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Bachelor's Thesis

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A qualitative Study of Czech non-believing Students

Bachelor's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 3.5.2023

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References

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Abstract

In my bachelor's thesis I focus on what it means for one to be a non-believer, supported by various statistics and data that examine non-believers in the world and in the Czech Republic. Using a qualitative process of data collection, I thus explore what my informants' individual beliefs are within the topic of non-religion, as well as how they themselves reflect on the sources of these beliefs. Specifically, this thesis then seeks to grasp these themes through two main theoretical frameworks. Firstly, identity formation, which is introduced through the theory of G.H. Mead, who points to the so-called significant other in this process. At the same time, I introduce the Social Identity Theory by H. Tajfel and J. Turner, which discusses the importance of social groups on individual identity formation. This social group is represented in my thesis as a group of non-believers, but it can be further divided into other subgroups. This is followed by a second framework where I present M. Weber's secularization theory and more specifically his disenchantment of the world, but this is complemented by its critique, represented for example by P. Berger, who in turn writes about the re-enchantment of the world. Using these aforementioned ideas, then, I want to point out that the topic of non-believers is a complex and difficult topic that deserves closer empirical research.

Abstrakt

V mojí bakalářské práci se zaměřuji s podporou různých statistik a dat, které zkoumají nevěřící ve světě a v České republice, co to pro jednoho znamená být nevěřící. Pomocí kvalitativního procesu sběru dat, tak zkoumám, co jsou jednotlivé přesvědčení mých informantů v rámci tématu nenábožnosti a zároveň jak oni sami reflektují zdroje těchto přesvědčení. Specificky se pak tato práce snaží uchopit tato témata na základě dvou hlavních teoretických rámců. Zaprvé formování identity, což je představeno pomocí teorie G.H. Meada, který v tomto procesu poukazuje na tzv. významné druhé. Zároveň představuji teorii sociální identity od H. Tajfela a J. Turnera, která pojednává o důležitosti sociálních skupin na formaci identity jednotlivce. Tato sociální skupina je v mé práci reprezentována jako skupina nevěřících, která se ale dále může štěpit do dalších podskupin. Na to navazuje druhý rámeček, kde představuji sekularizační teorii od M. Webera a konkrétněji jeho odkouzlení světa, což je ale doplněno o jeho kritiku, kterou například představuje P. Berger, který naopak píše o znovuokouzlení světa. Pomocí těchto výše zmíněných myšlenek chci tedy poukázat na to, že tematika nevěřících je komplexní a složité téma, které si zaslouží bližší empirický výzkum.

Keywords

Non-religion, atheism, Czech Republic, students, secularization, desecularization

Klíčová slova

Nenáboženství, ateismus, Česká republika, studenti, sekularizace, desekularizace

Title

A qualitative study of Czech non-believing Students

Název práce

Kvalitativní studie českých nevěřících studentů

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1. Introduction

When I was a kid, conversations about who believes in what were almost non-existent. I lived comfortably with the label of atheist and never really addressed it. That only changed recently, about two years ago after conversations with my older brother, who claimed to be a believer, but in a completely different sense than I was used to, meaning not in a religious sense. He claimed to believe that there is a higher power that has the ability to influence our lives, and that this power, shall we say transcendent, is his own god, in whom he believes alone and is not tied to any church or other institution. At first, I rejected his idea and did not understand how it could be possible, but then, upon further reflection, it occurred to me that this topic may be much more nuanced and complex than a simple division between believers and non-believers. Therefore, my understanding of the subject was challenged, and I wanted to know more.

Moving on from my own experience, various research suggests that the Czech Republic repeatedly ranks among the most atheistic countries in the world. From my own experience, I cannot contradict this, as I have somehow been aware of this fact from a very young age and there are practically no religious people in my social circles. Still, it seems to me that conversation about this topic has been absent or severely lacking in my life. The label of atheist has always been a comfortable one for me, perhaps even automatic, that I never really thought much about what was behind the term, whether I really agreed with it, and whether other people felt the same way.

The Pew Research Center has produced a major survey of the world's religious groups published in 2017. Their estimates are based on analysis of more than 2,500 different censuses, surveys and official population registers. According to them, the top three groups in the world are Christians with 31.2 %, Muslims with 24.1 %, and the unaffiliated in third place with 16 % of the total world population. According to them, the unaffiliated group includes all people who identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, or simply those who do not associate with any religion in the surveys. This research also explores the prediction of the global population of the world's major religions and unaffiliated among others. Even though the absolute number of

unaffiliated is expected to increase slightly to 1.2 billion by 2060, the overall proportion of unaffiliated in the world is expected to actually drop from 16 % to 13 %.

Similar research was done in 2012, also by The Pew Research Center. From this research it can be seen that there are a total of 6 countries where the unaffiliated are the majority group of population. The Czech Republic is in first place as 76 % of the total population of 10.5 million identify as unaffiliated. This is followed by countries such as North Korea with 71 %, Estonia with 60 % and Japan with 57 % of the total population. What is also interesting about this research is that it indicates that a portion of these people still align themselves with various religious or spiritual aspects, such as belief in a god or a higher power. Which, again, indicates that the topic of non-believers, or in this case unaffiliated, is more complex and nuanced.

It is further important to note how the selected censuses, surveys or questionnaires are constructed and what questions are being asked of the informants. Whether these are closed questions where the choice is between believer and non-believer or an open question with the opportunity for the person to describe themselves as best as they can.

Data from the Czech Statistical Office, referring to the 2021 census, show that there were 5.03 million people out of the 10.5 million population who said they had no religious beliefs. According to the same tables we can see that this number has increased by almost 2 million compared to 2011. However, it is also important to note that this question was voluntary, meaning that informants could choose not to answer it. As seen in the statistics, 3.16 million respondents chose to do so, almost 1 million less than in 2011. In total, 8.19 million respondents selected these two answers. By comparison, there were 2.33 million believing respondents in 2021 (ČSÚ, 2021).

Thus, as can be seen from the data, this is a large population group that cannot be ignored. It is also indicated by the increased interest in this topic in recent years from various scientists and researchers. Studies of religion, irreligion, secularism, atheism and other terms and

concepts in Czech Republic are now quite rich (some of them are Hamplová and Nešpor 2009, Vaclavik 2010, Boubík, Rimmel and Václavík 2020, Furstová et al 2021).

What then lies behind the assumption that someone is an atheist and is it possible to label everyone collectively with this term? Hence in my work, I delve more deeply into this topic and explore what it means for someone to be a non-believer. The above-mentioned statistics are an example of quantitative methodology, which I do not want to focus on in my thesis. On the contrary, I want to grasp this problem using a qualitative perspective and thus leave my informants more room for self-expression in their narratives. This means that I was interested in one's values, attitudes, ideals, opinions in terms of their self-identification within this topic. Similarly, as in research already done on Scottish students by Christopher Cotter (2015). In his work, he as well approaches non-believers outside the framework of religion and allows informants to define themselves according to their beliefs, opinions, attitudes and everyday practices.

In connection to this I conducted semi-structured interviews with non-believing students, meaning non-believers in any form of institutionalized religion, from Charles University from the department of Sociology and through further coding and data analysis I tried to answer my research questions, which are the following: What is the relationship between students' non-religious identity and meanings ascribed to non-religiosity? How are sources of their beliefs and opinions reflected by them? Are there any similarities in their responses and, if appropriate, can they be divided into specific categories following Cotter's research?

2. Theoretical and conceptual background

Overall, it is important to provide space for personal definition of the individual in this topic, which often has no place in various surveys or censuses, as questions focused on religion and faith are often reduced to the duality of believer-non-believer or religious-non-religious. For a deeper understanding of the topic, it is also necessary to first define the terms associated with it. I also must admit that when reading through all the literature, it is really difficult not to get

lost in all the definitions of the various concepts provided. There are indeed many and often the authors differ in their views and each definition brings a slightly different perspective. It should be noted, therefore, that there is no single definition for the concepts I will describe below, and therefore it is possible that the definitions I provide here may differ from others.

To ensure clarity of my work, I will define the concepts that are most relevant to my research and relate to the Czech Republic in general. These include institutionalized and non-institutionalized religion, non-believers or non-religious individuals, religious apatheism and secularization. Additionally, I will define concepts that emerged during my interviews with informants, such as atheism, agnosticism, spirituality and new age religion.

