

ATHEISM IN POST-SOCIALIST CONDITIONS: THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

Abstract. *In post-socialist Slovenia one observes the re-emergence of certain traditional defamatory attitudes toward atheism. For this reason, empirical testing of the following theses, which have been publically promulgated by leading representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, have been undertaken in recent years: 1. that atheists are unhappy; 2. that atheists are unreflective about life; 3. that atheists are immoral; and 4. that atheists do not feel solidarity with social minorities. On the basis of data collected by ISSP, EVS, and WVS research studies, it is possible to claim that these statements made by the Catholic Church about Slovene atheists are unsubstantiated. Especially as regards "convinced atheists" and "natural atheists" who exhibit above-average levels of happiness, above-average belief as to the meaning of life, average moral rigour and below-average social distance in relation to various social minorities. The explanations of such findings will be pursued in a comparative analysis of the ethos and value habitus of Catholicism on the one hand, and in the secular ideologies that have been present in Slovenia on the other.*

Keywords: *atheism, (de)secularization, ex-Yugoslav states, Slovenia, happiness, meaning of life, moral rigour, social distance*

De-secularization in post-Socialist Eastern Europe and ex-Yugoslav states

If, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we look at the statistical data showing European trends in religion between then and now, we discover two separate Europes: the West, which, with a few exceptions, is undergoing a process of secularization (at the individual level)¹, and the

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¹ Throughout the text the fundamental concepts regarding secularization are used in the sense of Karel Dobbelaere's distinctions and definitions of the individual, societal and organizational levels of de/secularization (Dobbelaere, 2002).

post-socialist East, which, with a few exceptions, is undergoing a trend towards de-secularization (see Table I).² The sociological explanation for these opposing trends (as well as for the exceptions) is not difficult to pin down. The East (in contrast to the West) is characterized and burdened by a number of processes and phenomena that, according to a variety of theories, are seen as de-secularizing factors. The deregulation of the religious sphere, or more accurately the end of control by socialist and communist regimes over the religious sphere, merely provided the basic framework that led to de-secularization, both at the level of the individual and indeed society as a whole.

Table I: SHARES OF RELIGIOUS POPULATION IN EUROPE: DE/SECULARIZING TRENDS

	1980- 1982	1989- 1992	1995- 1996	1999- 2001	2005- 2007	Difference between the first and the last measurement
G. Britain	59.2	56.1		41.6	48.7	-10.5
France	55.6	50.7		46.6	46.9	- 8.7
Belgium	81.4	67.6		67.4		-14.0
Netherlands	70.4	60.4		61.8	56.9	-13.5
Spain	65.4	67.8	69.2	59.0	45.6	-19.9
Switzerland		73.9	57.4		64.8	-9.1
Sweden	34.2	31.1	32.6	38.9	33.4	-0.8
Germany		65.3		62.1	42.9	-22.4
Ireland		72.4		73.8		+ 1.4
N. Ireland		71.7		62.3		-9.4
Norway	48.0	47.5	46.9		41.3	-6.7
Danmark		72.5		76.5		+4.0
Austria		80.4		79.5		-0.9
Italy		86.1		85.8	88.0	+1.9
Slovenia		73.1	69.1	70.2	72.6	-0.5
Croatia			71.3	85.2		+13.9
Serbia			59.7	74.5	85.5	+25.8
B&H			69.8 ('98)	74.3		+4.5
Macedonia			66.4 ('98)	84.1		+17.4
Montenegro			49.3	73.2		+23.9
Czech rep.		41.7		43.2		+1.5
Hungary	44.7	56.8		59.0		+14.3
Slovakia		65.8		81.5		+15.7

² Likewise, in the fundamental precepts of Christian faith, two trends can be observed with regard to variables and indicators in relation to religious participation and religious belief.

	1980–1982	1989–1992	1995–1996	1999–2001	2005–2007	Difference between the first and the last measurement
E. Germany		37.2		28.6	(28.5)	-8.6 (-8.7)
Poland		96.3		94.4	94.6	-1.7
Russia		56.0	63.6	65.7	73.6	+17.6
Romania		74.5 ('93)		84.8	93.4	+18.9
Bulgaria		36.1	52.8 ('97)	51.7	63.6	+27.5
Ukraine			64.3	75.4	80.7	+16.4
Latvia		54.4	64.3	76.9		+22.5
Estonia		21.2	35.6	41.7		+20.5
Lithuania		55.1	83.6	84.4		+29.3

Source: World values survey

Those countries emerging from the remains of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are not exceptions to this rule. According to WVS³ polls, self-declared religious belief has increased by 26 percentage points in Serbia, by 24 percentage points both in Montenegro and Macedonia, by 14 percentage points in Croatia, and by 5 percentage points in Bosnia-Herzegovina⁴ (see Table I). Similar increases were concurrently detected in assessments as to the importance of religion in life. The only ex-Yugoslav exception is Slovenia, which has remained relatively stable in this regard. Moreover, comparison with data from Yugoslav times (Toš et al., 1987) indicates that there have been significant changes in the order of individual countries (then constituent republics) in terms of the degree of religiosity or secularization. Serbia and Montenegro were the least religious parts of socialist federal Yugoslavia; today, however, Serbia and Montenegro, as independent countries, have witnessed the greatest growth in religiosity⁵ (see Figure 1).⁶

³ World Values Survey, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.

⁴ The small magnitude of these differences regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina is the consequence of the temporal proximity of the measures. A comparison with data from research projects conducted a decade or more ago indicate that the growth in religiosity in Bosnia-Herzegovina had been much larger. According to Hacic-Vlahovic the increase in religiosity amongst Bosnia-Herzegovina's three ethnic groups between 1988 and 1998/2001 was exceptionally high: among Serbs it rose from 18.6 % to 75 %; from 37.3 % to 84.9 % among Bosniaks; and from 55.7 % to 86.8 % among Croats (Hacic-Vlahovic, 2008: 80). A similar increase in religiosity in Bosnia-Herzegovina is revealed in Figure 1.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in these two parts of Yugoslavia, membership in the Communist Party (the League of Communists) was the highest just prior to the collapse of Yugoslavia. In Montenegro 30.9 % of the adult population were members of the League of Communists, as opposed to 19.3 % in Serbia; the percentage remained the lowest in Slovenia: 8.6 % (Toš et al., 1987). Similar can be argued with regard to civil religiosity. Considering indicators of attitude towards communism, working class and ideological militancy, Hafner-Fink detected the highest level of civil religiosity in Montenegro (78.9 %) and the lowest in Slovenia (41.0 %) (Hafner-Fink, 1994: 182).

⁶ It should be noted that data between 1987 and 2008 is not entirely comparable, as the phrasing of questions and possible answers were slightly different.

