community." My translator, a local high school student, told me that in American TV shows and movies all we do is talk about this idea of "community" and that this idea was not present in the Czech Republic. Czech people pride themselves on their practicality, privacy, and genuine nature. Combine these self-proclaimed national traits with the decades under communism where

community only existed publically in communist settings it makes sense that feeling a real sense of “community” in the way that America stresses this idea may not exist.

The identification of a pub or a café a source of community could relate to the Czech pride in their beers and a culture of drinking. Czech people are very proud of their beer. When I asked students what made them Czech their teachers told them not to just write about their beer and liquor. Czech people consume more beer per capita than anyone else in the world.<sup>77</sup> There is a strong culture of beer drinking. Drinking beer is a normal social activity. The drinking age is 18 but is rarely enforced; most Czech men begin drinking in high school around age 15 and 16 and then regularly spend time in pubs with their friends by the age of 18.<sup>78</sup> Drinking and being in environments where drinking is featured could be a community setting within Czech society.

### **Responses to “Where do you find your morals and your sense of right and wrong?”**

My next question also played off of the idea of social cultural creation without religion. I asked, “Where do you find your sense of right and wrong/your moral compass?” One could argue that these values, although not given to people directly from a hierarchical religious structure, do come from a society that is based in its past as a predominantly Christian society. I wanted to see if students were self-aware enough to think about where their values came from. I was curious if they had insight into where the environment was that they learned these values and how values became social or cultural values in the first place. Like the question about community and secular saints, I wanted to find a “truth provider” and purpose giver that a church might provide in a traditionally religious congregation, but in a secular society.

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<sup>77</sup> Timothy M. Hall, "Pivo and Pohoda: The Social Conditions and Symbolism of Czech Beer-Drinking," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 21, no. 1 (2010), 116.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Students overwhelmingly responded that they learned their sense of right and wrong and morals from their families. Students also reported that their values and morals came from within themselves. Forty-six students responded with their family as a source of their morals and sense of right and wrong. Interestingly students were more likely to name specific family members in response to this question rather than the question asking where they found their sense of community. Thirteen students answered that their sense of right and wrong and their morals came from themselves. Nine students responded that their friends taught them about their own sense of morals and right and wrong. Six students mentioned teachers, coaches, or school environments to be sources of their knowledge and beliefs about their own morals and sense of right and wrong. Three students referenced their more general environment, “nature” and “the world” as sources of this information. Three students mentioned religion as a source for this information; two students responded with the word “church” and one student said that books, religious and scientific helped them form their opinions in relation to these ideas.

One cheeky respondent said that they found their sense of right and wrong and moral compass from Wikipedia. Although this response was intended to be funny, it may reflect that the availability of information is so great that in our modern time we do look to our own research and individual pursuits of knowledge as sources to inform our deep beliefs. This facetious response also connects to my question about how my Western background influenced my work; are Western connotations and conceptualizations of terms like spirituality present or influential in the Czech Republic? How does access to outside cultures and information contribute to a person’s identity and affect the culture that they are a part of?

## **Responses to “Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?”**

My last question to the students was, “do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” Nuancing my question is my realization that many Czech people consider spirituality intrinsically linked to religion and separated from practicality, a quality that is considered to be quintessentially Czech. This perspective and culture of religious disassociation makes it more difficult to highlight and pinpoint concretely if a person or a culture would describe themselves as secularly spiritual, even if they have spiritual feelings or places in their life. From my data I conclude that there is a “something-ism” of undefined belief, which many people ascribe to. Nineteen students responded with a straightforward “yes.” Ten students responded with “maybe,” “partly,” or “a little bit.” Eight students responded with either “I don’t know,” or “I don’t think about it.” Twenty-nine students responded with “no.” Of those definitive “no” responses there were several firmly state comments. “I am a student, not a friar,” and “DEFINITELY not” were two strong negative responses to this question and reflect negative connotations or associations of spirituality being tied to religion.

## **Reflections**

This surveying gave me a broad sense of what students in this area thought and felt about religion, their Czech identity, and how they viewed themselves and the world around them. The weakness of this process was that I was not able to personally interview students one on one and that not all students may have wanted to eagerly participate, they were after all at school and doing an English language activity. I was able to move in other different directions and enter into my phase of one on one interviewing in Prague with more background from this surveying and

class discussions. During my interviewing in Prague I was able to ask the specific follow up questions that I was not able to ask in classroom discussions.

One of the points that I realized from working with these students was that the Czech Republic, or at least in the eyes of these Czech students, is uniformly influenced by Christianity. In all of the classes of students I asked students if they were celebrating Christmas, all students said yes. When I went out to eat with other the other teachers one woman brought up that fact that she had never met a Jew before (I am Jewish). Coming into this project I took for granted the cultural diversity that I've grown up around that has influenced the way I see the world. I was so surprised that an adult woman who went to university in a bigger city than where she taught and grew up had never knowingly interacted with a Jewish person. Going into my one-on-one interview I made a point to ask interviewees when it felt appropriate what other types of religions were active in the Czech Republic.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Part Two: Interpretation of Responses from One on One Interviews in Prague**

The benefit of interviewing one on one is that the conversation is detailed, intimate, and that interviewees opened up to me in all sorts of unexpected ways. Interviewing mostly strangers one on one and meeting in many different locations posed potential threats of awkwardness and logistical difficulty. Overall things went surprisingly smoothly. I set up interviews over Facebook, through friends, and by email. With a coffee, or ginger tea (*zázvory čaj*) in hand I went through the same interview questions that I surveyed the high school students with. I added in supplementary questions and the image identification activity to my make my interview process more intensive.

#### **Responses to Ambiguous Description of a Spiritual Location**

Responses to this question were specific and given in detail. When I read the description of the place about half of my interviewees closed their eyes to picture what I was describing. Some of the same themes appeared in these responses that I categorized from the high school students, places in nature, personal spaces, places that create an atmosphere of isolation or literal perspective by providing views, and places that foster connection.

For responses in nature one interviewee said, “It is outside in the woods. There is a place close to my house, there is a hill and on the top of the hill there is a large stone that is vertical. There are no trees; you can see my hometown. There is a beautiful view and every time I go here I am like, this is fucking beautiful, chills. Every time I go back home I can’t wait to go there.” This location embodies all three of my place categorizations. Another interviewee identified the

summer camp she works at in the woods, specifically during the winter when all the kids had left camp. Two other interviews located specific wooded areas. One interviewee told me that he went on spiritual quest in the woods for several days and that this description matched exactly how he felt, “like I am sitting alone in the night sky and feeling the universe and feeling that I am not that important in the universe, like I am a tiny nothing and then it just clicked that it was this experience.” Two interviewees mentioned water as a part of their location, “My first thought is a swimming pool,” and, “This is the sea in Croatia where I lay on my back.” A desert, and pagan ruins were also mentioned as possible locations.

My interviewees also recalled that this space could describe a church, although the churches that they mentioned were not churches that they would regularly go to. Two interviewees said that this space could be a big cathedral in Prague. One interviewee located a Bronze Age sanctuary in Israel, and another interviewer mentioned a Mosque that she visited in Istanbul and a Church in Spain. The more frequent identification of a church may have been because my interviewees knew about the subject of the interview before hand, religion and secularism, and this previous knowledge might have made the description of the location I read more transparent. Maybe interviewees already had in mind that I would be asking them about religiously related things, compared to the high schoolers that I surveyed and talked with who had no preconceived notions about what we would be talking about. However even though the space of a church or mosque were brought up by interviewee, the churches and mosques that were mentioned were generally spectacular and could create an experience of being out of the ordinary and out of the feeling of the “first space” of day to day life.