At the beginning it is important to explain the difference between institutionalized and non-institutionalized religion since my work revolves mainly around the non-institutionalized. *„In the most straightforward meaning of the word, an institution is a formal organization. (...) Religion which is institutional is in this sense, i.e., religion that takes place within a formal organization such as the Roman Catholic Church. Non-institutional religion, by contrast, is religion found outside formal organizations”* (Davidsen, 2013, pp. 557). The author further adds that the term non-institutionalized includes, for example, collectively the so-called new age religions, which include, for example, alternative spirituality and are religions that can be described as detraditionalized, since *„it takes place entirely outside the Christian tradition or at least freely combines Christian elements with non-Christian religion, alternative medicine, and alternative science”* (Davidsen, 2013, pp. 555). In the case of Czech Republic David Václavík (2014) as well comments on the classical Czech mistrust in institutions. As an example, he refers to data from the 2011 census, which shows that religion (meaning the institutionalised one) does not have such a solid position, both in social and political life, but also among individuals in the Czech Republic (Václavík et al., 2014, pp. 22-30).

Next is the concept of non-believers and non-religious people. One possible definition could be that *„non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion”* (Lee, 2012, pp. 131). So, who falls into this category. Smith and Cragun (2019) write

that this category is very diversified, and we can find in it „*atheists, agnostics, naturalists, spiritualists, skeptics, freethinkers, the nones, and the spiritual-but-not-religious*”. They also add that it is a mistake to see the category of non-believers as a homogeneous group, as their opinions, attitudes and different values can vary widely (Smith, Cragun, 2019, pp. 322).

Specifically, the term religious apatheism is associated with the Czech environment. As I mentioned above, the group of people who chose not to answer the question about religious affiliation in the census is quite large and still growing. Václavík (2014), for example, refers to this and comments that for Czechs the issue of religion and spirituality is simply not that important in their lives. Religious apatheism can also be defined as „*deinstitutionalized religiosity and apathy towards religion*” (Václavík, et al. 2018, pp. 112). Further commenting on apatheism, Nešpor et al. (2018), referring to research conducted among hospital, prison, and military chaplains, write that a significant number of these very apatheists and spiritualists turn to the church for help or services in difficult or important life situations, such as divorce or the birth of a child. The condition must be that this church is non-intrusive and non-invasive. This means that their services can be used without continuous participation or acceptance of their demands in a religious sense (Nešpor et al., 2018, pp. 114).

At the same time, it is necessary to define the concept of secularization. Lee (2015) shows the complexity of this term in her work. According to her, there are three main approaches of the term secular that being „*to be free from religion, to be modernistic and politically anti-religious, or to be intellectually irreligious*” (Lee, 2015, pp. 10). This definition can be enriched by another one that says that secularization is „*a theory, belief, ideology or political modality that demarcates the secular from other phenomena (usually religious, but also sacred and/or metaphysical ones) and prioritizes the secular over the non-secular*” (Lee, Bullivant, 2016). Considering the views of other authors, as Hjelm (2018) writes in his work, referring to Peter Berger and his two main conceptions of secularization. The first one refers to the differentiation of institutions and the embedding of religion in the structure of society, this one is called structural or also objective secularization and most experts agree on it. On the other hand, according to the author, there is a more problematic and difficult to grasp type, namely

subjective secularization, where people lose trust in religion or overall faith on a personal level (Hjelm, 2018, pp. 236).

Further on, the concept of atheism is defined as a „*a belief in the non-existence of a God or gods, or, more broadly, an absence in belief of their existence*” (Lee, Bullivant, 2016). The name atheist is very inflected in Czech society, but as it is written Czech atheism may be misused, as censuses show that true atheist attitudes are held by a relatively small group of people in the Czech Republic. „*Czech atheism tends to be confused with other religious phenomena – religious apatheism*” (Václavík et al., 2018, pp. 112). As Nešpor et al. (2018) adds on the same topic, people who are in the so-called grey zone are more numerous than atheists in the Czech Republic, but at the same time they are not willing to devote much time, resources, or attention to these interests, unless, as I wrote above, they are facing some kind of life crisis (Nešpor et al., 2018, pp. 110).

Furthermore, the concept of agnosticism is described as „*a theory, belief or ideology entailing the belief that nothing is known or can be known of immaterial things, with particular reference to the existence or nature of God*” (Lee, Bullivant, 2016).

Another problematic and complex concept is spirituality, which is understood from different perspectives, as Koenig Harold (2008) writes „*traditionally, spirituality was used to describe the deeply religious person, but it has now expanded to include the superficially religious person, the religious seeker, the seeker of well-being and happiness, and the completely secular person*”. There we can see some transition from spirituality being a religious term only, and we find that even a secularized person can be spiritual. This term was also described by, as already mentioned, Heelas (2002) when he contrasted it with religion, which according to one informant is something outside of us, and spirituality is something that is intrinsic to our being and the sacred is formed by our personal wisdom and knowledge of the world and life.

The New Age is another phenomenon that can be mainly observed since the mid-1980s involving various holistic, body-mind phenomena such as astrology or paganism and physical practices such as yoga, which is mainly specific to Western cultures but not exclusive to them. New age religious practices lack a solid institution that would be superior to local and temporary groups of people and lack sufficient umbrella organizations to govern and arrange larger projects (Sutcliffe, Gilhus, 2014, pp. 3-8). Furthermore, according to Hanegraaff (2002), new age is a phenomenon that is quite vague and without boundaries and thus it is difficult to determine its exact definition or numbers of followers. According to him, the label refers to a broad set of spiritual practices and beliefs, for it is true that they are „*alternative from the perspective of mainstream Western society*” (Hanegraaff, 2002, pp. 302).

These are the definitions that I will primarily work with in my thesis. As I stated above, it is important to keep in mind that they may vary from author to author, but for the purpose of this paper these definitions should be sufficient. As can also be seen, this is a very complex topic, and we cannot say that one simply does not believe in anything. A person may thus have their own idea of belief and may have their own practices that they follow in life, they just do not necessarily involve God.

2.1. Disenchantment or (re)enchantment

Returning to the above-mentioned concept of secularization, I think it is also necessary to describe perhaps one of the most well-known concepts related to the phenomenon of secularization, and that is the concept of the disenchantment of the world by Max Weber and as well the critique of it. As Jenkinsen (2000) writes in his work, Weber's disenchantment is conceptualized in the modern Western world where mysticism is disappearing from the everyday life and human experience is subjected to science which makes slowly everything predictable and manipulable by people. According to him, Weber's concept of disenchantment has two distinct aspects. The first is a noticeable secularization or overall decline of the magical and mysterious. The second is the increased power of science, bureaucracy, law, or the legal apparatus overall (Jenkinsen, 2000, pp. 12). Similarly, as Testa (2023) writes in his article,

Weber suggests that secularization stemmed from „*processes of rationalization, intellectualization, and technicalization typical of modern time*” (Testa, 2023, pp. 103).

Furthermore, according to Jenkinsen (2000), it is important to understand the very concept of disenchantment, which according to him has two spheres. The first is that morality and human values itself no longer reside in a publicly shared and prescribed concept of belief but are rather at the individual level. Next, he argues, the eventually end form of Weber's disenchantment is a world in which everything can potentially be explained rationally, meaning in the way science proceeds. This, according to him, and as other critics write¹, is not entirely true. He refers to many forms in today's world that we might take as forms of a re-enchantment of the world, like for example neo-paganism and other spiritual traditions (Jenkinsen, 2000, pp. 15). We can expand on this with Testa's own understanding of the concept of re-enchantment, and it goes as follows „*it is a concept that aspires to define and describe not only the emergence or re-emergence of religious phenomena that are less structured and less formalised than “official” religions and the Christian Churches, but also their ongoing transformation*” (Testa, 2023, pp. 125). As he also writes, referring to other scholars, secularization may be a process that the modern world is currently in, but it will never lead to a complete secularization of society. Referring to Partridge, society must be thought of as differently religious rather than less religious. (Testa, 2023, pp. 108).

Thus, as Jenkinsen (2000) writes, secularization can be visible by declining belief in organized, institutionalized religion in Western modern civilization, but this does not mean that representation in other non-religious and irrational practices is declining at the same time. Furthermore, he points to Romanticism as one of these re-enchantment practices, or rather movements, which he believes have been influential to this time. The latter arises as a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and gravitates towards a pre-modern age full of mysticism and irrationality (Jenkinsen, 2000, pp. 19).

¹ For example, Berger et al. (1999), who in the work *Desecularization of the World* opposes secularization theory while admitting that he too contributed to it in his early works.

2.2. Self-identification and self-discovery

Following on from the previous chapter, in society today, we can see a slow drift away from institutionalized religion to something else, possibly atheism, agnosticism, spirituality, and many other phenomena. I have already touched on the issue of secularization and its definitions above. As Lee (2015) writes in her book, both studying and then understanding what it means to be secularized can bring many benefits. Among other things, it opens new questions for those who want to engage in the study of contemporary societies and religion, not based on assumptions but on detailed empirical studies of what really makes the difference between religious and secular societies. As the author herself mentions so *„if the significance of ongoing secularization processes and the experience of secular people are recognized, this provokes then, (...) the need for a deeper, more critical engagement with it”* (Lee, 2015, pp. 3).