These changes are not difficult to explain. The fall of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia, a state whose ideology functioned as a sort of (secularist) civil⁷ religion⁸ (Smrke, 1990; Perica, 2002: 89; Flere, 2007), occurred simultaneously with increasing inter- and intra-republic⁹ tensions and conflicts, and with the growth of ethno-religious mythologies (Velikonja, 2003) and the nationalization of religion (Vrcan, 2001). In the countries that were engulfed in war between 1991 and 1995 – Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro – a so-called cultural defence was triggered, a phenomenon which, according to Steve Bruce (Bruce, 1996: 97), augments the process of de-secularization.¹⁰ In other words: to a considerable degree religion became important because it was a marker of awakened ethnic identity and nationalism. Churches, of course, have not been mere passive observers; in

⁷ The concept that the ideology of Yugoslav socialism was a special type of civil religion may be considered disputable in view of a very strict scholarly regard for a number of the determinants of civil religion as expounded by Bellah in his examination of American civil religion (Bellah, 1967). Some scholars link civil religion exclusively to "open societies"; whilst some other authorities even apply it – without hesitation – to authoritarian regimes. For instance, David Martin in his scheme of basic religio-cultural patterns in left-wing statist regimes detects the existence of a civil religion which is, in essence, antireligious (Martin, 1978: 59).

Here we would like to emphasize the attributes of the socialist Yugoslav ideology, which, given their inter-connectedness, carry certain religious connotations: the charismatic and much venerated life-president Josip Broz Tito; the great schism with the Soviet Union, which also earned Tito the title of "Luther of the socialist world"; a history full of dramatic and sacred events, which, in their official interpretation are reminiscent of biblical scourges and triumphs of "the chosen people"; specific socialist – i.e. Marxist – orthodoxy with its sacred teachings, dogmas and heresies; a great unifying concept of "brotherhood and unity" among nations, which transcended their erstwhile ethnic and religious divisions; as well as the Communist Party as the organ of the ideologically consecrated.

It is of secondary importance in this particular discussion whether this phenomenon should be termed a special type of civil religion, political religion, secular religion or something else. In any case it would be impossible to claim that such a civil religion did not enjoy a wide circle of adherents, no matter how improbable this might seem from today's perspective. According to Hafner-Fink, drawing from Klasno Biće Research as late as 1987, almost 70% of the population of Yugoslavia were "ideologically orthodox" (Hafner-Fink, 150–152, 182) (see also Note 5).

⁸ In this light, of course, it is possible to regard the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the subsequent transition as a period of a particular kind of secularization, one that relates to sacred elements that had previously characterized the Yugoslav civil religion. Only in the light of this secularization might it be possible to appropriately understand the transitional de-secularization at the level of traditional religions. There seems to exist a psychological and sociological connection between intensive adherence to Yugoslav civil religion and the subsequent intensive transitional revitalisation of traditional religiousness.

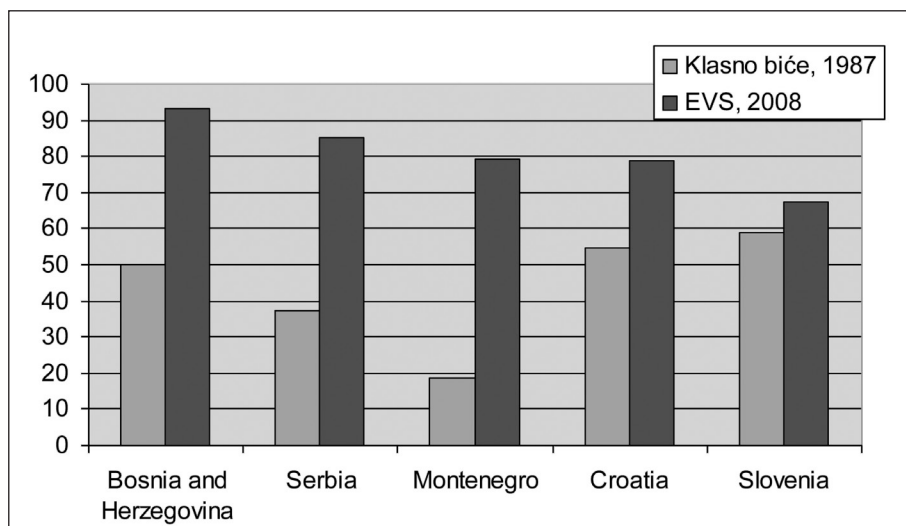
⁹ Socialist Yugoslavia was a federal state comprising the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. The Socialist Republic of Serbia was comprised of Serbia proper and the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo.

¹⁰ Bruce writes: "The role of religion in cultural defence can be described like this. Where there are two (or more) communities in conflict, and they are of different religions (for example, Protestants and Catholics in Ulster, or Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims in what used to be Yugoslavia), then the religious identity of each can acquire a new significance and call forth a new loyalty as religious identity becomes a way of asserting ethnic pride and laying claim to what Max Weber called "ethnic honour": the sense of "the excellence of one's own customs and the inferiority of alien ones" (Bruce, 1996: 97).

the course of events they perceived opportunities to increase their power in society.

Likewise, the increase in religiousness in Macedonia can be partly explained by the new expression of ethnic pride and identity following the loss of the larger identity of being Yugoslav, especially given the fact that the Orthodox churches of neighbouring states did not recognize the Macedonian Orthodox church as an independent and autocephalous entity.¹¹ The continuing tensions and conflicts in relation to Macedonia's mostly Muslim Albanian minority may also contribute to the processes and effects of cultural defence. This has very likely played a role in the increase of religiosity among Albanian Muslims in Kosovo, experiencing tensions with Serbian neighbours of a different faith since the mid-1980s.

Figure 1: SHARES OF RELIGIOUS POPULATION IN THE REPUBLICS OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND SUCCESSOR STATES



All the ex-Yugoslav countries undergoing de-secularising trends (that is, all with the exception of Slovenia) have also suffered relatively severe economic difficulties¹², which also makes it possible to look to the classical deprivation thesis as an additional explanation, particularly that version

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Macedonia is the only European country in which slightly more men than women claim to be religious (see: WVS 2001). This might be explained by the phenomenon of nationalism or politics being expressed through religion.

¹² Here, of course, we are not referring to the current global economic crisis that has also affected Slovenia, but to the sharp fall in GDP and the emergence of growing inequality (as expressed by the Gini inequality coefficient) which followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

recently rearticulated and given a new approach by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). It cannot be denied that the existential insecurity, exposed by Norris and Inglehart as a factor in increased religiosity and de-secularization, has in most parts of former Yugoslavia risen considerably, at least temporarily.