Responses could be categorized as spaces that would foster reflection. Reflection could be prompted by a sense of being alone, like in the examples of being in nature. Two other



responses located this space as a bedroom at home and as a hotel room in Iran. Both of these spaces are personal and located in a specific set of memory. Another atmosphere that might prompt reflection is an atmosphere where people feel a sense of themselves compared to the place they are in or the history that surrounds them. For example, one respondent explained that he felt this sense of deep reflection and isolation despite being surrounded by other people when he visited Terezin, a concentration camp located outside of Prague. Another interviewee said that this space could be the gym at his high school. A different interviewee responded that this space could even be a bank. All of these locations are examples of places where other people are but where an individual is alone, or places attached to memory of other people or to the past. This sort of environment could evoke a sense of self-awareness and spirituality. A graveyard, pagan ruin, Terezin, and churches or mosques all evoke a sense of the past and a history attached to these places. The past and history as influencing factors for locations that matched the description of spirituality were new elements that came from these interviews.

### **Responses to “Where in the Czech Republic are you from?”**

I asked my interviewees where they and their families were from in order to help me gauge how regionalism might affect their perspectives. I was curious to determine the diversity of where people were from as well so that I could better judge if my interviews were representative of a larger population than just an urban population of people living in Prague.

Seven of my interviewees were from Prague. Of the seven though, one person went to school a few hours away from Prague, and another had a father from Austria. I interviewed two people from Moravia; one person was from a small village and the other was from Brno but works in Prague. I interviewed someone from Southern Bohemia and another person from

Northern Bohemia near Liberec. I interviewed one Slovakian who has been living in Prague for six years. Charles University is one of the major Universities that young Czech attend, so there is a draw for students all over the Czech Republic who live in the city during the week and then take a train home on the weekends. Many of my interviewees were students or recent graduates. Groups of students from different cities mingle at Charles University, but it seemed like ties to hometowns and groups of friends based on region were strongest. This could reflect that region and locality are important elements within identity. The women I stayed with while interviewing during my time in Prague were from Northern Bohemia; although they live in Prague and have friends from the city, their main group of friends is their friends from their hometown who also came to live in Prague.

I learned that small biases exist between people living in Prague and people living in smaller cities in the country. My interviewees told me that people from Moravia speak differently than people in Prague and visa-versa so that it is easy to detect where different people are from. One interviewee explained that there is a small sense of antagonism between people from Prague and people from villages. He said that the people in villages assume that the city people think that they are more educated and worldly than the people in the villages. People from smaller areas than Prague expressed a loyalty to their hometowns and explained their identity as mixed from a city perspective and their hometown mentality where they grew up. While my interviewees identified these differences, they felt these differences were not divisive and that their “Czechness” was not limited to their places of birth. When I later asked what make my interviewees Czech, hometowns were barely mentioned and larger commonalities like language and culture trumped locational difference.

## **Responses to “What makes you Czech? What is an essential part of your Czech identity or Czech identity more broadly?”**

When I asked interviewees what made them Czech I received literal answers, the location, geography, and language and more complicated anecdotal responses trying to explain to me what constituted Czech identity. Each interviewee identified both positive and negative aspects of their Czech identity, or how they saw other Czechs more generally. All interviewees asserted a strong Czech pride.

Language, culture, and tradition were three elements of Czech life that interviewees highlighted as significant for them. One interviewee explained to me that because the Czech Republic is so small compared to other nations they would always have a distinct sense of their identity because of their nationality. This interviewee said that they would continue the traditions that they did as a child with their future family even if, and especially if, they decided to live outside of the Czech Republic. Interviewees stressed language as a source of commonality with other Czechs. Czech is similar to other Slavic based languages like Slovak and Polish. Despite similarities, these languages are not mutually intelligible and Czech language fluency was a determining factor of identity for my interviewees. Moravians emphasized language and accent as significant to their identity, since living in Prague they are more aware of slight intonation differences in Bohemia and in Moravia.

One interviewee said that the physical landscape of the Czech Republic was significant to her and shaped her childhood and influenced her identity. She mentioned that in her experience Czech people feel drawn to nature and poetically told me that growing up, “running through the orchards and landscapes of Central Europe, learning Czech nursery rhymes and jokes in school and sharing the city of Prague” was formative to her identity as a Czech woman.

Interviewees mentioned national pride and lack of national pride in relation to their sense of self as a Czech person. Multiple interviewees stated, "I am proud to be Czech," while one interviewee said that he felt little nationalistic connection to the Czech Republic and that it just happened to be a place where he was born and raised. I asked what made him Czech and he responded that he saw himself as Czech, but he saw himself more "as an earthling." One interviewee said that she is particularly affected by the Czech national anthem although she doesn't consider herself a person of typical Czech character. She is a singer; whenever she sings the national anthem she tears up. Multiple people mentioned feeling connected to and proud of Czech icons throughout history. Vaclav Havel was highlighted as a person connected to an interviewee's sense of national self-identity.

When speaking about stereotypes of Czech character, my one on one interviewees mentioned some of the same characteristics as the high school students in Moravia. Being reserved, sporty, active, and straightforward were characteristics that were also mentioned. Interviewees mentioned that Czech people are very sarcastic; one interviewee said that there isn't ever doubt about if a person is being sarcastic, because they most likely are so no one would ever ask them if they were being sarcastic, like they might in America. This same interviewee told me that Czech people are blunt to a fault; they don't feel the need to sugar coat comments or skirt around issues. If there is a conversation or confrontation Czechs will, "tell you things up upfront and not wrap it up as a gift." Counter to this rejection of conversational flourishes and unnecessary ornateness was the Czech quality of culture seeking as one interviewee mentioned. This interviewee said that Czech people seek out cultural experience and especially in bigger cities it is normal to frequently attend theater and opera and go to galleries. This interviewee

expressed that art and artistic expression are valued within Czech culture and that individuality, at least in larger cities, is respected.

The idea of Czechs as practical to a fault without moral reservations came up. One interviewee who attends college in the United States explained to me that the roadside stands for buying firewood near campsites in the Northeast that operate on an honor system would not exist in the Czech Republic. He said that no one would pay money, and that the people would just see it as an opportunity for free wood. A Slovakian that I interviewed said that if a Czech person were to find a wallet on the street they would most likely pick it up and keep it. My interviewees explained to me that for better or for worse there is no taboo about serving your own interests in the Czech Republic and that this self-serving was not necessarily mean spirited but practical and smart. This relates again to what I discussed previously, a potential post-communist effect on the national personality of Czech people.

### **Responses to “Do you identify with a religion?”**

Seven interviewees responded to this question with a hard no. Of these no responses several interviewees added more detail. Two people said, “no I am an atheist,” one added more saying that they considered themselves to be a scientific person and that for them, while religion and science were not mutually exclusive, it seemed to be problematic to believe bits and pieces of each. Four interviewees responded with mixed answers. Some said that they didn’t know or that they either identified culturally as Christian or believed in an alternative type of religion that wasn’t connected to an established religion. One interviewee identified pagan nature gods as a source of his religious identification; he also added that he was interested in different gods from a variety of different religions. One of these middle ground respondents said that they don’t identify with religion to the extent where they would follow any doctrine but only in the way that

all Czechs are partly Christian. Another interviewee, in this same vein, said that she identified culturally as Roman Catholic and was baptized; she added that this cultural Christian influence is ingrained in Czech life. The city of Prague is built around its churches and statues of saints and religious figures, both Protestant and Catholic, are hallmarks of the cityscapes. The Czech calendar with names days to celebrate saints is another example of a persistent Catholic influence.

Three interviewees responded that they identified with a religion, Christianity, and more specifically Roman Catholicism. One interviewee explained that he identifies as Roman Catholic even though he doesn't follow any of the liturgy. He told me a story about how when the first census after the Velvet Revolution was conducted he was a high school student. His father marked on the census sheet for him and said that he was a "non-believer," this bothered my interviewee and he insisted on changing it to say that he was a believer. This strong association with religion may have come from a sentimental association he had with religion and his grandparents. He also told me how he wore a cross that his grandparents gave him as a small child and that he valued it as his most prized possession, because it was the most valuable thing he owned, and because of the emotional aspect of the gift. Although there were a few interviewees (the three Roman Catholics) who identified religiously the rest of the group did not strongly identify as religious. This group of one on one interviewees identified as less religious than the students who I surveyed in Moravia.