Heelas (2002) writes in his book that, however, even religion is not simply slipping into the void, as it would seem at the first look. Instead, religion as a belief in an infallible and omniscient God is turning more into a spirituality that is separating from God and focuses more on life itself by people gradually putting more emphasis on self-expression, self-discovery, and personal autonomy. Moreover, he describes this spiritual transformation using the examples of Sweden and the UK, where he says the numbers of believers in traditional institutionalised religions are relatively small to declining, but the numbers of people who identify as atheist or agnostic are also relatively small. So, in his opinion, there is a whole group of people who are in between and among whom this spiritual transformation is happening. These are people who do not want to associate themselves with traditional institutionalized religion, but at the same time believe in “something” that separates them from atheists and agnostics. (Heelas, 2002, pp. 413-415). I found these texts relevant to my thesis because they say that modern society is not completely non-believing, but rather moving to a kind of spiritual side, and that it is important to study these phenomena further in order to understand them properly. As well, the emphasis is on self-expression and self-discovery, which is what I want to focus on in my research and give the informants as much freedom as possible in their self-description in the interviews.

On the topic of self-identification and self-discovery, Václavík (2010) discusses identity and its creation in his book with reference to other authors. He explains from the beginning that

psychologists, sociologists and philosophers began to explore the concept of identity during the 20th century, significantly after the World Wars, when they were then most interested in the context of the identity crisis associated with the experience of war. He also adds that the concept of identity is complex, it can have several dimensions, it depends on the context in which we study it, and if we want to tackle the issue of identity we have to move between several sciences, especially sociology and psychology. (Václavík, 2010, pp. 19-21).

Furthermore, Mead (2015) in his book also discusses identity formation. His theory of identity formation is based on the idea that individuals develop a sense of self through interactions with others and through the use of language and symbols. In process of formation of an identity, he introduces the concept of generalized others, the idea being that the experience of self is always mediated. Thus, one can grasp the self only through this mediation and interaction with others. Mead then compares these processes to children's play, where children take on the role of parents, teachers, or other characters. This play is then a portrayal of the much more complex social processes in which we as adults are involved. The social groups and the various processes and rituals within it then influence what role I take on, but also how others perceive me (Mead, 2015, pp. 144-163).

Moreover, the theory that develops the term self-identification is the Social Identity Theory by social psychologists Tajfel and Turner from the 1970s. This theory states that people form their identities and sense of self from belonging to a social group. At the same time, these groups then provide a certain framework for how these individuals understand and see themselves and also how they understand and see others. Furthermore, individuals within this group also share the same values, attitudes, or personal characteristics. This group membership can be an important concept for an individual and can thus influence their views, attitudes or, for example, behaviour. Since its formulation, this theory has expanded and divided into various subcategories that attempt to explain different phenomena within social groups and the formation of one's identity (Tajfel et al., 1979, pp. 59-63). Furthermore, in the context of my research, I focus on the non-religious identity. I want to explore how belonging to a group of non-believers influences one's views, attitudes and behaviours and shapes their identity, or what other subgroups the individuals divide themselves into.

2.3. Cotter's research

Following on from this in my work, I would like to expand on the work of Scottish researcher Christopher Cotter, who in his qualitative study “Without God yet not without nuance: A qualitative study of atheism and non-religion among Scottish university students” (2015), discovers and explores the experiences and attitudes of non-believing students in Scotland. In his work, he as well approaches non-believers outside the framework of religion and allows informants to define themselves according to their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and everyday practices. He, by subsequently coding the interview and looking for similarities in the responses, further divides them into 5 main types based on the data collected, namely naturalistic, humanistic, spiritual, familial, and philosophical.

According to his research, the naturalistic type of people emphasise science, research and, above all, evidence. These people tend to be materialistic and have a negative attitude towards religion, seeing it more as an obstacle that represents a false knowledge of the world. According to them, there is also nothing after death and human life begins with birth and ends with death. Furthermore, the humanistic type of people emphasizes mostly on the people and humanity. Their main values in life are kindness, selflessness, and equality of all. Religion as such is not personally important to them. It bothers them that it can sometimes be oppressive, but they understand why it can be important to others. Then, spiritual type people give importance to phenomena such as love friendship and kinship. They are mostly non-materialistic people and may describe themselves as altruistic. They may also practice various spiritual practices such as meditation or yoga. Religion as such is seen by them more as an obstacle to friendship between people and is seen by them as an institution of unnecessary authority. Further, familial type places a strong emphasis on family relationships, even though this may be a barrier to self-identification for them. For them, family is more than a religion, and so they may identify themselves as Christians within the family, to satisfy relatives, even though this may not be the case. The last type is philosophical. This type is characterized by a great deal of self-reflection, self-criticism, and moral doubt. This type expresses themselves in lengthy definitions. They may also describe themselves as agnostic with doubts on what their stance on this subject is (Cotter, 2015, pp. 183-187).

His results show that while atheism or non-belief are often seen as quite simple terms that are clearly defined, the reality is more complicated and nuanced. And despite the fact that his informants might at first appear to belong to the same category of non-believers this category continues to fragment within itself. Overall, the study shows that students hold a wide range of views and attitudes within their own self-identification as non-believers, and the study thus shows that this topic is much more complicated and complex than it might seem at first glance. At the end he also suggests that the problem in defining non-believers may lie in the fact that the concept is explained in comparison to religion. Non-believers are then often associated with the prejudice and bias that “nothing is sacred to them” and condemned for not “believing in something rather than nothing” (Cotter, 2015, pp. 172-173).

2.4. History of non-believers in region that currently stands for the Czech Republic

The high proportion of atheists or non-believers, as I was writing about at the beginning of my work, has a history in the Czech lands. The forty years of communist rule certainly played a role with its atheisation politics, but the authors agree that the history of Czech non-believers goes back further than it might at first appear.

Václavík (2010) in his book analyses this history in more depth and divides the processes between the 19th and 20th centuries into 4 parts that shaped the present Czech society. He first describes the Catholic nation, where it is the period of recatholization after the Battle of White Mountain. According to the author, this is the period of the transition from Protestants to Catholics, when as reported in the 1900 census, 97% of the respondents claimed to be Catholic. In the next part describes Hus’ nation, which is based on the strong anti-Catholic character of the national revival and the beginning of modern Czech society. This resulted in a gradual distrust of religious institutions, which, as the author stated, were blamed for the injustices perpetrated on Czech society by the Habsburg monarchy. The third part is the liberal nation. Its characterization is the acceptance of national-liberal ideas that began to spread in Europe during the first half of the 19th century. Thus, in many European countries, the church was

pushed out of public and political life, such as culture, education, and government. Many Czech political representatives then adopted these ideas, which became the basis for the negative attitude of the Czech public against Catholicism and subsequently against any form of institutionalized religion. The fourth and final part is the pragmatic nation. Here the author refers to the words of T.G. Masaryk, who describes the Czech nation as pragmatic and cynical, because according to him the mentioned recatholization caused the moral distortion of the Czech nation, which faces moral degradation, but also religious decline (Václavík, 2010, pp. 52-72).

Similarly, Hamplová and Nešpor (2009) acknowledge that, unlike, for example, East Germany or Estonia, Czech non-believers cannot be seen as a direct impact of the communist regime, although its strong policy of atheisation certainly had an influence. The authors agree on the importance of the Czech revival and the relation to the Habsburgs. In their opinion, the Czechs were strongly opposed to the Habsburg dynasty and therefore also to the Catholic Church, which was closely connected to the state and generally had a privileged status in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So, even after the collapse of the empire, this opposition to the Church partly remained. They also add that shortly after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the proportions of Czech believers changed significantly. According to them, 1.5 million people left the Catholic Church and of these only 20 thousand were not from Czechoslovakia. A significant number of people, even after time, eventually ended up as atheists, or without affiliation. At the same time, there were also people who did not expend even an effort to leave the Church formally, so this number may in fact be quite higher (Hamplová, Nešpor, 2009, pp. 590-591).

Moreover Furstova et al. (2021) adds that the post-war years were then shaped by the Soviet influence and also by the communist regime that held control in former Czechoslovak Republic between 1948 and 1989, which sought to get rid of all activities of organized religion and systematically persecuted people who openly practiced their faith (Furstova et al, 2021, pp. 289).

2.5. Current state of research

Moving from history to the present, in the last twenty years, research has begun to explore this unique aspect of Czech non-believers, who are proving to be more than the mere atheists into which they are often stereotyped, and into which they often like to self-stereotype.