Lastly, we cannot deny that a part of the trend toward de-secularization could be attributed to religious mimicry, a phenomenon that the first author of this article presented in his book about human mimicry (Smrke, 2007): The disintegration of Yugoslavia, itself a land of high religious diversity, led to the creation of states that are more homogeneous in terms of religion. Within the framework of these new states, the traditionally dominant church presented itself as a potential source of considerable social power and legitimacy. Many have adapted to this new situation by simulating their adherence to or belief in the pre-eminent faith. In light of this it is possible to explain the numerous conversions¹³ of former communists and politicians. In many regards this phenomenon is merely the inverse of the dissimulation of religiosity, or the simulation of non-religiosity which occurred in the previous socialist era.

Slovenia and Croatia, two neighbouring ex-Yugoslav countries that are – in terms of religion – predominantly Roman Catholic, today reveal strong indications of emerging differences which are particularly interesting. The available data indicates that during the Yugoslav era, Slovenia and Croatia were very similar in terms of a number of religious indicators¹⁴, though now they have become very different. The difference lies not only in self-declared religious adherence and religiosity, but also in the degree of religiosity.

While only a minority of Slovene (self-declared) Catholics are orthodox and observant, Croatian Catholics tend, in terms of piety, to be more observant – thus Slovene Catholics are similar to those in the Czech Republic, while the Croats are more akin to the pious Poles.¹⁵ The differences in religiosity are certainly smaller than those between the (predominantly atheist) Czech

¹³ In this instance conversions do not refer to the relatively rare examples of baptism, but mostly to sudden or gradual public manifestations of religiosity.

¹⁴ According to the 1987 Klasno Biče Research Project, in the final years of socialist Yugoslavia, 38.9% of Slovenes and 41.9% of Croats were not religious; 27% of Slovenes and 27.4% of Croats had no religious affiliation; 22.3% of Slovenes and 24.8% of Croats agreed with the statement that it was necessary to accept the concept of god as an absolute truth. In all cases, the differences between the populations of the two countries were small.

¹⁵ The coefficient of orthodoxy amongst self-declared Catholics was calculated by measuring belief in ten doctrinal premises established by the Roman Catholic Church (believe in life after death, hell, heaven, personal God; refutation of abortion, euthanasia, suicide and adultery; disapproval of premarital sex and homosexuality). Data was mostly taken from EVS 1999/2000 research. The coefficient of orthodoxy in the case of Slovenia was 0.335, in the case of Croatia 0.557. As a comparison: the coefficient of orthodoxy amongst Czech Catholics is 0.370, and among Polish Catholics 0.630.

Republic and (Catholic) Slovakia (Froese, 2005); nevertheless, it is possible to observe yet another pair of European neighbours with considerable differences in the sphere of religion.

Slovenia and Croatia also differ in the degree of de-secularization at the societal level. In many aspects, Croatia is a re-catholicised society which, during these two decades of transition, has entered into four agreements with the Holy See. As a result the Roman Catholic Church became an important element of public and state institutions in Croatia, and thus it is today erroneous to speak of the separation of the church and state in its true sense. On the other hand, has Slovenia generally succeeded in upholding the separation of church and state (its relations with the Vatican being relatively weak), though in 2007 a new law about religious freedom was passed that, in our opinion, undermines the principle of separation of church and state (Smrke, 2008: 171–172).¹⁶

To cite just one example of differences between neighbouring states at the societal level: While confessional religious education was introduced into Croatian state schools following its independence from Yugoslavia, only elective religious education embracing world faiths was introduced in Slovenia (Smrke and Rakar, 2006). A visible sign of this difference is the crucifix in the classrooms of Croatian state schools, something which was not introduced in Slovenia. This comparison shows clearly how important the war (against an adversary with a different religious adherence) was a de-secularizing factor in Croatia. Croatia's prolonged war galvanized the alliance of nationalism and religion; indeed, said alliance was itself an important factor of the war. This was not the case in Slovenia, which, in the process of gaining independence in June 1991, experienced only a ten-day war. A further factor causing the difference between the two is the relative economic success of Slovenia: it is the only part of former Yugoslavia that is member of the OECD. Slovenia too might have followed such a path if its post-socialist transition been more economically challenging and led to a considerable or severe expression of social inequality – and consequently to an increased need for religious compensators. In view of the above is not necessary to explain the difference between these two republics of former Yugoslavia by way of the supply-side theory, which is occasionally critically applied by some authors in explaining the differences between other post-socialist states (Froese and Pfaff, 2001).

¹⁶ Consistent with expectations of Slovenia's few sociologists of religion, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia issued a 15th April 2010 decision that two articles of the Religious Freedom Act were incongruent with Article 7 of the Constitution, which stipulates separation of church and state. It seems that new legislation will need to be drafted.

Atheism's new social position: Revived expressions of defamation

All of the changes described above also express and define the social position of atheism and atheists. The first decade of transition in Eastern Europe saw a pronounced decline in the number of atheists. We calculate that during the 1990s this decline in the atheist population of Eastern Europe amounted to some thirty million people¹⁷. It seems that the proportion of atheists remained fairly unchanged only in the distinctly secular Czech Republic and East Germany, as well as in Estonia and Lithuania. As regards the territory of former Yugoslavia, the number of atheists dropped by more than two million (i.e. just over 10% of the population) during the 1990s. Slovenia, again, was the exception: changes were relatively insignificant, and it has by far the highest proportion of atheists among all the countries of former Yugoslavia.

The erstwhile privileged ideology – namely atheism of a Marxist or socialist type – has become socially marginalized in a number of post-socialist milieus, as is true of atheism in general. In particular some Orthodox states re-established state church conditions in which the church and theism are officially favoured by state institutions. Further to the concepts of Peter Berger (Berger, 1967), state institutions, which formerly supported and favoured atheism, have in many aspects (again) become plausibility structures of the (theistic) religious nomos. At the same time, politicians, often former communists, use theistic rhetoric in their public utterances, and former Yugoslav states are no exception in this.

During the socialist era atheism enjoyed the status of a privileged ideology and was considered a means of transcending the religious identities and sentiments that during World War II led to bloody inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts. Nowadays, in most ex-Yugoslav states, when the wounds caused by similar conflicts in the 1990s are not yet healed, the atheist conviction or ideology does not receive equal treatment to that of theism. Slovenia is once again an exception; nevertheless, a condition of complete equality is not entirely the case even in Slovenia.