### **Responses to "Is your family religious? How do your religious beliefs differ from what your family believes?"**

There were four straightforward responses of "no." Some interviewees' families were atheistic and others didn't interact with religion either through association or disassociation, so

that they were neutral. Others responded that the older generations of their family were more religious but as time went on their families became progressively less religious or that there was a discontinuity of religious association within their families. For example one interviewee said that while her mother, father, and she were baptized that her sister was not. Those who mentioned the older generations of their families as more religious specifically mentioned their grandmothers, a curious similarity to the responses of the high school students. Again, I interpret this detail of grandmothers being more religious as a result from the fact that women typically live longer than men, and so there are older women in the Czech Republic, not that women are inherently more inclined to be religious. One interviewee explained that her grandmother started going to church but only after her grandfather passed away and was not religious but enjoyed the company of the other people at the church. Another interviewee told me that her grandmother went to church but only to services with lots of singing and otherwise didn't consider her to be religious or align herself with religious beliefs, as she was a scientist by profession.

Like the students I surveyed, beliefs of interviewees generally aligned with the beliefs of their family. All interviewees grew up within a culturally Christian context although most interviewees did not identify as being religious people.

### **Responses to “Do you believe in a god?”**

Six interviewees answered straightforwardly that, no they did not believe in a God. One interviewee told me that she believed in “something” but not in a God. Another “no” answered was nuanced with the notion that the interviewee believed in some greater power in the universe, like electricity or the chaos of nature, but not in a God in any sort of religious context. This interviewee intimated that while he believed in some force greater than himself he thought that

humans didn't have a personal relationship to this force. Another "no" answer added on that he didn't think that there was some sort of intelligent being that was a God, that maybe there was something but that it was not a self-aware something. One interviewee said that no one had ever asked him before and that he was not sure of his answer. Another interviewee said that aside from uttering, "oh Jesus," if he was in trouble that he didn't think that there was one God figure out there. He added that although he didn't think that there was a God in the sense of a God being part of a holy trinity he thought that he believed in "something" rather than "someone." The forcefulness of these "nos" echo the idea that the Czech Republic is secular and influenced by atheism, a "somethingism" may be the closest expression or embrace of religious ideas for the Czech Republic.

A few of the interviewees answered that yes they believed in a God, of these "yes" responses were caveats and details to qualify their "yes." One interviewee identified Norse gods and Pagan gods as gods that he believed in. Another "yes" response was tagged on to that statement that the interviewee didn't identify religiously and saw themselves and their spirituality as more individualistic. This person noted that they go to church in order to be alone with their thoughts but that they don't practice the rituals and doctrine of the church. Of the three straightforward yes responses, only two mentioned going to church.

### **Responses to "Do you believe in an afterlife?"**

This question was met with uncertainty and only a small numbers of interviewees definitively said yes or no to the question of an afterlife. Three interviewees flat out responded that no they did not believe in any sort of an afterlife. One of these interviewees said that when he dies his body would decompose and turn into fossil fuel, "that's what happens to animals that



what will happen to me. I don't believe in a heaven or a hell or reincarnation. I don't believe in anything.”

Several interviewees expressed a conviction that there must be something after death even if they didn't align their idea of an afterlife in terms of a Christian heaven or hell. Ideas of reincarnation, past lives, and the notion of recycling souls were brought up. One person, after deliberating for a moment if the idea of an afterlife was crazy or not and saying how was kind of scary to consider, said, “well, the universe recycles everything, so why not souls?” Another interviewee who was confused about his answer said that he had a friend who passed away and although he considers himself to be an atheist, it gives him comfort to entertain the idea that the soul of his friend is out there somewhere. Despite these “maybe” responses, many of the interviewees showed a hopefully but realistic attitude towards this question. One interviewee summed up this attitude perfectly when she said, “it would be sad if you just turned off the lights and that was it, I would be glad if there was something after. But, I don't think about this in detail or deeply.” Another interviewee mirrored this sentiment by saying, “If there was an afterlife it would be cool, but it really doesn't matter in the end.”

Some interviewees offered up complicated possibilities for what an afterlife might consist of. One interviewee compared the idea of an afterlife to the movie Inception, where there are multiple layers of dreams and reality. Another interviewee told me of a dream he had where he was in a plane crash. In his dream there was chaos, but then a sudden and silent calm. He proposed that maybe death, and whatever happens after death, would be like his dream. He also added to this idea that maybe an afterlife like his dream wouldn't be a real possibility and that he would just “rot in the ground.” One interviewee voiced the idea that what happens after a person dies could be different for each person depending on their beliefs in what happens after death.

This interviewee said that maybe there was a different path for each person and that if you wanted an afterlife there would be one, or if you wanted to be reincarnated etc. that could be possible.

Only one interviewee said that they believed in an afterlife where there was a heaven and a hell. An interviewee who aligned himself strongly with the ideas of Christianity admitted that he didn't know if he was satisfied with the ideas of a heaven and a hell but that the idea of a void after death was terrifying. This interviewee added that if there was or wasn't an afterlife, this wouldn't affect his life on earth. The other interviewee who believed in an afterlife said only that she thought that souls probably went where other souls were and where god was.

The uncertainty and multiplicity of responses both from my individual interviewees and from the surveyed high school students display that there is no simple answer for this question. The diversity of answers may not be uniquely Czech, maybe it represents more generally that this is a complicated idea for people to consider. However, these answers support my thesis that the Czech Republic is secular but spiritual in different not exclusively religious ways. Answers did not fit into a religious dialogue about life after death but went in different directions that may have been influenced from other outside ideas that were not within a tradition and Christian Czech influenced culture. The individualism of these answers also supports the idea that Czechs customize their beliefs and do not seek out community forming religions.

### **Responses to “Do you believe in evolution?”**

All but one interviewee said that they believed in evolution. The one person that said she didn't, said that she talked with other religious people and that they convinced her that evolution was not the only option. From these responses I can say that evolution is widely accepted and that science is seen as truth for the majority of my interviewees. Czechs are thought of as

practical, the scientific explanation for life in evolution aligns with this sense of practicality. Science in the Czech Republic may be a “truth teller” that could stand in for the idea of an all-knowing power. I do not know if my interviewees are representative of all Czech people but their insistence in their answers prompted me to have to qualify this question. I explained about the idea of Creationism and that this idea was present in American society as a way to explain why I was asking this question. I asked if there was a similar group of people within the Czech Republic, my interviewees did not know but were surprised that Creationism and Intelligent Design were ideas that people supported and fought for in the United States.

### **Responses to “What sort of religious traditions do you practice and/or how do you and your families celebrate Christmas?”**

For this question interviewees told me about the standard Czech Christmas traditions that they practiced as well as their own personal and family traditions and spins on Christmas celebration. One interviewee prefaced his response with the qualification that, “Everybody celebrates Christmas but it is not religious. I have never met a person here in Prague who does not celebrate Christmas.” Because of this normalized celebrating some interviewees were hesitant to explain their Christmas traditions because they claimed that they did what all Czechs do to celebrate Christmas and that their celebrations were not especially noteworthy within the context of ubiquitous Christmas celebration. The standard Czech traditions to celebrate Christmas that they told me about were similar to the traditions the high school students explained. Decorating of the Christmas tree (usually the day of or the day before Christmas), a festive Christmas meal with carp and potato salad, St. Nicholas’s Day, making lots of Christmas cookies, Ježíšek visiting in the evening to bring presents, and caroling and spending family time together were uniformly noted.