Following on this is, for example Václavík (2010) who in his extensive book “Náboženství a moderní česká společnost”, tries to describe society’s relationship to religion and its overall transformation. His aim is to provide a basic orientation to this problem, which, according to him, is largely created by the lack of anchoring of basic terms and concepts, such as religious identity or secularization, according to which the relationship of Czechs to religion is explained.

Hamplová and Nešpor (2009) also write that the suspicious character of Czech society towards religion does not mean its complete absence of spiritual needs and expressions. Their work “Invisible Religion in a “Non-believing” Country: The Case of the Czech Republic” focuses on whether the Czechs are really such an irreligious nation, and if so, what led to it. They do all this by analyzing various available data, such as censuses, international studies or specifically targeted research. According to their results, a significant part of the Czech population believes in or agrees with some element of so-called alternative religions, which includes, for example, belief in the truth of horoscopes or belief in some supernatural forces. At the same time, their analysis shows that the degree of religiosity does not correlate with the socio-demographic data of the respondents or with the level of their education. What it does correlate with is their religious socialization in childhood. Meaning, that respondents who attended religious services with their family in childhood were more likely to respond positively to questions about belief in horoscopes or in some supernatural forces (Hamplová, Nešpor, 2009, pp. 581-597)

3. Methodological part

I choose a qualitative data collection procedure for my research in order to represent the problem from the perspective of my informants. In the course of my work, I described the importance of allowing the informants to express themselves, self-identify and describe their experiences, attitudes and values in the best way they want, as this is a complex topic with many nuances. In my work, therefore, I do not want to focus on the quantity and frequency but rather on the depth and diversity of attitudes, opinions and values held by the selected informants of my research.

The data collection itself is done by an in-depth semi-structured interview. According to methodological book from Novotná et al. (2019), semi-structured interviews consist of thematic categories with predetermined examples of questions that the researcher prepares in advance and then uses as a kind of guide during the interview. The guide serves to ensure a certain coherence of the interviews. At the same time, the order of these questions is not fixed, and the researcher must be able follow up and ask questions according to what the informant is currently talking about (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 322).

That being said, I choose the semi-structured interview because I am trying to understand a certain group of people, which are non-believing students, and their worldview without limiting their statements to mere response options in the questionnaire. The basis of my interview is composed of 6 thematic categories that I want to touch on during the interview and consist of introduction, self-identification, influence, everyday life, attitudes towards traditional religion and alternatives or spirituality. Informants will hear questions from me such as, does this topic have a place in conversations with your friends, how does the “it” shows up in situations like crisis or meeting new people, what do you think is after death?

Given that I will collect data in the form of semi-structured interviews, so it partly depends on the informant what topics they open and where the questions will be directed. With all that, I will proceed to answer my research questions, which I raised at the beginning, and which are

as follows: What is the relationship between students' non-religious identity and meanings ascribed to non-religiosity? How are sources of their beliefs and opinions reflected by them? Are there any similarities in their responses and, if appropriate, can they be divided into specific categories following Cotter's research?

3.1. Sample construction

I used purposeful sampling for my research. Further, I will quote using my own translation. In the footnotes I will then include the original text in Czech. „*Purposeful sampling is guided by the researcher's pre-selected criteria that the actors or data sources we want to include in the sample should meet*”² (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 294). The criteria I created for my sample were that the informants must be in their second or third year of studying of their bachelor's degree at Charles University, Department of Sociology, they must not be believers in institutionalized religion, and the sample should be gender balanced, i.e., 4 men and 4 women. The reasoning behind the choice of the sample is more practical as I am a student myself and hence it will be easier for me to approach the informants and arrange to interview with them.

As a sample making technique, I used the snowball technique. We use this technique when „*the terrain and theme are sufficiently outlined, but at the same time we are not yet familiar with them*”³ (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 297). This is rather accurate, as I had chosen the terrain and topic beforehand, but despite being a student myself, due to the closing of schools in recent years due to the corona virus and my following departure for Erasmus, I only know familiarly two people who acted as original informants, who further provided me with contacts of other informants. According to Novotná et al. (2019), one of the limitations of this technique is that we get too homogeneous circle of people and thus only get reflections of the views and attitudes of only one social bubble. For this reason, I also wanted to know why my informants were giving me contacts that I asked for and what their relationship to them was. I was looking for

² „Účelový výběr se řídí výzkumníkem předem zvolenými kritérii, která by měli aktéři či zdroje dat, jež do vzorku chceme zahrnout, splňovat.”

³ „Pokud jsou terén či téma dostatečně ohraničené, ale zároveň je ještě důvěrně neznáme.”

contacts that are outside their social group and they only know each other, for example, as school friends but otherwise do not talk much.

3.2. Data analysis

The interviews were followed by transcription, segmentation and coding. Since my sample consisted of Czech students, the interviews were conducted in Czech and the coding was done in Czech as well, where I translated the code names into English to make it easier to work with them. After transcribing all the interviews, I moved on to segmenting each text into thematic units, according to what seemed most important, most frequent, or how it related to the research questions. This also helped me to narrow down the texts themselves (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 430). Next came the coding. „Coding is the process by which we assign a label to the segments we created to characterize them⁴” (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 430). I then proceeded rather inductively. I coded according to the data and what was in it. However, I was still influenced by my previous understanding of the topic, my chosen theory, and my research questions, which gave the whole coding a conceptual framework (Novotná et al., 2019, pp. 431).

I then arranged the codes into a table into four main categories, to which I added various subcategories over time according to the themes that emerged in the interviews. I then progressively filled these spreadsheets with fragments from the interviews, in which I further underlined important points or added notes from the interviews in the form of „*I could see that they were more nervous about this topic*” or “*it was clear that they were engaged in this, very eager to talk about it*”. Yet, the table I am presenting here was created by myself and used more for my own consultation of the data and to help me better orient myself in the data.

⁴ „Kódování je postup, jehož pomocí přidělíme vytvořeným segmentům popisek, kterým jej charakterizujeme.“

Terminologie, různé spojované termíny a sebedefinice/Terminology, various associated terms and self-identification	Proč nevěří v boha/Why they do not believe in God	Zastávané životní hodnoty/Values their in lifes	Názory a postoje/Opinions and attitudes					Vliv na jejich názory/Influence on their views		Každodenní situace v životě, kdy se to „jejich“ projevuje/Everyday situations in their life			
			náboženství/religion	proč je náboženství důležité pro lidi/why is religion important for people	problémy s porozuměním, nedostatek důkazů, pochyby/problem s with understanding, lack of evidence, doubts	co je po smrti/what is after death	transcendentálně	rodina/family	kamarádi a ostatní/friends and others	každodennost/everyday life	různé rituály/diverse rituals	poznávání nových lidí/meeting new people	krize/crisis
moc jsem nad tím nepřemýšlela (...) tak asi říknu, že ateista a nevěřící	nevěřím v boha, protože za prvé jako nejsou žádné důkazy, ale zase jako nejsou úplně důkazy, že něco takového neexistuje	lidí, co jsou mě blízký	lidí, co prostě jsou křesťani, tak třeba mají negativní názory třeba na LGBT komunitu (...) a já jsem z toho nešťastná	že to přispívá k jejich nějakému well being	lidí nerozumi a přijde mi hrozně těžké si představit, že celý vesmír tady vlastně vždycky byl, protože jakoby jak tady vždycky něco může být vždycky	člověk prostě umře a konec a taky když člověk vyrůstá, tak ho všechno ovlivňuje, a i kdyby ses znovu zrodila, tak se zrodíš bez vzpomínek a už nejsi ty	celkově mi vesmír přijde jako transcendentální, protože to je něco čemu nerozumím.	u nás to je úplně polarizovaný. Moje mamka je hrozně nevěřící a na druhou stranu můj táta je z Ruska a když jsem šla k němu do kanceláře, tak tam měl třeba různé náboženské artefakty, třeba fotky panny Marie	já jsem vždycky byla hrozně obklopená lidma, co nevěřili, takže vlastně kdyby mě mamka vychovala křesťanský, tak bych se dostala do okolí, kde jsou nevěřící lidi. A pak i s internetem mi to přijde jako spojený		Nejsem úplně pověřivá, ale třeba když jdu na test, tak musím mít nějaký přívěšek a věřím, že mi přinese štěstí	třeba se potřebuji nějak modlit a já nechci, abych jim to nějak narušila, nebo abych jim něco neřekla, v tom mi to přijde důležité	

Appendix no. 1

3.3. Ethics and self-reflection

Personal beliefs can be a difficult and sensitive topic for some for many different reasons. However, the entire data collection process operated on the basis of voluntary participation. The informants were told about the purposes of my thesis at the beginning of the interview and were also assured that the data they would provide would be used only for the needs of my research. Based on this information, they all then provided me with spoken informed consent at the beginning of each recording. At the same time, I have anonymized all the data with creation of a fictional name for everyone included in order to protect their personal information and comply with their wishes.