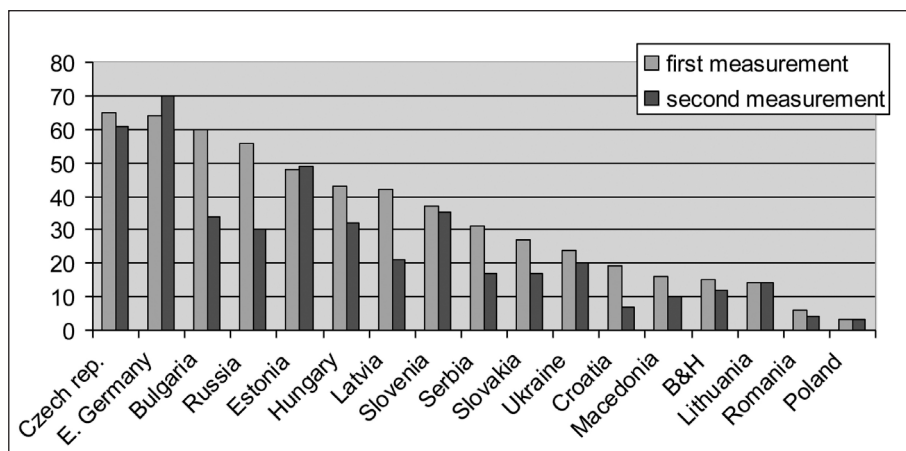
The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards atheists has also notably changed,¹⁸ and should be understood in the context of a tendency

¹⁷ The calculation is based on data provided by WVS: The established decline in the proportion of atheists was converted into actual numbers of inhabitants by considering the total populations of the discussed countries.

¹⁸ In addition to being a difficult task, the provision of a qualified opinion as to how the Catholic Church's general attitude towards atheism and atheists has evolved over the past two decades exceeds the terms and considerations of this research. It is, however, worthy of note that some recent ecclesiastic documents with reference to Vatican II, consider atheism to be evil. Chapter 5.5. of the 1999 reconciliation document entitled *Memory and Reconciliation* discusses atheism under the heading of *Our Responsibility for the Evils of Today* (Memory, 1999)

towards a revival of pre-Vatican II positions. Above all, the Catholic Church perceived the end of Communist Party rule as a historical victory for the Church, and some of its representatives even considered it a vindication of the Church's actions during World War Two¹⁹. Srđan Vrcan, a Croatian sociologist of religion, observed the revival of certain pre-Vatican II "set pieces", for example, from *ecclesiae christianae modesta* to *ecclesiae triumphans*, from *ecclesiae dialogans* to *ecclesiae militans*, from *ecclesiae semper reformanda* to *ecclesiae semper eadem*, and ultimately the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Vrcan, 2001: 250). Such re-orientations might be justly considered indicative of organizational de-secularization. The pre-Vatican II *status quo* spirit was also clearly expressed in the attitude toward atheism and atheists. While Vatican II intended to treat atheism *sine ira et studio* i.e. objectively, the Church is today renewing its attack on atheism in post-socialist countries. Some defamatory statements about atheism were so strident that the empirical validity of the most persistent claims is in need of examination.

Figure 2: SHARES OF ATHEIST POPULATION IN THE POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES IN THE '90S (WVS '92, '95/6 OR '99)



As a starting point, we will repeat some of the public statements made by Dr. Franc Rode, unquestionably Slovenia's most influential Catholic Bishop who was a Cardinal at the Vatican in charge of the office which oversees religious orders from 2004 to 2011.²⁰ During his 1997 to 2004 tenure as

¹⁹ It is important to note that in predominantly Catholic Slovenia and Croatia during World War Two a considerable portion of local churches and clergy, together with key elements of the Church hierarchy, entered into more or less obvious collaboration, either directly with the forces of occupation or with their local collaborators.

²⁰ Franc Rode has been the prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life since 2004.

Metropolitan Archbishop of Ljubljana, as well as at later points, Dr. Rode made a number of statements that precipitated a sharp reaction among Slovenia's secular intellectuals. Despite the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the fact that no clerics voiced opposition to Dr. Rode's views iterated below – it cannot be claimed that these are held by the entire clergy, and even less so by all Slovene Catholics. Further to which they have certainly not been held by all the Archbishops of Ljubljana during this era of transition. Nevertheless, it has been precisely such views that have most profoundly affected the opinions of the secular public and atheists as to the Catholic Church's opinion of atheism and atheists. In order to avoid any impression that Dr. Rode has been their only proponent, some views expounded by the leading Slovene Catholic academic, theologian and bibliacist Dr. Jože Krašovec are also included, as are some thoughts expressed by the most prolific Slovene lay Catholic columnist, Alojz Rebula.

1. Atheists are unhappy or are less happy than theists:

"This person [the atheist] has no existential joy or hope in life." (Rode in Jeklin, 1997: 46)

"While the religious person experiences life as a gift and a joy, the secularized person experiences only anxiety." (Rode, 2009: 36)

"Predicated upon the highest ideals of righteousness and fidelity faith is the only happiness there is /.../ non-belief, in other words insolence and impenitence, leads into damnation." (Krašovec in Kališnik, 1996: 9)

2. For atheists, life has no meaning:

"How does one approach a person [an atheist] who is not prepared to ask questions about the meaning of life, who instead grasps at infinite freedom and lives only in the turbulent present without hope of a future? /.../ How does one help this person [this atheist] to leave the universe of senselessness to which he is captive /.../." (Rode, 1997: 82–83)

"We are facing a change, and I see one of its signs in the demise of atheism /.../ Upon its radical malevolence (negativity) being laid bare, we may hope that Europeans shall recognize atheism as a prison of the heart and mind, and will realize that it cannot endow life with meaning." (Rode in "Prebliski", 1999)

"Why should /.../ only Christianity give meaning to life? This question is easy to answer. (1.) Because Christianity is most democratic /.../ (2.) Because only Christianity can provide overall meaning." (Rebula, 2001: 28)

3. Atheists are immoral/inhumane:

"Whoever visits the grave of his parents is not an atheist. Think about it: your father dies, you lay him out, and you carry him to the trash bin. That would be pure atheism." (Rode in Aleksič, 1999)

"Atheists and nonbelievers are in the minority [in Slovenia], but they have a leading role in the unrestrained disintegration of values, as values other than Christian ones do not exist in Slovenia." (Rode in Čokl, 2003)

"Secularized man does not accept God as the standard of truth and the guideline for an ethical life. /.../ Which brings us to Dostoyevsky's logical conclusion: 'If there is no God, anything is permitted.'" (Rode, 2009: 38)

"He who radically rejects God's authority and action, reacts to God's every intervention with a clearer sign of non-belief and impenitence. According to Holy Scripture, non-belief in the sense of impenitence is the sole obstacle to human salvation. /.../ There is no mercy for an impenitent nonbeliever, and nor can there be." (Krašovec in Kališnik, 1996: 4)

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4. Atheists feel less social solidarity because they do not honour the dignity of man:

"No world view other than the Christian faith contains such a high level of dignity for each human being." (Pastoral letter of the Slovenian bishops)

"I increasingly get the feeling that there are no real atheists. It is impossible to be a real atheist as the desire for that which is divine is the essence of our nature. If we have been victim to an atheist upbringing, we have been fatally maimed." (Krašovec in Petrovčič, 1996: 42)

It appeared that Cardinal Rode, and others, were reviving what C. Campbell described in *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (Campbell, 1971: 15) as 'Victorian prejudices against atheism'.²¹ However, in contrast to the 19th century, such theses can nowadays be examined empirically, verified against data regarding self-assessed religiosity, happiness, perception as to the meaning of life, moral judgements and attitude towards social minorities.