My interviewees also brought up very old Czech Christmas traditions. Pouring and melting lead, cutting apples, fasting for the golden pig, throwing shoes, floating walnuts, and keeping scales from the carp were all mentioned. I probed one interviewee about the process of buying, keeping the carp at home alive, and preparing the carp. He said that every year when he was a child his parents would buy a carp a few days before Christmas. The carp lived in the bathtub and each year he named it (“Ondra and “Pepa” were the last two carps). On Christmas Eve day his mother would prepare the fish. Some of my interviewees said that the fish was not especially delicious but that it was traditional and that on Christmas Eve was the only time that they would eat carp.

One of my interviewees always goes to her family cottage for Christmas. Many Czech families have cottages that they go to on the weekends or in the summer. These cottages are often a long drive or train ride away from where a family usually lives. During Communism weekend escape to a cottage allowed people to enter their own private and safe atmosphere. The importance of the cottage in Czech culture is persistent and might align with why it seems like Czech people value being outside in nature and enjoy periods of isolation from cities. The experience of spending family time together in a family cottage reiterates the idea of the cottage and of celebrating a holiday like Christmas as a special and valued time for Czech people. Another interviewee mentioned that he didn’t know why but that Christmas time always felt magical for him and that he cherished getting dressed up and taking time to prepare a nice evening with his family. Other interviewees told me that they go to their local cemetery on Christmas to bring candles to the graves of deceased relatives. These three examples, the cottage for Christmas, the valued family time, and the tradition of visiting cemeteries establish Czech Christmas as family centered and its celebration as within a personal and private intimate setting.

## **Responses to “Do you think that religion is a part of Czech national identity?”**

Nine interviewees directly said that religion was not a part of Czech national identity and that opposition or rejection of religion was a part of Czech national identity. Interviewees immediately brought up the fact that religion used to be more a part of Czech National identity. The Czech Republic has a history of religious influence but interviewees claimed that in recent years people have become less and less interested in religion. Some interviewees attributed this to the atheistic society that communist rule shaped. This question allowed me to probe my interviewees about idea of atheism within their secular culture and how this might have originated as an element of how Czech secularism is perceived. One interviewee told me that during Communism society learned not to value or to think about religion and passed these beliefs down to the next generation. Interviewees mentioned that compared to Slovakia and Poland the Czech Republic was much less religious. When I asked why this might be one interviewee contested that the Czech Republic had never been very religious, even before Communism and that when the Czech Republic became Czechoslovakia it wanted to distance itself from Catholicism (the religion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Another interviewee responded that the Czech Republic was less religious because it was not as traditional as Poland and Slovakia. He argued that folk custom and localism tied to the authority of a church is a strong force within Polish and Slovakian culture. This argument could go along with the reality of the south of the Czech Republic, Moravia, being more religious and more traditional.

Interviewees also described the Czech Republic as undeniably influenced by Christianity. One interviewee said that the Czech Republic was a Christian nation like the rest of the European countries and that the influence of Christianity is present in Czech society and culture. Another interviewee mentioned the mixture of Protestant and Catholic history and said that this past

combined with the more recent denouncement of religion during Communism and the Western trend of waxing atheism. Religion in terms of history and its lasting effects that shape Czech culture and traditions seems to be what makes up the Christian element within Czech identity. One interviewee even mentioned that maybe because Czechs see themselves as so adamantly a-religious the importance of celebrating Christian traditions like Christmas and Easter might be societal way to compensate for this rejection of religion.

One interviewee mentioned that people identify themselves with personal family beliefs and not with a national sense of religion. This same interviewee told me that although the Czech Republic is largely uninterested in traditional religion that all people must have something that they believe in, whether it be from a religion, from their family, or from their own personal experiences and ideas.

### **Responses to “Do you know any Czech Jews?”**

The overwhelming majority of Christian practice in the Czech Republic didn't surprise me, but I wondered if there were any other significant religious groups or ideologies. I asked my interviewees if there were other religions that practiced in the Czech Republic as well, as a part of this question I asked directly if my interviewees knew any Czech Jews (as I was still surprised to be the only Jew that the English teacher in Moravia had ever met). Interviewees mentioned that there were some Muslims, some people who practiced more specific kind of Christianity, and that there were also many people who practiced alternative types of religion.

Only one of my interviewees knew Jewish Czechs. She went to a high school in Prague that was specifically for Jewish students. Another one of my interviewees said that her family on her dad's side is Jewish. The fact that there is an all-Jewish charter school in Prague shows that

there are Jewish Czechs, but that they are few and far between as indicated by the paucity of religious diversity that my interviewees had exposure to.

### **Responses to “Are there “secular saints” in the Czech Republic?”**

The same names came up for this question as the responses from the high school surveys. There was less mention of Jaromir Jagr, the famous hockey player, but the singer Karel Gott was mentioned. My interviewees listed political figures like Vaclav Havel, Masaryk, and Karel Schwarzenberg. They also mentioned other people like Jan Palac who protested during the Prague Spring and set himself on fire as a final show of protest. The Prague Spring was a period under Dubček when reforms were implemented that tried to create an opening and liberating of Czech society. This period offered hope for radically changing society and ending Communism; there were protests and demonstrations but the hopes for the Prague Spring were damped during the following period of Normalization, which reinstates the social restraints of Communism and continue to repress society. Vaclav Cilek, a famous geologist, scholar and translator of religious texts, who I incidentally also interviewed, was mentioned as a secular saint within the academic community. Tomas Halik, a theologian who writes about the reclamation of Czech spirituality and navigating religion in a secular society was mentioned with the caveat that many consider him to be important but that even he is not supported or respected by all. One interviewee interpreted my question differently and said that for some people horoscopes could act as secular saints giving direction in their lives. A few interviewees said that they don't think that there are true secular saints in Czech culture that would be a secular saint for all of society.

The mention of horoscopes as a secular saint is interesting because it relates back to some of the other polling and research done in the Czech Republic. In the Česká Lípa study one of the

questions asked was about beliefs in horoscopes and other alternative or occult types of practices. When I asked my interviewee if many people read horoscopes she said that horoscopes are popular within Czech culture but that people only read them for fun and that they are not taken as literal fact or taken seriously.

### **Responses to “How do you think religion changed after 1989 in the Czech Republic?”**

This question provoked mixed responses. Some interviewees asserted that the Czech Republic continued to remain atheistic and a-religious despite the freedom given to people to practice religion. Other people said that there was a blip of increased religious exploration but that this blip was only a blip and soon secular trends leveled out the small and temporary spike in religious participation. One interviewee described this blip that others mentioned as a “spiritual awakening” and a “spiritual blossoming” where new ideas and religious thoughts were introduced and embraced by Czech people. She said that young people were enthusiastic about this new political shift and became swept up in religious and social movements. This “spiritual blossoming” as this interviewee coined this period may have only related to religions and movements outside of the tradition Catholic Church. Her perspective of this period contrasts with the description of the same period from another interviewee. This contrasting description comes from an interviewee who works for the Strahov Monastery. He explained that the Church was in an unrecognized position in 1990 and that after 1989 the Church was unable to spiritually fulfill people because the church was overly concerned with regaining their property and quarreling with the government.

The mention of a “spiritual awakening” after 1989 presents the idea that freedom of expression and freedom within a society are elements that allow for personal spirituality. Vaclav



Havel was famous for his philosophical perspectives. He touted the idea that freedom within a society was essential for its spiritual wellbeing and successful functionality. This idea of freedom as related to spiritual potential is an interesting entry point in thinking about how spirituality exists within different political and social atmospheres.

A few interviewees, like the high school students, answered that they did not know. One interviewee simply said that she wasn't alive during this period and that she did not know what it was like. Another interviewee said that she wasn't sure because her family never talked about things like this. The responses of uncertainty and disinterest reflect that persisting idea that religion is not at the forefront of most Czech people's minds. As a follow up to these responses of uncertainty and ignorance I asked if my interviewees thought that the Czech Republic was becoming increasingly secular.