As I found out in the course of data collection, some questions can be very intimate and difficult for informants to answer, as they may not have given much thought to such questions themselves. I encountered this most when asking questions such as „What do you think is after death?” or „What was it like in your family when you were growing up?” At this point, I think it was important to give the informant all the space and control and to be a focused interviewer ready to respond quickly in a situation of great discomfort and move on to the next question if necessary.

However, I must admit that the interview did not always go according to my original plan. I tried to follow up on my informants' answers as much as possible and this sometimes led me to get tangled up in the interview and accidentally missing a topic or question that I was interested in. It was also challenging at times not to lead informants towards certain answers. Informants sometimes did not understand what I meant by certain questions. For example, when asking whether they had any significant rituals connected with their beliefs and opinions, I had to sometimes provide examples of such situations for clarification and their better understanding. I am aware that these examples may have then consequently influenced their answer.

It is also necessary to add that my research was done in a temporal and local context. By temporal I mean this year and by local, I mean the Czech Republic, Prague and more specifically the Faculty of Sociology. This needs to be reflected, as by changing any of these components one may come to different results, which in turn will be influenced by other components.

4. Empirical part

4.1. Influence

In this section I will explore how my informants reflect on what influenced the formation of their beliefs and opinions that I have outlined above. This section aims to answer my research question: How are sources of their beliefs and opinions reflected by the informants? Moreover, this section is divided into 2 sub-sections namely family and friends and peers. During the interviews, I mostly asked informants questions such as “What was it like in your home in this aspect when you were growing up?” or “Do you think your parents feel the same way as you do?” or “Do you think this is a topic that has a place in conversations with people close to you?”

4.1.1. Family

The interview began with questions about childhood and early life. Some informants recalled being in an environment where they felt some kind of religious or spiritual influence which,

however, was not so significant. For example, Richard, 23-year-old student, who works as a bartender and is highly interested in slow-fashion and poetry, remembers that they had religious icons at home and also mentions his Protestant neighbours:

„There are tendencies in our home to have religious icons, crosses, but it's not that we live a religious or Christian lifestyle. But when we talked about my childhood, for example, I spent a lot of time with neighbours who are Protestant. And who would give me, I don't want to say like Christian or Protestant school, but they would discuss a lot of things with me about this religion, like what is after death and that we're either going to heaven or hell. They gave me different power point presentations on what hell looks like, what it looks like in heaven and stuff like that. (...) Now the question is, like, did I take any of that, like, into my life... I rather take it as kind of, I don't want to say bizarre, but I find it funny.⁵” (Richard)

Anna, Lenka and Mikuláš were also remembering. Anna is 22 and studying a programme focusing on the study of contemporary societies, she works part-time in a café and travelling frequently as she is in a long-distance relationship with partner in England. She explains her situation at home when she was growing up like this:

„Mom's a huge non-believer. And she has a huge aversion to it. But she's in a similar place as me, she doesn't have an aversion to those people as much as she does to religion as a whole. And my dad, on the other hand, he's from Russia. Everyone there is just very religious, I have an aunt and uncle who went to church every Sunday, which my dad never did, but also when I went to his office he had all kinds of religious artifacts, like a picture of the Virgin Mary. He just kind of, kind of generally believed that there was a god, but I was never led to religion by him. But I think that was also influenced by my mom, that she just wouldn't want me or my sister to be brought up to be religious, I think.” (Anna)

⁵ The interviews were conducted in Czech, as I mentioned above. From now on, I present the quotes in English as my own translation.

Lenka is 24, considers herself a feminist and believes in the ideal of social equality. She reflects that her situation was quite difficult at home since her mother was undergoing, in her words, psychospiritual transformation:

„What formed me was actually... I call it like a kind of psychospiritual transformation, where actually I think, or I don't remember it, like it's hard to say what it was like. But my mom was going through some difficult life situations and she like clung to, classically, religion and declared herself a bigoted fundamentalist Catholic, which of course comes with a pretty controversial way of life. (...) We had a lot of paintings at home, and that was around the time I was 13. And those were pretty fundamental for me in terms of puberty. First time you like somebody, you're menstruating, and your breasts are growing, and on top of that your mom is going through some sort of like religious transition. That was pretty hard.” (Lenka)

Mikuláš is a 23-year-old student who works part-time in a bar, enjoys graphic design in his spare time and, as he says, likes fast things, which relates to his lifestyle and hobbies. In this part, he recalls why he did not like being superstitious:

„Mom's superstitious as fuck, like, mega. So, she's been reading the dreamer⁶ like all the time. I mean, when I was a kid, it was crazy, that period of hers, and then it passed, thankfully. (...) The effect is that I used to pretty much hate it, because it pissed me off, so in turn I was like rejecting it.” (Mikuláš)

Other informants, however, recalled that debates about religion or maybe in their case atheism never had much space in their homes, that they never talked about it much with their parents, and that they grew up in an environment where they knew from a very early age that they were not religious, but they did not think much about it. Pavel is 24, currently looking for a part-time job, and likes to spend his time in nature, where he gets inspiration for the music and paintings he creates. He reflects, why he does not know much about his parent's non-religiosity:

„I think I definitely came to it on my own, because my parents never really talked to us about any kind of spirituality. Maybe in the context that we knew that there was, that

⁶ In Czech as snář

one neighbor who was Christian or Catholic, but I think it more came about because of some escapism. Quite often my thoughts were just running away from real things in life. (...) It's like we don't talk about it much, but I think my mom is the kind of person who, not that she doesn't believe, I guess she believes that something exists. But we've just never really, like, explored it in depth.” (Pavel)

Natalie works part-time in a bar, says she is often concerned about issues of equal human rights, and travels frequently due to her long-distance relationship. In this section she describes what it was like in her home when she was growing up with non-religious parents:

„My parents are probably the same way, they would definitely label themselves as atheists as they're 100% not religious and I grew up in that environment so I guess I'm coming from that, but like overall we didn't talk about it at all at home about anything like that like just from a young age I knew that there were like Christians or some like other religion, but somehow we didn't talk about it, we were just non-believers and that's how it was.” (Natálie)

4.1.2. Friends and peers

Then we moved on to their later life and the influence of different friends or peers. Informants mostly reflected that a religious or spiritual identity, is not very important to them and that it rather does not have a place in conversations with their friends. They explained this either by saying that they didn't know how to approach the topic, whether they would be interested in it at all, or simply because it was not an important part of identity for them. Therefore, they talked to their friends about other things that they attached more importance to. Vitek is a 23-year-old student who is studying program focused on social anthropology, his hobbies include music and working in culture. Here he describes his, probably, last memory of talking to his friends about being non-religious:

„In high school, I still remember talking about it a little bit with my friends. When we were stoned. But I don't really remember, or I don't know that I've talked to anyone about it ever since.” (Vitek)

Both Natálie and Lenka, expressed that they tend not to have discussions on the topic of non-religion with their friends. As they say, either they do not find it important, or they are not that interested in it:

„I guess we don't talk about it much. Like I know I have some friends that are like more spiritual, but otherwise not much. I don't really know what that discussion should look like or if I would even care.” (Natálie)

„Maybe for me this isn't quite as high priority, some sort of identity, that religious identity, so I don't think it comes up in those topics as often. I don't feel the need to have a debate with my friends over whether or not God exists.” (Lenka)

On the other hand, there was also an informant who stated that he believes this topic has at least some space in his social circles. Pavel, as I mentioned above, is an artist and enjoys creating music and paintings in his spare time, which is why, as he mentions, his social circle is made up of like-minded people who may reflect their various spiritual experiences in their art. His response goes like this:

„Of course, it could because of the people I hang out with, but somehow, I feel like more and more people are getting into it. I feel like they're dealing with it, experiencing it, exploring it. And maybe their work is based on that spirituality. Or not just some paintings or sculptures, but also like actually their actions and some rituals. I can't generalize, but I can say that in the art group, people tend to do that. It seems to me that it's quite noticeable that they're trying to actually go back to some traditions, like almost pagan in spirituality.“ (Pavel)

The informants also often included the view that they thought that even if they had not been brought up in a non-believing environment, they would have later become non-religious anyway, due, among other things, to the availability of the internet and information on it or social groups that they are part of. In a similar spirit, then, were the responses from Anna, Natálie and Richard.