²¹ During this period of transition, there have been four Metropolitan Archbishops of Ljubljana: Alojzij Šuštar (1980–1997), Franc Rode (1997–2004) the first Archbishop to be appointed following the end of communist party rule, Alojzij Uran (2004–2009) and Anton Stres (2010–).

Research: What Are (Slovene) Atheists Really Like?

For the purpose of this research, the above statements were transformed into the following verifiable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:

In Slovenia, atheists exhibit a significantly lower level of self-declared happiness than theists.

Hypothesis 2:

In Slovenia, atheists exhibit a significantly lower sense of the meaning to life than theists.

Hypothesis 3:

In Slovenia, atheists exhibit a considerably lower level of moral rigour than theists.

Hypothesis 4:

In Slovenia, the religious exhibit a significantly lower degree of social distance in relation to social minorities than the non-religious or atheists.

Suitable variables taken from ISSP, EVS and WVS research studies were taken as indicators.

Independent variables:

As regards (self-defined) atheism, those variables which measure belief and non-belief in god were considered. The ISSP²², EVS²³ and WVS research studies differentiate between various types and degrees of intensity of atheist conviction. This paper considers the following distinctions:

1. *Convinced atheists* are those who, when asked about their religious convictions and offered three possible answers – believer, non-believer, convinced atheist – choose convinced atheist (EVS, v 110; WVS, v 187);
2. *Atheists* are those who do not express a belief in god: When asked if they believe in god, their answer is negative (EVS, v 115; WVS, v F050);
3. *Natural atheists* and *Personal atheists*: Natural atheists are those who, in the ISSP survey (ISSP 1998, v 38; ISSP 2008, v 34), choose the option “I do

²² ISSP – International Social Survey Programme: Religion I (1991), Religion II (1998). Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung. The ISSP 2008 data for Slovenia was obtained from SJM 2009, Slovene Public Opinion Poll.

²³ EVS – European Values Study 1999/2000 (Release 2, May 2006) – Integrated Dataset (<http://zacat.gesis/webview/index.jps>).

not believe, and have never believed, in god”; personal atheists are those who choose the option “I once believed in god, but no longer do”.

A further comparison was drawn between those theists who claim to have always believed in god (socializational theists), and those who have made a conscious personal decision in life to believe in god (personal theists).

The Slovenian population has – in comparison to the neighbouring countries – a considerably high proportion of atheists²⁴, and this number remained stable during the era of post-socialist transition. The percentage of atheists is in the region of 34.8% to 37% (WVS 1999 and EVS 1999/2000); the percentage of natural atheists is cca. 19.1%, and personal atheists 11.3% (ISSP 2008); the percentage of convinced atheists is in the region of 8.8% to 11% (EVS 1999/2000 and EVS 2008). In this regard, Slovenia is close to the European average, which – according to our calculations – accounts for about one-third of the population.²⁵

Dependant variables:

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As regards the indicators of happiness, the variable regarding self-assessed happiness from ISSP 1991, 1998 and 2008 was considered: How happy would you say you are? (ISSP 1998, v 4; ISSP 2008, v 6).

Five variables were taken from ISSP 1991, 1998 and 2008, as regards perception as to the meaning of life – agreement or disagreement with such statements as: People can do little to change life (ISSP 1998, v 45); Life is meaningful because god exists (ISSP 1998, v 46); Life does not serve any purpose (ISSP 1998, v 47; ISSP 2008, v 45); Life is meaningful if you provide meaning yourself (ISSP 1998, v 48); We each create our own fate (ISSP 1998, v 49).

As regards moral rigour and permissiveness, 11 variables from among the numerous morality variables measured by EVS 1999/2000 and EVS 2008 were applied: Do you justify: claiming state benefits (v 225; EVS 2008, v 233); cheating on tax (v 226; EVS 2008, 234); accepting a bribe (v 231; EVS 2008, v 234); throwing away a litter (v 237); smoking in public buildings (v 241);

²⁴ It is worth noting that notions of god held by Slovene theists are relatively unorthodox – to the degree that more than one-third of theists depart from the definition of god as a person, which is typical to the Catholic Church. According to ISSP 1998, only 39.4% of Slovenes believe in personal god.

²⁵ If we convert the percentages of those Europeans who denied belief in god in the ISSP 1998 survey into actual numbers, it suggests that of the 710 million inhabitants of Europe (including all of Russia), some 238 million – i.e. 33.6% – are atheists. Such figures, of course, differ entirely from those estimations provided in, for example, Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (Barrett et al., 2001: 14). In its non-scientific assessment that Europe's atheists account at a mere 3.1% of the total population, said encyclopaedia is, in our opinion, unobjective.

joyriding (v 227; EVS 2008, v 235); driving under the influence of alcohol (238); speeding over limits in built-up areas (v 242); having casual sex (v 240); adultery (v 230); lying in own interest (v 229, EVS 2008, v 237). Moral rigour and permissiveness were thus measured in the spheres of citizenship (v 225, v 226, v 231), the environment (v 237, v 241), traffic (v 227, v 238, v 242), sexual activity (v 230, v 240) and general morality (v 229).

As regards social distance, results in relation to seven selected minorities were drawn from EVS 1999/2000 and EVS 2008: I would not like to have as neighbours: people of a different race (v 53; v 47); Muslims (v 59; v 53); immigrants or foreign workers (v 60; v 54); people with AIDS (v 61; v 55); homosexuals (v 63; v 57), Jews (v 64; v 58), and Gypsies/Roma (v 65; v 59). In measuring social distance towards Muslims and foreign workers, distance was also measured to those hailing from the Western Balkans, who are not a separate category in the EVS survey research. Muslims and foreign workers in Slovenia for the most part emanate from the former Yugoslavia.

To verify the hypotheses, simple cross-tabulations of variations of the independent variable (atheism) with dependable variables, suffice. The aim is to verify and examine certain states as opposed to any possible causal correlation of the results.