### **Responses to “Do you think each generation is becoming more and more secular?”**

Most interviewees responded that they thought society was becoming increasingly secular and that the younger generation especially was the most secular. One interviewee phrased it like this, “Young people want to be free and for me religion is kind of a thing that tells you what to do. It's a control. I don't want to be controlled by something that I don't believe in.” Interviewees also mentioned that they or their friends were involved with less traditional activities that could be described as New Age or stemming from Eastern Religions. Yoga, healthy eating, and meditation were mentioned as alternative and popular practices. These activities are also associated with modernism and Western culture, which may be a factor in their popularity. Interviewees mentioned that the types of people who sought out these New Age or Eastern rooted religions and spiritualities were typically wealthier.

### **Responses to “Where do you find a sense of community?”**

For this question answers were varied. Many people mentioned close friends and families or their local neighborhood, school or hometown as a source of their feeling of community. People mentioned their work colleagues or feeling a sense of community with the types of people that they work with; an artist I interviewed felt a sense of community from the arts scene in Prague. I interviewed a member of a punk band who immediately said that the punk rock scene is where she feels comfortable with other people and where she forms community ties. Interviewees mentioned other niche music scene or communities based in lifestyle, like vegetarianism, or abstaining from drinking or smoking, or a community formed in a bar of drinking and smoking. People also mentioned more personal experiences as sources of community, like feeling kinship with dead authors. The two people who identified strongly as religious mentioned that they feel a sense of community within their church group and one woman mentioned that Christian summer camp was where she found consistent community. After probing an interviewee about his passion for team sports he said that if he were to extend the metaphor of church that the playing field and court would be his church and that the athletes could be his community or congregation.

### **Responses to “Where did you learn your morals/sense of right and wrong?”**

Interviewees responded almost unanimously that they learned their morals and sense of right and wrong largely from their families. One interviewee explained to me that growing up he viewed his parents almost as gods, believing everything that they said and did to be true and right. He told me that later when he realized that his parents were human and made mistakes he was let down. He told me how his parents got divorced and that even though he understands that

his parents are not the all-knowing authority on morality, he still learns his own values from them and learns what he doesn't want to do as well. Interviewees identified specific family members that they looked up to as role models of behavior or who raised them.

Other sources of morals and right and wrong were from friends, experiences, and reflections on these experiences, and internally. Places of socialization were mentioned, like school, work, or through other group activities like sports. One of my interviewees was a sociologist. He commented that he knows that his sense of right and wrong and his morals, although they feel like they are internal and self-constructed, are really products of his society. He said that he is a product of his society, which also means that he is a product of the religion that his society was based in. Despite his self-awareness and his assertion that he learns from mistakes and experiences, he thought that these experiences, mistakes, and ideas stemmed from other people's socialization and that there was no getting away from society as a fomenting personal factor.

### **Responses to “Would you say that you are a spiritual person?”**

When surveying the high school students I struggled to uniformly tell students, and have them understand, what I meant when I asked them if they considered themselves to be spiritual. Their yeses, nos and maybes on the surveys I collected didn't tell me how they understood this term. When I asked this question to my individual interviewees, they either asked me to elaborate or explained how they conceived the idea of spirituality and how that conception related to them. In a broader sense of the idea of spirituality I define spirituality to include self-reflection, awareness, and questioning of the world around us, and experiencing moments of clarity or awe. Most of my interviewees said that they considered themselves to be in some way

spiritual. I asked interviewees who paused with this question if they sought out experiences that made them feel like my initial description of an ambiguous spiritual place would.

Three interviewees said without explanations or caveats that they considered themselves to be spiritual people. Seven interviewees explained their take on spirituality and said that they considered themselves to be spiritual people. One interviewee said, “If by spiritual you mean someone who reflects and works on himself then yes, but not in a religious way.” Another interviewee said, “I think about what is right and wrong and what I can do in my life.” One interviewee disregarded the traditional religious connection of spirituality and said, “Yeah I do actually even though I don’t believe in a god.” She told me that when she was younger she experimented with Wikka and Buddhism.

The religious connection with spirituality, as I saw in my discussion with the high school students, tended to dissuade Czechs from identifying as spiritual. Likewise, the New Age association with spirituality also characterized this concept for some of my interviewees. One interviewee said that he wasn’t sure if he could consider himself spiritual since he didn’t meditate but that he did like the spiritual attitude. Another interviewee said that she believed that she was more spiritual than her religious friends and that although the Czech Republic was qualified as atheistic and secular, she thought that many people were spiritual. When I asked Vaclav Cilek this question, he paused, added milk to his tea and said, “I don’t know, but I do like to travel by train.”

One interviewee who rejected the idea of spirituality in his life said that he was a person of habit and science. He said that although he sees where yoga and other things associated with spirituality come from he doesn’t seek them out. Although he doesn’t consider himself to be spiritual, he said that he doesn’t think that spirituality is “just gibberish.”

## Image Identifications

### St. Nicholas's Day

I showed interviewees an image of St. Nicholas's Day. St. Nicholas's Day is celebrated December 5<sup>th</sup>. St. Nicholas (Mikulás) visits children with an angel and a devil in order to evaluate, and reward and/or punish their behavior the past year. This image prompted stories and memories from my interviewees, as celebrating St. Nicholas's Day is very traditional and hugely popular in the Czech Republic. Families hire young neighbors to dress up as St. Nicholas, the devil and the angel and then make a house call. Children are expected to recite a poem for St. Nicholas and if they are decidedly good they will receive a candy from him or sweet from their parents. Some families tell the people dressed up as the devil and the angel personal details of their child's behavior the past year so that they are better able to either scare or reward. The devil character carries a potato sack with him to put naughty children inside and then drag them to hell. Naughty children are sometimes given a potato from the devil. This tradition seems to mediate and fend off the encroaching Western idea of Santa Claus, as Czechs do have St. Nicholas, they just have him in a different context and on a different day.

Interviewees told me how terrifying this experience was as a child, but that they loved this tradition. One interviewee dressed up as the angel with friends for her neighborhood and felt like her experience with St. Nicholas's day had come full circle. Another interviewee told me how on December 5<sup>th</sup> he was very careful to be especially good all day long in order to make up for being bad. In bigger cities people walk the streets on December 5<sup>th</sup> dressed up, creating a fun and almost Halloween-like atmosphere. Cafés and Christmas Markets have people dressed up as devils, angel and as St. Nicholas who approach children and scare them or reward them with candy. Most of my interviewees told me that when they were children they really believed that

the people dressed up as the devil, angel and St. Nicholas were real. Interviewees were surprised to hear that Americans don't also celebrate St. Nicholas's day.

This image transitioned me to ask interviewees about believing in Ježíšek as children. When Ježíšek brings present during Christmas dinner he is not seen. One interviewee told me that her best friend growing up imaged that Ježíšek looked like a giant pinecone. Other interviewees told me that they imaged Ježíšek as a winged cherub. Most of the interviewees said that they believed in Ježíšek and were surprised to find out that their parents were actually bringing their presents. One interviewee told me that he felt betrayed and maybe finding out that Ježíšek was a lie contributed to him being an atheist and not trusting religion. Other interviewees told me that they always knew their parents were fabricating Ježíšek's visitation and that they played along and still do.

## **Vaclav Havel**

Vaclav Havel was one of the figures my interviewees and survey respondents identified as a secular saint. When I showed interviewees this image their reaction was generally one of high praise. Interviewees also mentioned that they weren't sure if Vaclav Havel personally was as heroic as he was publically. One interviewee mentioned that Vaclav Havel was "chief of the club of womanizers." This mixed response highlighted the idea that a universal secular saint, or a person worthy of being a universal secular saint is nearly impossible to find.

## **Moravian Dancing in Traditional Costume**

Since I showed this image to an interview base of people who identified with living in Prague and with Bohemia, the responses were largely distanced. People identified that the

dancers were Moravian and wearing traditional dress but aside from this they did not have much to say on the topic. Some interviewees said that they have never experienced these traditions and that these traditions only appear for festivals and are somewhat touristy. Other interviewees said that they really like these traditions but that they were not personally connected to them in any way.