„And I didn't know anybody around me who simply had religious beliefs, but I think that if it had been the other way around, that I had been raised Christian, I would have certainly believed in it formerly, but now I think I would be distanced from it. Like, I've

always been totally surrounded by people who didn't believe, so actually, if my mom had raised me Christian, I would have gotten into a social circle of people who didn't believe. And then even with the internet, I feel like it's connected. (Anna)

„Like I guess I was influenced somehow (by parents), that's for sure, but I still think that even if I wasn't, I would come to that later in life, that I wouldn't believe in anything, it's somehow in me I guess.” (Natalie)

„But I wouldn't say that it has affected me in any extreme way in terms of what kind of person I want to be (Protestant neighbours). And I think it's mostly the family that does that, and the fact that I can say I come from a non-socially disadvantaged family, which may sound stupid. But that I had access to all the information, nobody really pushed anything on me and stuff.” (Richard)

In this chapter, I discussed who and how, according to the informants' reflection, had an influence on the formation of their non-religious identity and their meanings which they ascribe to non-religiosity. It is evident from their responses that none of them grew up directly in a religious or spiritual environment, meaning their family or close relatives were non-religious or they did not raise them in religious ways. On the other hand, when they did have some form of experience with religion or spirituality, they tended to distance themselves from it as a result, because they found it repulsive or foolish. The only one who grew up in a religious environment later in life was Lenka, whose mother, in her words, underwent a religious transformation when she was 13. Later in the interview, however, she reflects that this is probably why she finds the church itself repulsive. In addition, informants also describe that even if they had grown up in a religious environment, they would have moved away from it later in life, due to the social circles in which they are involved or access to the internet where they believe they would find information that would reinforce their non-religious attitudes.

Whether at home or among friends, debates on this topic have almost no value, either because of lack of interest or because it is not an important topic for them that would shape their identity. The only exception was Pavel, who is mostly involved in artistic social circles, and as he reflects, this may be one of the reasons.

In the course of this chapter, one can see examples of the very apatheism that Václavík et al. (2018) or Nešpor et al. (2018) write about. Informants repeatedly state that their non-religious identity is somehow not very important to them and that even in their social circles this topic does not come up and thus it is evident that they do not devote any time, attention, or resources to it. At the same time, this can be explained using Tajfel et al.'s (1979) Social Identity Theory, where he suggests that people form their identities through their membership of a particular social group. In this group, they share similar values, attitudes, or characteristics and at the same time these groups provide a certain framework of worldview. All my informants belong to a group of non-believers, which is further subdivided, but it already provides a worldview framework. Most of my informants self-reported that they hardly discuss their non-religious identities in their social circles, whether it is family or friends, but even this implies that their group gives equal, little, weight to this topic and therefore shares the same attitudes towards topic of non-religion. Only Pavel reflected that the topic of non-religion has a place in his social group and that he often talks about it with his friends, but as he said, he is more in an artistic group where the question of spirituality can be more important for people, because, as he says, it can then be then incorporated into their work.

4.2. Exploring self-identities and belonging

In this chapter I move from influence on self-definition. I will explore some deeper understanding of my informants' individual reflections on how they identify themselves within the framework of non-believers or others, what is their relationship towards non-religiosity and which meaning they ascribe to it. I will also touch on the topic of reluctance or difficulty in self-identifying or belonging somewhere. Finally, I will also mention their reflections on everyday life and how these themes are present in their everyday life in different situations, such as form of different rituals or crisis.

The informants provided me with their answers based on initial questions after I introduced them to the nature and purpose of my research. The questions primarily focused on whether they already had a coherent concept in mind of how they would identify themselves within the

framework of this topic. The answers I received were diverse. Pavel and Richard were among the participants who knew from the beginning and had already defined the terms that best represented their identities. Pavel described how recently he has been keen on different types of “post” religion:

„Recently I’ve become quite sympathetic to post-religion and post-paganism, chaos magic, which is actually against some conservative notion of religion and is actually like an extension of modern religion.” (Pavel)

Richard, on the other hand, was talking about the concept of altruism and how does it project in his life:

„If I have to say a term that defines me, I guess altruism. I’m an altruist in my opinion, the opposite of egoism, although I think altruism is also a form of egoism, because after all, a person is trying to, like, fulfil the needs and wants of others, so that he feels good, so that’s also in a way maybe like egoism. But I guess that altruism is just being there for everybody to help others and stuff. More or less the whole world revolves around people, just how we treat each other, how we exist...” (Richard)

Interestingly, Alena, Vitek and Anna took it from the different end. They all began by describing what they did not believe in or what they do not associate with. It was also apparent from their responses that they were uncertain and that they had not given much thought to this topic. Alena, for example, said this:

„I guess I wouldn’t say that I’m a believer in any, in any particular being, like I believe there’s a god or anything like that, I don’t think so. (...) I like most probably religions based on nature just like Buddhism or Hinduism”. (Alena)

Vitek, then, came to a conclusion that what he believes in is a purely materialistic, physical world:

„I don’t believe in, like, supernatural powers, just... I don’t believe in, like, a god or something, or like, a force. I don’t even believe that we are here as humans for a reason. (...) I believe more in the physical world.” (Vitek)

Anna gave me the feeling that she was not certain about this topic. The main idea was that she is missing any evidence to formulate an opinion:

„If someone asks me, I’ll probably say atheist and non-believer, but I’m more like I don’t believe in God because first of all like there’s no evidence, but then again like there’s also no evidence that there isn’t such a thing.” (Anna)

4.2.1. Reluctance or problems with self-identification and belonging

Continuing on from the previous chapter, with some informants I noticed that they often had problems with expressing some kind of self-identification or, on the contrary, they do not want to be categorized or to identify themselves in any way, because they do not relate or do not agree with the whole concept. This can be seen in the examples of the following answers from Lenka or Natálie:

„I believe we have a range and reality of some identities. So... Yeah, and at the same time, like, I don’t like categorizing myself.” (Lenka)

„I don’t really know who I would describe myself as. Classically, I guess I just say I’m an atheist, but I don’t know if I’m really comfortable with that term. Maybe I am just something in between, you know, like not really atheist, definitely not religious, maybe spiritual.” (Natálie)

As I already mentioned above, informants often mentioned that they had never found this topic particularly important in their lives or had never dealt with it in such depth that they could hold clear attitudes and opinions. This may be related to what I wrote earlier, which is religious apatheism, where Václavík (2014) describes this situation by saying that for Czechs religion or spirituality is simply not so important topic in their lives, and perhaps for this reason the numbers of people who choose not to answer the religious affiliation question in the census are still increasing. When I asked about if non-religious affiliation is an important topic in their lives or conversations with friends and family Lenka answered like following:

„Maybe for me this isn't quite as high priority, some sort of identity, that religious identity, so I don't think it comes up in those topics as often. I don't feel the need to have a debate with my friends over whether or not God exists.” (Lenka)

Natálie was already mentioning this earlier, that the conversations about this topic at her home were almost non-existing:

„Like overall we didn't really talk about it at home about anything like that, like just from a young age I knew that there were like Christians or like some other religion, but somehow, we didn't talk about it, we were just non-believers, and that's how it was. (...) Like I guess I was influenced somehow (by parents), that's for sure, but I still think that even if I wasn't, I would come to that later in life, that I wouldn't believe in anything, it's somehow in me I guess.” (Natálie)

Moreover, Vítek expressed that being a non-believer is part of him, but he doesn't think it's fundamentally manifested or resonated in any way:

„Not really, it's more part of my conviction, but I guess it doesn't really resonate. (...) Maybe when something bad happens, I tell myself that it doesn't really matter anyway, that things just happen.” (Vítek)

Before I move on to the next chapters I would like to summarize the findings so far. In my sample there is only Pavel, who says he is in touch with post-religion, post-paganism and chaotic magic, and Richard, who claims to be an altruist, who sort of know where they stand and how they would identify themselves. The others are relatively unsure, defining themselves as being against institutionalized religion, but not all of them agree with the term atheist, rather they are somewhere in between, as Natálie responded, who is not quite an atheist, certainly not religious, but more spiritual.

Berger et al. (1999) criticizes secularization theory, that originally stems from Weber, which according to him claims that modernity inexorably leads to secularization at both the social and individual levels. He, on the other hand, writes that it is modernity that has contributed to

counter-secularization and, moreover, secularization at the social level does not necessarily mean secularization at the individual level. According to him, although certain religious institutions, which I think he means for example Christian ones, are losing their power in the modern society, with religion on the individual level it is not the case. Meaning, new and old religious practices, by which I think he means for example paganism or new age, still have a place in people's individual lives (Berger, 1999, pp. 2-3). Thus, as Hjelm (2018) refers to Berger in his work, secularization can happen on two levels. The first is the structural one, where the very embeddedness of religion in society loses its power (Hjelm, 2018, pp. 236). We can see this quite well in the Czech environment, thanks to the results of the censuses, where the numbers of people claiming to belong to a classical institutionalised religion are declining. However, I understand that the problem is not that simple and that there are several factors behind it. The second level is the subjective one, where people are losing their beliefs at that individual level, and it is harder to grasp (Hjelm, 2018, pp. 236). To me, this issue lies in the fact that while people are losing faith in institutionalized religion, they still believe in something at least. However, this is also seen in my informants who strictly oppose institutionalized religion and the concept of an all-knowing God but are themselves in a kind of grey area where a lot of them are inclined towards a certain spirituality. A similar view is shared, among others, by Heelas (2002), who argues that „*rather than religious giving way to the secular, the religious (for God) is giving way to the spiritual (for life)*” (Heelas, 2002, pp. 413).