The Results:

Atheists do not empirically vindicate the Church's / Dr. Rode's theses

1. *Atheism and happiness*: According to data from ISSP 1991, ISSP 1998, ISSP 2008, as well as from EVS 1999/2000, EVS 2008 and WVS 2005, Slovene atheists express a higher self-assessment as regards the level of their happiness than theists do. This was especially true of natural atheists and those who had received no religious education.
2. *(A)theism and perception as to the meaning of life*: All survey cross-tabulations (ISSP 1991, ISSP 1998, ISSP 2008) of perception as to the meaning of life as well as variables about belief in god, reveal that Slovene atheists did not subjectively experience less meaning to their lives than the theist population or the public at large. Atheists differ from theists in that they consistently reject the connection of the meaning of life to the existence of god²⁶, however, they tend to strongly emphasize the role of each individual in creating meaning in their own lives. Natural atheists, in particular, as well as those who reported no religious education, resist the notion that life has no meaning considerably more strongly than theists.

²⁶ It is interesting to note that this connection is not widely expressed even among Slovenian theists.

Figure 3: HAPPINESS AND (A)THEISM IN SLOVENIA

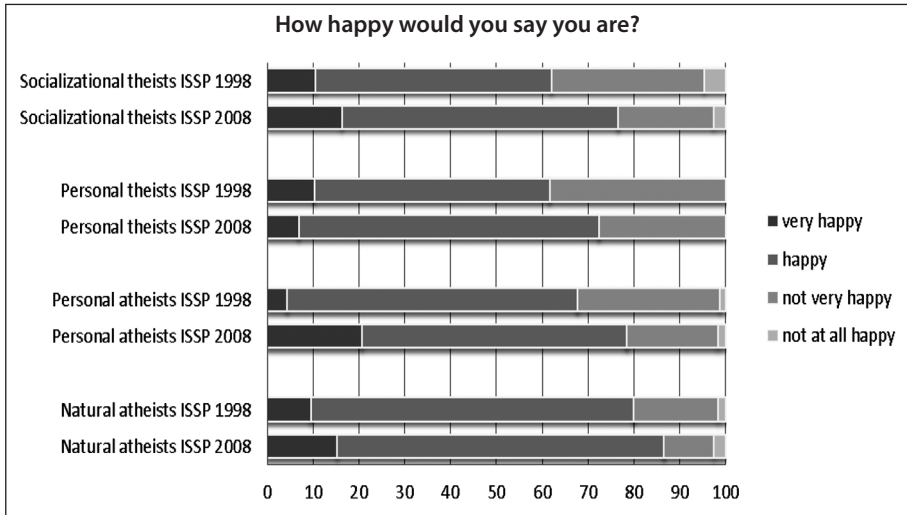
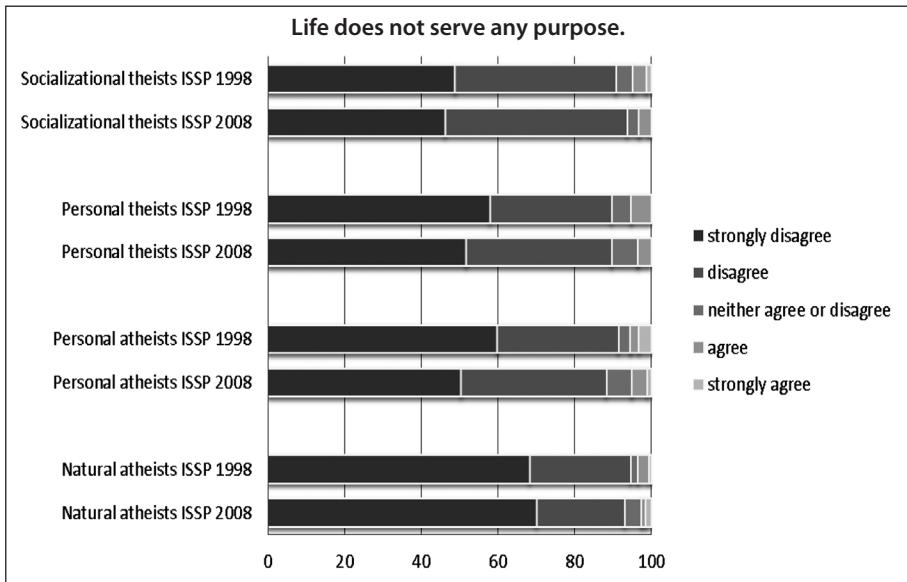


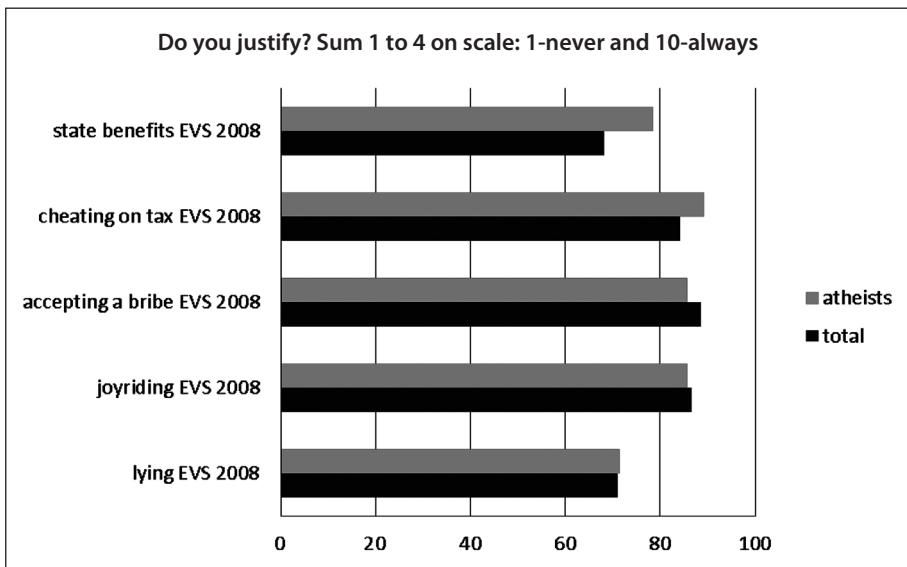
Figure 4: (A)THEISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE IN SLOVENIA



3. *(A)theism and morality*: In comparison to the general population, convinced atheists in Slovenia are apparently no more morally permissive than others. According to selected indicators, their citizenship morals are above average, their environmental morals are average, their traffic morals above average, and they are more sexually permissive than average. Convinced atheists are slightly above average in terms of general

morality. In all instances the differences are insignificant. Figure 5 compares the morality of atheists to the population at large in the segment of young adults, which is – in opinion of Slovenia's Roman Catholic Church – particularly morally problematic. The cross tabulation of variables as to belief and non-belief in god, using Inglehart's *post-materialist 12-item index* (WVS 2005, v Y001) also reveals that theists in Slovenia display a more materialistic orientation than atheists, who exhibit more post-materialist orientations.

Figure 5: MORAL RIGOUR AMONG ATHEISTS IN THE 18–25 AGE GROUP IN SLOVENIA.