One interviewee explained that these traditions were tied up with heavy drinking culture and that he was realizing more and more how alcohol, for better or for worse, is a huge element of Czech culture. When I showed this image to other people they also jokingly mentioned vodka drinking. Alcohol culture is a large part of Czech identity. Czechs are proud of their beer making prowess and pubs and taverns constitute a huge social arena for Czechs of all ages. Likewise, homemade spirits and other harder alcohols usually made in the south of the Czech Republic garner equal pride. This question resulted in me considering drinking as an element of Czech identity and bars as a source of community rather than what I thought this question might produce, a commentary on folk and traditional culture.

## **Santa Claus**

I asked if Santa Claus was making an appearance in the Czech Republic after I showed an image of Santa Claus in a mall to my interviewees. One interviewee told me that Czech people hate this commercialized image of Santa since they feel it threatens the traditional Czech Christmas. Other interviewees said that Santa is in the Czech Republic but only in advertising and that a Santa in a mall or the idea of Santa bringing presents would never become popular. A few interviewees mentioned that they associate Santa Claus with Coca Cola advertisements. One interviewee told me that a few years ago in Wenceslas Square some people dragged around a

trashcan on wheels with a figure of Santa Claus inside. He said that it wasn't mal-intended, and that it was all in good fun. Another interviewee said that she felt sorry for the children and the mall and that she would never sit on Santa's lap. I went to the three different malls in Prague. The only place I saw Santa Claus used as advertisement was for a Samsonite suitcase store.

### **Grinch Image**

Some of my interviewees identified the movie *The Grinch*, but most people were unsure what I was showing them. Even the interviewees who identified the Grinch seemed ambivalent, or uninterested. I asked if there were similar Czech Christmas tales. Interviewees told me that during Christmas fairy tales are played on television but that they are not specific Christmas cartoons or movies. Although Christmas is everywhere in December in the Czech Republic it is not commercialized and commoditized to the extent that it is in America.

### **Burning Witches Image**

Most interviewees celebrated the Burning of Witches or the alternate Burning of Winter growing up. Czechs traditionally burn witches in late April to celebrate Walpurgis Night or Beltaine (although Czechs refer to this tradition more informally as the burning of witches). This initially was a pagan tradition used to celebrate the changing of the season and to ward off any evil that accumulated during winter. This tradition morphed into the burning of the witches, as the night of April 30 is believed to be a night where evil powers are at their peak strength. The other tradition where Czechs burn a figure is called Marzanna where people burn an effigy of the Slavic goddess of winter, Morena. This tradition takes place in March. Interviewees recalled fond memories of being with family and friends out in nature or smaller towns for these



celebrations. A few interviewees said that they did not go to these celebrations because they are not typically done in Prague (there aren't spaces where huge bonfires could be). A few interviewees mentioned that this is a drinking holiday and that it originated with Pagan ideas but that today it's typically an excuse to spend time together, cook hotdogs, and drink. I was curious to see how interviewees interpreted this holiday and if they connected it strongly with Pagan roots. Although most interviewees didn't talk about the Paganism related to these celebrations many people mentioned that they enjoyed the element of being outside, which could translate from the Pagan awareness of nature.

One interviewee told me that these celebrations have prompted an alternative party music culture surrounding and inspired by it. In open fields "techno nomadic" parties happen in the springtime. The burning of the witches in Czech is Pálení čarodějnic, these outdoor impromptu music parties play with this title and incorporate it into their event, by naming these organized events Czartekk (there is a Facebook page that coordinates and lets followers know when these outdoor witch burning inspired music events take place) which sounds similar in Czech to čarodějnic.

## **Mediation Image**

I showed interviewees an image of a woman mediating on a bridge. Interviewees identified that she was meditating and either commented that they themselves don't meditate or told me that they mediate or know people who do. One interviewee looked at the image and said that this is not a real meditation situation since the water flowing underneath the woman mediating was too much energy for her to be balanced. My interviewees commented that this sort of New Age practice is generally embraced by younger people and by people of higher

socio-economic status. I included this image to see if interviewees related to the types of alternative and potentially spirituality seeking activities like meditation.

### **Image of the Czech Republic as Part of the E.U**

This image provoked strong reactions of approval, disapproval, and begrudged acceptance from interviewees. Interviewees who approve of the Czech Republic's inclusion into the E.U see the E.U as an alliance of progress and an emblem of modernity. Interviewees mentioned the perks of being included in the E.U, like being able to travel easily between other E.U countries and being included in study abroad opportunities like the Erasmus program. Interviewees who disapproved of the Czech Republic's inclusion in the E.U saw the E.U as an oppressive force. One interviewee said, "First it was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then it was the Russians, then it was the Germans, now it's the E.U." Other interviewees expressed discomfort at being forced into an allegiance where the Czech Republic might be obligated to become involved in conflict militarily. Positive E.U responses, negative E.U responses, and mixed E.U responses all agreed that the Czech Republic should not adopt the Euro.

As a follow up question I asked in interviewees how they conceptualized themselves: did they consider themselves as Western, Central or Eastern Europeans? Interviewees responded that the Czech Republic was Central Europe. Some interviewees said that the Czech Republic wants to be more Western but that the Eastern influence will always prevail and the most they could be is Central Europe. Other interviewees said that no one wants to be considered as Eastern European even if from their culture and traditions they are more Eastern. Another interviewee offered the perspective that the Czech Republic's history is so intertwined with the history of Eastern Europe. I asked if there were certain countries or borders that started Eastern Europe.

Answers were varied, with countries named as close as Poland, and other interviewees who were unable to pinpoint the start of Eastern Europe. One interviewee explained that if they said it was Poland and if I asked a Polish person they would claim that Eastern Europe started with the next country over, Belarus.

## Conclusion

### Characterizing Czech Secularism and Reflections on Czech Identity

Trying to synthesis a range of answers from hours of coffee shop interviews and six high school classes of surveys and discussions makes it difficult for me to present concise conclusions; my questions and the responses to questions were ranging and diverse. I cannot assert that the nature of Czech secularism is one hundred percent a certain way or that my data is fully representative of the Czech Republic. The popular press assumes that the Czech Republic is uniformly secular and has created a simplified and almost sensational presentation of this assumption. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI visited the Czech Republic. The newspaper article covering the story labeled this visit an, “uphill fight for Pope against secular Czechs” and characterized Czech people as “natural-born skeptics.”<sup>46</sup> The article continued to explain the Czech Republic, quoting a Czech newspaper editor, as a place where “no one believes in anything.”<sup>47</sup> I want to go beyond headline assumptions of Czech seculars and add details that can provide a better explanation than a simplified and blanket secularism when talking about religion and society in the Czech Republic.

I can use my data and experience to help continue to characterize the nature of secularism in the Czech Republic and to add new perspectives to what this secularism is and means within a context of Czech identity. Czech secularity, based on my research, is not purely atheistic. Religion in the Czech Republic exists, but is made up of a fluid attitude that is more about personal and individual beliefs than any sort of structure or doctrine imposed by an institutional and established Christianity. Christianity is, nevertheless, a cultural force within the secular

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<sup>46</sup> Dan Bilefsky. "Uphill Fight for Pope Among Secular Czechs." *New York Times*, September 26, 2009. Accessed March 28, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/world/europe/27pope.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/world/europe/27pope.html?_r=1&).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Czech Republic and contributes to identity creation. Within the Czech Republic is an identifiable spirituality within individual's lives regardless of religious or irreligious belief.

I conclude that the version of spirituality I presented in my interviews and surveys is visible in the Czech Republic and can even be parsed out into categories that explain elements within Czech culture and character. The caveat to this claim however, is that while spirituality in my description is present in the Czech Republic, I was not able to measure how or to what extent this sense of spirituality was important in the lives of my interviewees. The fact that interviewees identified spirituality through locations in their life is significant to my thesis and shows that spirituality exists within secularism but does not explain to what extent this present spirituality is important.