4.2.2. Important values and attitudes in life

I noticed a recurring trend in the responses of my informants, and that was responses that focused on people, humanity, relationships, and various forms of social inequality. I must reflect that this may have been influenced by the composition of my sample. All my informants are studying a sociology degree only with a different specialization and due to their educational background, they may be more likely to come into contact with the topic of social inequalities and thus their worldview and their answers may be influenced. I asked them questions such as “What makes them happy or unhappy in life?” or “What values are important to you?”. Richard is in his third year of studying sociology and social policy. Previously he described himself as an altruist and he said:

„The whole world revolves around people, simply how we treat each other, how we exist, what we are able to tolerate, respect, what we do not tolerate and how it affects others.” (Richard)

When talking about what makes Pavel, Lenka and Natálie happy and unhappy in their lives their responses were linked to the question of justice and injustice in the world or to the equal rights for all:

„Definitely friends, good relationships with friends, some social fulfilment. (...) I would say I’m a bit of a humanist. (...) Like generally in life it makes me unhappy when I see something unfair going on, or some like more global like issues of generalization in terms of sexuality, racism and even religion.” (Pavel)

„And in the long run it’s like relationships and I guess bonds with people. (...) I’m quite a person who is based on some kind of justice, which is also related to relationships, I’m just a relationship person.” (Lenka)

„It’s like people make me happy and unhappy. Close people are everything to me, I stand behind them and I like to spend time with them because I don’t like to be alone, but on the other hand, other people who maybe don’t hold the same values then make me unhappy, which then also hurt, like not physically, but just by their opinion, my friends. Like people who are against the LGBT community or some anti-feminists, they just downright piss me off and I don’t even want to see them.” (Natálie)

Pavel, Vitek and Lenka followed up on this in relation to the church itself, explaining their attitudes and reflecting on what bothers them about institutionalized religion. They brought up topics like church and LGBTQ+ community, church as a manipulation and questions of moral codes. Thus, Pavel said:

„Which I think is just a construct (religion) to some extent. And that the belief simply served as a control over people by a created sort of higher entity. The ultimate entity that everyone is just afraid of. (...) I also think that actually our lifestyle is still quite religious in a way. Like a monogamous relationship and of course like I’m not saying that a monogamous relationship is a bad thing it’s not at all but... But like judging a

polygamous relationship. And I think that maybe that's just a thing that's embedded in people because of the religion. Actually, then also another thing I think is the condemnation of homosexuality. Looking down on women, I think that's definitely sort of religious too. Not only that, of course, but..." (Pavel)

Also, Vitek explained that religion having some moral codes is a good thing but he would rather appreciate if people were good by their very nature:

„Well, I guess it's good that when a religion has a moral code, it's probably fine if people stick to it. I mean, it's kind of weird that they stick to that code because they don't want to be in hell or something in the afterlife. Maybe, like, I'd probably welcome it more if people were good on their own, right, and not like for the sake of having a good afterlife, right?" (Vitek)

Furthermore, Lenka is a respondent who placed a strong emphasis on distinguishing belief and religion at the individual level from institutionalised religion. This was a recurring theme in her responses, and she brought it to my attention several times. It was evident that she was no stranger to this topic and had a wide experience with it. As she herself reflected there are many people in her social circles who follow different religions, and she is grateful for this. She also talked about how her stepfather, who was present most of her childhood, was Jewish from his mother's side and went on to describe a rather traumatic experience for her, when her own mother went through a religious conversion during her adolescence and declared herself, in her words, a “*bigoted fundamentalist Catholic*”. Her response then, in connection with views on religion, was as follows:

„I think there's also like a big difference here in the perception of belief, of religion, and like separating religion and belief from the church as an institution through which religion is somehow happening. And the church as such, whether as primarily the Catholic one, is completely repulsive to me, it's like, for a lot of different reasons. Yeah, it might be like very real, but I think that religion as we know it today, that it happens through an institution, I think that's like the biggest manipulation that's ever been done on humanity.” (Lenka)

In this section, it can be seen in the informants' answers that their core values and attitudes revolve around people and humanity itself, and that they are concerned with human rights issues such as the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, issues of morality, or they see the church as a manipulation of humanity. This is certainly affected to some extent by the fact that the informants in this thesis are sociology students, so they are influenced often by touching on similar issues during their studies. Cotter (2015) reflects in his work that his research is limited in its own nature but despite this I see some consistencies. He proposed an alternative conceptualisation of non-believers in the form of a typology based on their narratives. Among other things, he proposed a humanistic type that is focused in his informants' responses on questions of their most important beliefs. The questions revolved around people and humanity or values such as kindness, selflessness, and equality. Non-religious identification was not an important issue in life for them alone and, like my informants, they did not give it much importance. On the other hand, this does not mean that they were neutral in their attitudes towards institutionalised religion. They often associating it with words such as oppressive or pointing out that biblical moralities were often a cause for dispute in society (Cotter, 2015, pp. 183-184). My informants saw it more or less the same way, pointing out that religion can stand behind the issues of the LGBTQ+ community or referring to it as a manipulation of humanity. At the same time, it can be seen that the informants operate in certain social circles where they give this issue a higher priority. Thus, as Tajfel and Turner describe in their Social Identity Theory, where individuals form their views and attitudes by belonging to a social group, it also provides them with a framework for viewing the world.

4.2.3. Everyday Life

In this shorter section, I will focus on how informants project their non-religious identities into everyday life, either in the form of rituals or whether this manifests itself somehow in times of crisis. When I asked Lenka if she has any rituals in life connected to her non-religious practices, she mainly talked about yoga or meditation:

„The kind of like spiritual practice that I have in my life is like I meditate, or I go do yoga and those are just kind of like spiritual practices that come from Eastern religions, which is closely related to religion but not necessarily.” (Lenka)

Alena, on the other hand, was talking about the importance of having a talisman with her for bringing her luck in different circumstances as, for example, exams:

„Well, the talismans, maybe. Like, if I had an exam and I would be like, “oh, man, I gotta take, I don't know, this little stuffed animal here with me” and if I forgot about it, realistically, I'd blame the bad result on it.” (Alena)

Moreover, Pavel explained that even simple things like going to park or falling asleep can be for him form of a ritual or meditation:

„For me, the ritual is just going to the park and looking at trees and thinking about the connection with some (...) It actually recharges me and cleanses me somehow. I feel like this way is a ritual that one goes to sleep. For example, when I lie in bed, I try to imagine that I am leaving my body, or I look at my fingers, and it's a kind of meditation to some extent I guess.” (Pavel)

On the other hand, coping with a difficult period of life or some other crisis within their non-religious practices is more rational. Informants usually reflected that they just need to cope with this situation by themselves because there is no higher power to turn to. Therefore, in time of crisis it seems that they do not project their non-religious practices on the situation. This can be seen in the example of Vítek and Anna. Anna also described that when she was younger, she used to pray to nature when she was in a difficult situation and hoped that it would listen to her, but as she later added, this is no longer the case today.

„But today... Yeah, I'd say I'm kind of turning around... I'm more trying to resolve a difficult situation.” (Anna)

„I'll just tell myself that it happened, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's already happened, so I don't know how else to deal with it.” (Vítek)

With this section, I wanted to point out how different practices and rituals in the lives of my informants may be associated with their non-religious identities. Even though some informants responded that they did not have any practices or rituals or simply thought they did not, but, as

I have indicated in the examples some knew. Their rituals mainly revolve around physical and mental practices such as yoga or meditation, or in the form of owning talismans that can bring them good luck or protect them in different situations. On the other hand, in situations of crisis, informants stated that they somehow do not project their non-religious practices and indicated that they have to somehow come to terms with the situation or resolve it.

As Mead (2015) wrote, identity formation, in this case the non-religious or spiritual one, arises in the process of interaction with others, whereby one takes on a certain role, but others also perceive one as such. These processes can be various socialization moments, for example, in the form of different rituals, during which is our identity formatted or reinforced. So, whether it's Lenka, who goes to yoga, where together with others they strengthen the relationship between body and mind, Pavel, who in his free time draws energy and inspiration from nature, which he will then later share in his art group, or Anna, who gives meaning to talismans, they are all part of various social rituals that strengthen their belonging to a community.