4. *A/theism and (social) distance to minorities*: A cross-tabulation of the variables indicates that in Slovenia convinced atheists are the least distanced from social minorities, while the greatest distance is expressed by believers. In all seven instances, convinced atheists express less distance in relation to the identified minorities than the European average in 1998; the distance expressed by those who define themselves as religious is above the European average in relation to all seven social minorities in 1998. Linear regression analysis, which was considered in relation to others factors – such as education, age, gender, community (rural, village, town, city) – reveals that religiosity is important factor in social distance with regard to minorities (0.163; sig. < 0.01) (Smrke, Hafner-Fink, 2008).

Table II: (NON)BELIEF AND EXPRESSED SOCIAL DISTANCE FROM SEVEN SOCIAL MINORITIES IN SLOVENIA

<i>Are you religious?</i>	religious		nonreligious		convinced atheist		European mean	
<i>Don't like as neighbours</i>	1999	2008	1999	2008	1999	2008	1999	2008
People of foreign race	14,5	27,5	5,6	29,2	2,5	21,7	11,8	16,1
Muslims	26,6	29,3	12,7	26,7	11,4	21,7	18,5	21,0
Foreign workers	19,2	28,2	7,1	27,7	7,6	21,0	14,3	19,3
People with AIDS	38,2	29,5	17,8	27,7	24,1	23,8	29,7	35,3
Homosexuals	51,5	36,0	27,9	30,2	29,1	28,7	33,7	38,7
Jews	21,1	28,1	7,6	25,2	5,1	23,1	11,4	16,0
Gypsies	41,5	39,4	26,4	34,7	24,1	32,9	38,6	37,2

Source: EVS 1999/2008

Conclusion

All of the above hypotheses were rejected. This being the case, it is necessary to briefly address the following questions:

1. Why are the results so? And how can we interpret them sociologically?
2. How, in this light, should we understand the Church's / Dr. Rode's erroneous and misleading statements about atheists?
3. What can we expect from such comparisons of ex-Yugoslav states as regards the established differences in the degree of de-secularization occurring during the post-socialist transition?

Discussion

The results obtained should not be generalized across a broader geographic area: the links and correlations probably vary from society to society; such is, after all, confirmed by a number of other research projects addressing these same issues and questions. At the same time, however, the Slovene results should be addressed and considered in a wider European context, or an attempted overall address of the subject in general. The dialectics between the secular/atheistic segment of society and the theist/religious segment are, in our opinion, conditioned by historical developments, the character of specific (ir)religious ideologies and organizations, as well as a whole series of other factors.

1. Some factors and circumstances which may explain the results

Slovenian secularism and atheism emerged on the historical scene in opposition to the centuries-long ideological monopoly of the Roman

Catholic Church. At first secularism and atheism were merely a small part of a wider “anti-clerical” pole in the country’s social polarization, which David Martin recognized as an important characteristic of the Latin (i.e. Catholic) religio-cultural pattern (Martin, 1978: 36– 41). The intensity of this polarization was for the large part a consequence of “postponed” secularization at the societal level, and the manifestly privileged social position enjoyed by the Church.

When Axis forces invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, the erstwhile polarization escalated into a confrontation: secularism and atheism were given a historical opportunity. Their ideological and organizational forces – foremost amongst which was the Communist Party – acted to oust the fascist occupation, this in contrast to a considerable proportion of the local Churches (in Slovenia and Yugoslavia alike) which entered into collaboration. The anti-clerical forces in society were ultimately on the same side as the victors in this world war, and were thus provided an opportunity to realize the idea of radical societal secularization. After the war, the Catholic ideological hegemony among Slovenes was replaced by a similarly all-encompassing secularist monopoly in the form of Yugoslav socialism. A sizeable segment of secular Slovenes and atheists was created during the 45 years of socialism. Following Yugoslavia’s dramatic ideological severance from the Soviet Union in 1948, its consequent development was in many respects different from elsewhere in the socialist world.

In Slovenia both discussed segments of society – secular and atheist – outlived their historic socialist manifestations; after all, in the end both perceived socialism as a spent force. It is by all means of importance that the project of Slovene independence was led by political forces which, although heterogeneous, were predominantly secular. Religion and the Roman Catholic Church undoubtedly played no leading role. This too is a reason why atheists in Slovenia did not become a cognitive minority in society in the post-socialist era of transition. Had atheists become a distinctive cognitive minority, one might have anticipated different results, particularly as regards their self-assessed happiness and perception as to the meaning of life.

The value habitus of Slovene Catholicism in the interwar period was pre-modern and traditionalistic. Its attitude towards discussed topics of happiness, the meaning of life, morals and attitude towards that which is different, was rigid and remorselessly uncompromising. In the light of the traditional eudaemonistic pessimism which prevailed in these lands in the pre-WWII era, a number of Cardinal Archbishop Rode’s reproaches of atheists appear curious. The *Life of Saints* (1906–8) – the literary diet of Slovene Catholics before World War Two – extols that “*No other way leads to heaven, save the one of suffering!*” (Rogač, 1906 – 1908: 491), or as John 12:25 puts it “*He*

who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will be given eternal life, which is indeed characteristically reflected in the traditional Catholic attitude towards happiness. The Catholic was to be oriented towards other-worldly happiness, in the context of which (traditional) Catholicism could be ranged among world-renouncing religions. Similarly, the meaning of life for a Catholic was to be rigidly connected with God and the Church, or in other words: any autonomous role of the individual and their capacity to determine and create meaning to life for themselves was refuted.

Catholic morals in pre-WWII Slovenia were not the ethics of an enlightened version of Christianity, but rather the conservative morality of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, which was particularly out of touch with life as regards sexuality. Likewise, the ethic of reciprocity "Love thy neighbour" had no particular universal connotation, but was intended parochially in its application within the community of fellow Catholics. Pre-WWII Catholic morality and the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards that which was *different* is well illustrated through its standpoint on mixed marriages – i.e. any marriage between a Catholic and a non-Catholic was a "moral evil".

It should also be noted that the official perspective of the Roman Catholic Church towards some social minorities – which were earlier considered in the measurement of social distance (homosexuals, Muslims, Jews) – were habitually, and until recently, discriminatory. Such traditionally conservative views were partially eclipsed by time and, in particular, by Vatican II, but they were nevertheless not eliminated in their entirety. Slovene bishops have caused a deal of controversy over recent years through their public criticism of some minorities and groups in society: for example in relation to the equality of rights of homosexuals.²⁷ The bishops have also long conveyed their opposition to the building of a mosque, which is much needed by some 50,000 Muslims living in Slovenia. Although their right to a place of worship is no longer opposed, it was not that long ago that the Islamic community lodged an official protest against a statement made by Dr. Rode.²⁸

²⁷ On several occasions Franc Rode expressed himself contemptuously with regard to homosexuals; for instance in one statement he said that any openly homosexual cleric would be suspended from the Roman Catholic Church. His successor, Alojzij Uran, defined homosexual practises as a sin (Trampuž, 2005: 34). Save for some smaller political groups, such as the Slovene National Party (SNS), homosexuals have no problems in this regard.