Moving back to the original characterizing of Czech secularism, I am asserting that Christianity is a significant element within Czech culture and identity, especially within Christmas traditions. I can also suggest from my interviews and survey that there are different influencing factors aside from religion that contribute to a sense of Czech identity. Pope Benedict XVI hit on this element that Czech identity is made up of more than religious identity, and tied to the Westernization when he visited the Czech Republic in 2009 to “foment a continent wide spiritual revolt.” This “revolt” was against, in Pope Benedict XVI's words, “atheist ideology,” “hedonistic consumerism” and “a growing drift toward ethical and cultural relativism” that he saw as threatening forces within the Czech Republic and forces of identity creation outside of religion.<sup>48</sup> Based on discussions of Christmas traditions and Western influences I understand that the people I interacted with are aware of their sense of national identity in relation to other countries, and this awareness helps to punctuate a Czech desire to retain their culture and traditions. The way that Czechs identify is still strongly linked to cultural

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Christianity, and there is a backlash to the “hedonistic consumerism” of the West that threatens Czech identity and culture. Despite Pope Benedict XVI’s classification of Czechs as atheists, Czech secularism is not purely atheistic.

I went into this project with the mission of divorcing secularism from the association of atheism. My surveys from students showed me that many more students in Moravia than from Bohemia (when I interviewed in Prague) identified with a religion and attended church. Although more students did identify actively with a religion there was also a strong base of secular and non-religious identification. Of my interviewees, many identified as non-religious. But, the non-religious people often offered up an alternative belief system that was not purely atheistic. Even when people firmly said that they did not believe in a god they sometimes said that they believed in some form of an afterlife or alternative force within the universe. The personal quality of practicality in Czech culture (preference of a scientific approach) does suggest that there would be more atheists in the Czech Republic. When I was leading class discussions I introduced the phrase agnostic to the classes and asked if students understood what I mean by this phrase. Although I introduced this phrase students were more likely to say that they didn’t believe in a god but add a qualification or an alternate that could equate their belief system as agnostic even though they did not identify as such in their responses. Although the Czech Republic is often categorized as a nation of “non-believers,” religious beliefs exist, but they are based in personal and individual conceptualizations and are not tied to a church. There are of course people who fit into the Christian and Catholic model of religious identification in the Czech Republic, but of these self-identified Christians there is even room for personalization.

I base this claim that Czech secularism is not parallel with atheism in the overwhelming diversity of answers to the questions of “do you believe in a god?” and “do you believe in an

afterlife?” Even interviewees who claimed that they were culturally Catholic provided answers to an afterlife might consist of that did not align with Catholic Christian beliefs. Based on my research I am claiming that Czech secularism is not made up of a culture of “non-believers” but is more agnostic and within this secular distancing from institutional religion are more personalized forms of personal belief, or spirituality that might not fall under a religious categorization but are not exclusively atheistic either.

My claim that religion exists in the Czech Republic in the form of individual and personal belief systems that deviate from traditional religious influence aside from cultural Christianity align with Tomáš Halík’s idea of a Czech “somethingism.” Tomáš Halík is a Czech theologian and professor who was previously a Catholic priest and an organizer of religious activity during Communism. He writes on the nature of religion and spirituality in a European context; he is famous for the claim that, “the most influential religion in the Czech Republic today is *not* atheism but ‘something-ism.’”<sup>49</sup> What Halík means by this is that there is a large population of Czechs who by census measures would be identified as non-believers, but that even the most religiously detached Czechs believe in something. This something could apply to an outer worldly definition, like a god-like power. This something could also apply to a more life on earth-based definition and could provide some sort of personal purpose or self-understanding.

The growing popularity or accessibility of alternative types of religion, more New Age types of religion or activities that come from an Eastern type of spirituality support the idea that secularism in the Czech Republic is made up of personalized belief systems and that there are many different ways to express these beliefs. By New Age types of religion and spirituality I mean non-institutional religions or spiritualities that offer belief systems outside of the traditional

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<sup>49</sup> Tomáš Halík to Australian Broadcasting Corporation newsgroup, "Why Have You Forsaken Me? Five Theses on Faith and Atheism," March 18, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/03/18/3965697.htm>.

Christianity in the Czech Republic. This could also embody lifestyle choices or personal belief creation based on thoughts that don't align with an institutional dogma. By Eastern spirituality I mean the ideas that are imported from outside of Czech culture and associated with Eastern religions or practices. Buddhism, yoga, meditation, neo-pagan rituals, and small group religions could fit into this categorization of New Age or Eastern based religion or spirituality.

The accessibility of these different ideas also reflects the plurality within Czech culture that could contribute to its perception as a secular nation. When talking with my interviewees about the prevalence of New Age types of religion or spiritual expression it was interesting to note their perceptions on the people who might be involved with these religions. Interviewees claimed that wealthier people were more likely to seek out these types of spirituality. This adds an interesting element to the previous argument from Hamplová and Nešpor in their article *Invisible Religion in a "Non-Believing" Country: The Case of the Czech Republic*, which stated that there was not a clear socio-economic or demographic influence in religious socialization. When talking about the types of people who seek out New Age or Eastern originating types of spirituality my interviewees specifically said that wealthier people and people living in cities participated in these activities and by this description created a demographic and socio-economic stereotype for a person engaging in these activities. Hamplová and Nešpor's study only addressed Christianity. Maybe a similar study of the influence of socio-economic status or demographics is not measurable or comparable when examining New Age religions and spirituality. These religious and spiritual categories are fairly new within society, so it could be assumed that people who engage in these activities have chosen them and were not socialized into them by familial influences.



When I asked for places of spirituality based on my description I was able to divide answers into four interrelated categories. These categories were: places in nature, personal spaces, places that create an atmosphere of isolation or literal perspective by providing views, and places that foster connection. This organization of responses helps me to characterize and explain how Czech people I interviewed and surveyed identified with my locational description of spirituality. Although as I mentioned earlier this sense of spirituality is Western biased, this categorization and overviewing of responses helps me to vocalize that although the Czech Republic is categorically secular, personal spirituality is present within the lives of individual Czech and even comparable with the use of these categories. Aside from helping me locate and introduce the idea that spirituality is present within the Czech Republic's secular identity, these categorizations helped me to understand the values within Czech culture and how these values could reflect Czech identity.

The category of places in nature as sources of spirituality could point towards a cultural value of appreciating nature. This idea corresponds well with my interviewee who explained that she is Czech because of her upbringing in the physical landscape, "running through the orchards and landscapes of Central Europe." Although this categorization can point towards a cultural appreciation of nature it could also be connected to the other categories as places in nature tend to be isolated, personal, and separate from other spaces in day-to-day life.

The categorization of personal spaces as a source of spiritual feeling could also relate to the Czech value of personal and private life. Students and interviewees discussed with me the characteristics that they associated with Czech identity and character like being more reserved, the value of directness, the idea that Czechs are publically indifferent but with close friends and family very involved and caring. The cultural value of openness within close circles and a

general public reserved nature lead me to think that Czech people value what is personally close and significant to them and that this makes sense that places of spirituality my interviewees and students identified were personal spaces. One could also point out that a spiritual location from my description would of course be personal because it would be a specific and sought out location that an interviewee visited multiple times and knew of. This is true, but it is significant to note that interviewees did not for the most part mention public places.

The next categorization, places that create an atmosphere of isolation or literal perspective by providing views, plays off of the previous two categories. Many of the places that fell into this category were outdoors or were spaces that were personally significant to interviewees and students. I found it interesting the visual separation of these places created an atmosphere for reflection or spiritual feeling. The last category, places that foster connection, included places where students and interviewees connected in small groups with friends, family or social groups they were a part of. The connection in these places reiterates the value of close relationships and small personal networks and could reflect the post-communist influence where people prefer to function with private close knit groups rather than within a larger public sphere.