4.3. Differences in attitudes among informants

In the course of my work, specifically with the interviews and the subsequent analysis of the collected data, I noticed that, following the pattern of Cotter's (2015) research, there is a certain trend among my informants that they fit typologically into different groups. It is clear to me that I do not have a large enough sample size to create typological groups, and thus I am limited by the very nature of my thesis. Despite this, I have decided here to briefly introduce the two main types of informants.

The first major type are informants who have certain spiritual tendencies. As I have described several times above, spirituality is a complex term and can have different definitions. Cotter's informants, then, mostly mentioned topics such as love, kinship, friendship, and life altruism. They also shared anti-materialist attitudes and then practiced various therapeutic and healing practices themselves, including yoga and meditation. They then commented on institutionalized religion as serving as an obstacle to human friendship or as potentially

dangerous (Cotter, 2015, pp. 185). The greatest examples of this type then are Alena and Lenka. They both call themselves spiritual and put a lot of emphasis on relationships between people, whether it's their friends or just trying to have an empathy towards others. When asked about transcendent and spirituality Lenka answered that:

„Yeah, that's what I would describe myself as a person who believes in and operates in a reality where I think there's something that transcends that reality like the lived reality like the social reality that we create as humans here on this world. I think that's the kind of thing that a lot of people are labelling themselves as spiritual now, and I would label myself as spiritual too.” (Lenka)

Alena, for her part, expressed a positive attitude towards Eastern religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism and often used terms such as the soul body plane, aura, or karma in her interview.

„I like nature-based religions the most, like Buddhism or Hinduism, so I gravitate more towards that. (...) I guess I'm still on that level of humans, I believe that everyone has an aura that can affect other people and you don't have to match with someone just based on that.” (Alena)

Both also said that they like to meditate and Lenka goes to yoga. At the same time, they were rather negative about institutionalized religion. Lenka, in her interview, compared it to the greatest manipulation of humanity, and Alena said that it bothers her when religion is forcibly promoted or pushed on others.

The second type of informants were those with scientific tendencies. Cotter referred to this type in his research as the naturalistic type, and these people most mentioned in his research a belief in science and the scientific method; they were very focused on evidence, accuracy, clarity, and the physical world. At the same time, they had materialistic views, where the whole human existence starts from birth and ends with death, after which there is nothing. Their attitudes towards religion are negative, with religion representing a false knowledge for them (Cotter, 2015, pp. 183). The best examples of this type can be Natálie and Vítek. Even though Natálie mentioned at one point that she might be spiritual, her subsequent narrative suggested

otherwise. They both claim to believe most in science and the various laws of physics and the overall physical world that nothing transcends. We can see this in their answers in which I asked them about their beliefs and attitudes.

„I'm just missing the evidence. I don't really know if there's anything or not. But I certainly don't favor anything divine or supernatural, I don't think that exists. I'm a big believer in physics, the physical world in general. Some physical laws and science.”
(Natalie)

„I don't believe in, like, supernatural powers, just... I don't believe in, like, a god or something, or like, a force. I don't even believe that we are here as humans for a reason. (...) I believe more in the physical world.” (Vitek)

At the same time, both equally expressed that, according to them, there is nothing after death. Vitek compared death to turning off the computer and Natalie compared it to what happened before birth, meaning nothing. Similarly, both expressed some negative attitudes towards institutionalized religion, but at the same time reflected that religion can be good for people, for example in a situation of life crisis, when people seek comfort and answers to their questions in it.

Thus, even though I see some tendencies and similarities in my sample, subsequent research consisting of a larger sample of informants would be needed to create a better, more robust and larger typology.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of my work, I set myself the goal of this thesis, with the support of various statistics observing unaffiliated in the world and in the Czech Republic, to explore in more depth what it actually means for one to be a non-believer. Thus, I wanted to give more space to empirical evidence in my research and to focus, through a qualitative process, on what meanings students ascribe to their non-religious identity, how they reflect on the sources of

their beliefs and opinions, and whether it is possible to divide them into certain typological categories, following the model of Cotter's research. Throughout my work, I focused on a group of students at Charles University, particularly studying in the field of sociology.

Due to the nature of my work, I then further introduced two main areas of theories, namely theories that are related to secularization, such as Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world, which states that the mysticism is disappearing from the world in connection with modernity and its processes, such as rationalization, intellectualization, and due to technology. On the other hand, I described its critique, which in turn discusses the re-enchantment of the world, which suggests that while we may see a certain drift away from institutionalized religion in the Western world, on the other hand, we cannot say that people have completely detached themselves from various religious or spiritual practices or rituals.

The second area was related to self-identification and belonging. There, with reference to Heelas's secularization theory, which says that religion does not slide directly into the void, but rather into spirituality, where people put more emphasis on self-identification, I followed up with Václavík, who generally introduces the beginning of identity studies after the World Wars and also Mead who discusses the identity formation and introduces the concept of generalized others. In addition, a theory that then extends the concept of self-identification is Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner, which theorizes that people form their identities based on belonging to social groups. These groups then provide a framework for understanding and viewing oneself and also the world around one.

How, then, did informants reflect on the sources of their beliefs and opinions. First and foremost, it should be noted that non-religious identity is not very important to these informants, which is supported by the fact that they hardly talk about it with friends, and even when they were growing up it was not a topic that was somehow discussed in their homes or with close relatives. So, I understand this through the concept of Czech apatheism, introduced by, among others, Nešpor and Václavík, who write that Czechs simply do not place much importance on the topics of religion or spirituality and it is not that important in their lives. On

the other hand, I also understand this using Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, where I think informants are in social circles that give similar, little, weight to these topics and are more interested in others, such as equal rights for all, which, among other things, may be influenced by the fact that they are all sociology students. This can also be understood in relation to the informant Pavel, who on the contrary claims that this topic is more reflected and debated with his friends, but as he himself points out, he is mostly in a group of artists where their various non-believing practices and rituals can be mirrored in their artworks.

Continuing, I come to the question of what meanings students ascribe to their non-believing identity. The first important thing to note is that in the interviews I conducted with informants, it is clear that they are moving away from believing in anything, but rather leaning towards some sort of spiritual side, or that they find themselves in a grey area where they do not quite identify with the concept of atheism, but do not really know where or how they would place themselves. I can understand this through Berger's critique of secularization theory, where he writes that while the power of institutionalized religion may be declining in modern society, it's not quite the same at the individual level. Indeed, even as he himself argues, this claim is hard to grasp and can be explored through further empirical research.

Next, we can follow up on what attitudes and beliefs are important to informants in their lives. The theme that emerged most in the interviews was empathy towards other people and topics such as human rights issues in relation to the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, issues of morality and the church as a manipulation of humanity. My understanding is that their social circles or groups which are described by Tajfel and Turner, give more weight to these topics, and so it shapes their worldview and what they see as important, and so these topics are more important to them than non-religious identity. At the same time, I see the formation of a certain typology described by Cotter in his research, where the humanistic type in particular emphasized selflessness, kindness, and is focused on people. Non-religious identity was then not as important to these informants, but at the same time they did not have entirely positive views of institutionalised religion, saying that it could be oppressive and as a source of conflict between people. This is also linked to the various practices and rituals that informants described in relation to their non-religiosity or spirituality. These were practices such as doing yoga,

various forms of meditation or giving meaning to talismans as a good luck charm. Thus, as Mead describes, it is the various rituals and social processes that can reinforce how an individual perceives themselves in relation to others and also how others perceive the individual.

Lastly, I wanted to demonstrate, according to my research question, if it is possible to create some typological categories. Despite my limited sample size, it is possible to see certain tendencies among informants. Specifically, following Cotter's model, it might be possible to divide them into two larger categories based on their responses, namely spiritual and scientific, or as Cotter called it naturalistic. The spiritual type emphasizes friendship and life altruism, shares anti-materialistic attitudes, and practices various healing and therapeutic practices such as yoga or meditation. The scientific type, on the other hand, emphasizes science and knowledge based on evidence and the scientific method. It has materialistic tendencies of seeing the world, such as that human existence begins with birth and ends with death.

In my opinion, the sociology of religion can represent one of the major sources of knowledge about people's perception of the world, their surroundings and themselves. This work has certainly not been easy, and I think that this topic is so extensive and complex that it deserves further detailed research, especially on the issues of the secularization of modern societies and the shift from the religious to religious other, which may be represented, as I have tried to point out in this work, by something similar, only freed from the entity of an omniscient and omnipotent God. Nevertheless, as Furstova et al. (2021) notes „*Czech non-believers should not be seen as complete atheists; they are just religious skeptics who tend to fulfil their spirituality needs outside traditional religion*” (Furstova et al., 2021, pp. 299).

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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: demonstration of self-segmentation and coding of interviews (table)