²⁸ In a Christmas interview on Pop TV (24. 12. 2002) Dr. Rode expressed his reservations towards the construction of a mosque, claiming that such would be a political centre, whereas a church is a spiritual centre. His statement provoked a protest from Mufti Osman Đogić, leader of Slovenia's Islamic community. In an interview for the weekly magazine Mladina, Rode's successor, Alojzij Uran, defended his own opposition to a mosque as "his right" (Trampuž, 2005: 35). Furthermore, as he had previously (Maličev, 2004: 3) Uran expressed his support for Muslim oratories as a more suitable solution. Only in 2010 did Slovenia's Roman Catholic Church change its view on the subject.

The Roman Catholic Church also reacted oddly with regard to the issue of the so called “erased” – i.e. some 18,000 citizens of other former republics of former Yugoslavia who, following Slovenia’s declaration of independence, were unilaterally removed from the registry of permanent residence, thus alienating them from their social, civil and political rights in Slovenia. Prior to the introduction of a law remedying this injustice by a left of centre government in 2010, the Roman Catholic Church had remained singularly silent on the subject. In the light of all this, the results of this research should not be surprising; rather, they should be expected.

The value habitus of Slovene (and Yugoslav) secularism and atheism was in many respects presented as a historical counterweight to the Catholic religious tradition. Numerous aspects of Yugoslavia’s socialist civil religion could be considered a world-affirming secular religion, which was declaratively oriented towards happiness in this world. Atheistic as it was, it was – in contrast with the Catholic tradition – optimistic, defining the meaning of life naturalistically and objectively in the sense of a specifically understood social progress.

Acting like a conservative church, Yugoslavia’s socialist civil religion at first rigidly confined the meaning of life in a framework of social goals determined by the Communist Party; however, it gradually allowed more autonomy for the individual. A program of transformation of the national character, which was particularly emphasized by Slovene socialism, predicted a fight against a series of traditional Catholic values – especially those of self-denial and humility. Values and dogmas such as fraternity and unity among nations were used to surpass the parochialism of ethnic religions: religiously and nationally mixed marriages were, for example, considered positive rather than evil. In its attitude towards social minorities, Yugoslav socialism began to abandon its prejudices and discrimination earlier than the nation’s churches did. It would be surprising if the post-socialist versions of secularism and atheism would not in some way continue such a legacy, and advocate these advantages over church traditions. This is not to say that some secular and avowedly anti-clerical politically-ideological groups do not deviate from the average I aim to ascertain through this study. More thorough research, that would itself take into consideration the heterogeneity of secularists, atheists and theists, would reveal a diversity which has, herein, been deliberately neglected.

It should also be noted that Slovenian atheists generally occupy social positions that certainly influence some of the qualities being analysed in this paper: they have a higher than average levels of education (Smrke and Uhan, 1999: 153) and assets, and are generally younger than Slovene theists. According to Flere and Klanjšek, in Europe in general there is a significant inverse relationship between social status (measured on the basis of income

per capita) and belief in god. Indeed, in Slovenia this inverse relationship is the highest in Europe (-0.275 ; $p < 0.001$) (Flere and Klanjšek, 2009).

2. How should the Church's / Dr. Rode's statements be understood?

The theses about atheists and atheism addressed herein are mostly arbitrary ideological deductions that are not grounded in any actual or perceived state, nor are they an inductive interpretation of "the signs of the times" as defined by Vatican II. In post-socialist countries, such notions received impetus as a consequence of the fall of erstwhile atheist regimes, which local church authorities understood as an opportunity for a grand come-back. They are an expression of the arrogance to which everyone who has witnessed the defeat of their old enemies is susceptible.

In this context, we must also take into account the frustration felt by the ecclesiastic establishment during the socialist era when religious life was restricted. The harshest views on atheism are likely to be spurred by personal history, experience and resentment.²⁹

Attributing atheism with such traits as unhappiness, immorality, lacking in social solidarity and devoid of reflection, might also be understood as a very specific variant of what C. Campbell identified as the problem-creating function of religion (Campbell, 1971: 136). When Church organizations successfully conflate defective character with "godlessness", the Church's power in society is accordingly augmented in accordance with its apparent veneer of social necessity. In this context, the tirades of Victorian prejudice against atheism can be understood as a specific strategy aimed at increasing the Church's social authority and privileges.

The application of such a strategy can be interpreted as an erroneous answer to growing competition in the faith market. Slovenia, like most other post-socialist states, is not only undergoing gradual religious pluralization, but also exhibits numerous signs of easternization as defined by C. Campbell (Campbell, 2007). While the most recent census detected a decline in the percentage of self-defined Catholics,³⁰ it is also obvious that an increasing number of Slovenes look east for the fulfilment of their spiritual needs (Črnič and Lesjak, 2006). However, rather than addressing initiatives and demands for change from its adherents, and rather than searching for answers to the challenges posed by its competition, the Roman Catholic

²⁹ All three authors, whose opinions on atheism were taken as a starting point for this discussion, had problems with the previous regime: Rode's stems from the post WWII anti-communist emigration; in 1984 Krasovec was sentenced to a month in prison for publishing his thoughts on atheism (Mojzes, 1992: 360); Rebula (then living in Trieste in Italy) was also a co-publisher of dissident literature.

³⁰ The percentage of self-defined Catholics in the 1991 census was 71.6%; in the 2002 census it had fallen by thirteen percentage points to only 57.8%.

Church has misguidedly set about its customary defamation of atheism. Thus the attitude of the Catholic Church towards atheists and atheism reveals more about its own problems in understanding its role in society than it does about atheists.

3. Further analyses in the future

The post-socialist evolution of the countries of former Yugoslavia has engendered vastly disparate changes in the sphere of religion, and as such they can be perceived as a living laboratory in which any number of social theories may be tested. Further to this analysis of Slovenia, any comparative study into the position of atheists in each of these states would undoubtedly be of particular interest. Due to the gradual and only recent inclusion of the largest portion of ex-Yugoslav states into international WVS, EVS and ISSP studies, any full-scale comparison with Slovenia is not yet possible. When such comparisons become feasible, the hypotheses of a study should be phrased with regard to the differences in the intensity of de-secularization, which is itself discussed in the introductory section of this paper. It would be even more ambitious and demanding to attempt a full-scale comparison of the situation of atheists in those few post-communist states which have not undergone any processes of de-secularization with those in which de-secularization is most evident.

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