The fact that all interviewees and students with the exception of one were able to provide a location in their lives that matched my description makes me think that my definition of spirituality is a present element within Czech life. This element is present and locatable for my interviewees, but this still does not consider if and/or how my interviewees see this element of spirituality in their lives as important. Some interviewees expressed that they repeatedly visit the location they told me about, others were able to easily identify a location but did not express that they sought out this atmosphere. Even though interviewees and students were able to locate places within their lives that I could deem spiritual, the responses for when I asked my final

question, “do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” were mixed. Even though these places that were categorically spiritual existed in the lives of my interviewees the fact that they existed didn’t mean that they were seen as spiritual or important for individuals. I initially assumed that being able to locate a source of personal spirituality with a location would make my interviewees see themselves and their lives in a spiritual context, but this was not the case. One reason that interviewees might have not identified themselves as spiritual is because they understood the term spirituality within a religious context.

Christianity, though not prevalently working in Czech society within a church structure, is a dominant cultural factor. Celebrating Christmas highlights different Czech specific traditions and is a large part of Czech cultural identity. Christmas celebrations in the Czech Republic underscore my idea that Christianity in this form of tradition and ritual is a cultural staple. All interviewees and students celebrated Christmas and were zealous to explain to me their family and Czech traditions. For being a secular country, the Czech Republic has a multitude of traditions and celebrations connected to Christmas. As far as extending past the basis of being a part of Czech culture, religion is not a self-consciously active element of individual Czech identity. The lack of outward and institutional religious identification in the Czech Republic, its famous secularity, is more of a part of Czech identity than religion is. This creates an interesting dynamic of a country steeped in Christianity through traditions and cultures, but with an identity made up of the fact that it is not religious. It would make for an interesting follow up study to see how this influence of cultural Christianity affects the minority of non-Christians in the Czech Republic.

When trying to navigate a sense of Czech identity in relation to the rest of Europe, all interviewees and respondents placed the Czech Republic as geographically and within the

mentality of Central Europe. Despite the modernization and Westernization influences, the Czech Republic retains a strong regional identity. I found support for this Czech identity when looking for points of visible Western identity within commercialism and presentation of Christmas. Czech culture is affected by outside cultural influences but its traditions are not threatened since Czech people hold strongly to them. In my interviews Czechs vehemently disregarded the influence of Santa. All my interviewees expressed love for the Czech Ježíšek over a Western Santa. These strong opinions show that Western influence is seen as a threat but that there is a cultural backlash to this non-Czech influence. Santa was not visible with the exception of an image in one store window. There were women in the mall dressed up as angels selling products, which tied back to the Czech tradition of St. Nicholas's day (with the devil, the angel and St. Nicholas). Maybe one of the reasons that there is less overt culturally Czech consumerism is that the Czech traditions and beliefs surrounding Christmas time might be harder to market. Since none of my interviewees knew what Ježíšek looked like it would be hard to appropriate him as a symbol and use that symbol for marketing.

No doubt the effect of commercialism has increased since 1989, but as a cultural outsider this commercialism did not even begin to compare to the Christmas commercialism I see in the United States. During my time in Prague I saw people Christmas shopping and preparing for Christmas but I was not overwhelmed by a feeling of consumerism. The preparations for Christmas time aside from present shopping and purchasing a carp seemed to be based more on preparing for family celebrations and preparation in a personal sphere (baking, cooking, spending time together). This is only a comment based on limited observation of Czech identity in relation to Westernization in the form of Christmas commercialism.

Czech identity is rooted in many things, the history of the Czech Republic, the national identity, traditional self-stereotypes and outside perspectives of Czech behavior and personality characteristics, and points of self-perceived Czech uniqueness that helps to make up a sense of Czech national pride, like specific traditions and hallmarks. One of these hallmarks that contribute to Czech identity is the perception that the Czech Republic is a secular nation. Even after hearing the complexities of different interviewee's personal beliefs and backgrounds many interviewees fell back on the generalization of Czech secularism and made some comment about how "we" don't really believe or that "it" (religion) is not important to "us." This reversion to a group mentality after divulging personal details and beliefs makes me think that even though there is a prevalent "something-ism" that the details of this "something-ism" can only be explain in individual terms since the Czech Republic as a whole sees their "something-ism" as a part of a larger body of non-belief and secularism.

This explanation that nuances my sense of Czech identity on a national and personal level based in religious/irreligious associations seems to be somewhat circular. My conclusions help to characterize and add complexity to the notion of Czech secularism and the identity. As much as I have been able to conclude, there is still so much room for other questions and potential future examinations of secularism and identity in the Czech Republic as well what can be understood socially and culturally from its traditions. I still have yet to get to the bottom of the details and quirks surrounding the Christmas time traditions; what is situation and story behind that Christmas time "golden pig" that my interviewees and surveyed students introduced?

I set out initially to do this work because I was interested and inspired by my experience in the Czech Republic. I recognized that the Czech Republic was unique and research worthy, and that there were gaps waiting to be filled in the field. This work was personally significant for

me as it pushed my intellectual and personal boundaries. Working for two weeks to schedule, plan, organize, and conduct my research required me to be independent in a scholarly capacity that I had never experienced before. This experience of interviewing and writing was incredible both personally and academically. I was able to reconnect with people I had relationships with in Prague. I visited my host family for dinner, met up with the academic director of my abroad program, and spent time with a Czech friend. The unique position I was in conducting this work allowed me to meet and get to know so many interesting strangers on a deep personal level.

The idea from my thesis that identity is so culturally ingrained in this Czech context made me reconsider my own identity and the potential ways that I have been socialized and understand myself and the world around me because of my culture and experiences. The methodology I used could be used also for readers to consider their own sense of identity and conception of themselves within religious and irreligious terms within their own society. Although the examination of the secularism within the Czech Republic in this thesis was a study based in very specific questions, these questions can exist outside of the purpose of my thesis and could provide a mode for personal and cultural reflection.

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## Image Appendix for Imagine Identification Exercise

### 1. Santa Claus at a mall



### 2. Moravian traditional costumes and folk dancing



3. Image of the Czech Republic with the deep blue and ring of gold stars of the European Union overlaid



4. Vaclav Havel



5. Dr. Seuss's The Grinch



6. A woman meditating



7. An image of St. Nicolas, the devil, and an angel for St. Nicolas's Day



## 8. The Czech spring tradition of witch burning



<sup>1</sup> Image citations:

Image One: MacDonald, Scott. "Santa at the Mall," Photograph. 2009.

[http://www.scottmacdonaldphotography.com/2009/12/01/best-of-november/1113\\_santa\\_2285/](http://www.scottmacdonaldphotography.com/2009/12/01/best-of-november/1113_santa_2285/), (accessed March 23, 2015)

Image Two: Gao, Jialiang. "Male and female Moravian Slovak costumes worn during the Jízda králů Festival held annually in the village of Vlčnov in Southeastern Moravia," Photograph. May 2007. The Lovely Planet,

<http://www.thelovelyplanet.net/traditional-dress-of-slovakia-kroje-decorated-and-cultural/> (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Three: "Map of the Czech Republic with the EU Flag," Image. December 2010. [Czechy.svg](http://www.czechy.svg), (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Four: "Vaclav Havel," Photograph. <http://www.vize.cz/UserFiles/news/novinka-1084.jpg>, (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Five: "The Grinch who Stole Christmas," Image. [http://blog.pennlive.com/go/2011/11/holiday\\_tv\\_guide.html](http://blog.pennlive.com/go/2011/11/holiday_tv_guide.html) (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Six: "Woman Meditating," Photograph. <http://www.harmonyandhealth.com/meditation/>, (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Seven: "St. Nicholas's Day," Photograph. [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com), (accessed March 23, 2015).

Image Eight: "The Burning of the Witches." Photograph. <http://anickaworld.com/2012/05/06/the-burning-of-the-witches-carodejnice/> (accessed March 23, 2015).

