

Varieties of Religiosity in V4 Societies

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There are several reasons for trying to compare the four countries of the so-called V4 societies (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). It is not just that they are neighboring countries that were part of one state formation a century ago and feel a certain closeness to each other – despite various tensions. They also provide an interesting and contrasting picture of the great differences regarding the presence/absence of religion (spirituality) in their territory at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is precisely the large differences we see in a relatively small geographical area that alerts us to the fact that when considering the religious profile of a given country, we must take into account not only the global context (better said, the European-American and, specifically, European contexts), but also local factors. The latter may influence the global factors to a certain extent, and with a certain delay. No matter how much the limited validity of the secularization thesis is emphasized nowadays, we can see that it is largely valid with regard to a large part of Europe, at least as far as the external manifestations of the traditional major religions are concerned.

Data View

Virtually all the data collected in the European Values Study (2017) show the long-known and almost trivial fact that Poland and Slovakia maintain higher levels of religiosity and attachment to their denominational structures when compared with the other two V4 societies (Czech Republic and Hungary).

Question: “Do you belong to a religious denomination?”

(in percentages):	YES	NO
Czech Republic	26.4	72.6
Hungary	46.2	52.4
Poland	91.2	7.8
Slovakia	74.9	24.4

Question: “Do you believe in God?”

(in percentages):	YES	NO
Czech Republic	31.4	49.9
Hungary	65.2	26.6
Poland	90	6.7
Slovakia	71.4	21.2

As we will see below, answers to the question of how they imagine God differ among the four countries. For example, only 6.5 percent of Czechs believe in a personal God, while 31.4 percent of the respondents simply say they believe in God.

Question: “How often do you pray?”

(in percentages):	EVERY DAY	NEVER
Czech Republic	10.5	62.7
Hungary	18.1	33.9
Poland	44.1	10.4
Slovakia	27.4	23.9

These data do not allow us to know whether respondents do not imagine prayer as merely a formal activity, such as the use of a pre-given liturgical or other text. Perhaps they engage in some actions that could be included in the concept of prayer in a broader sense, for example, some form of meditation. The definition from Britannica.com shows how broad the concept of prayer can be:

Prayer, an act of communication by humans with the sacred or holy-God, the gods, the transcendent realm, or supernatural powers. Found in all religions at all times, prayer may be a corporate or personal act utilizing various forms and techniques. Prayer has been described in its sublimity as ‘an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation held alone with the Beloved’ by St. Teresa of Ávila, a 16th-century Spanish mystic.¹

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, of course, gives a narrower definition:

Prayer is spiritual communication between man and God, a two-way relationship in which man should not only talk to God but also listen to Him. Prayer to God is like a child’s conversation with his father. It is natural for a child to ask his father for the things he needs.²

Czechia – The Leader in Secularization

The Czech Republic clearly leads in the departure from official religious structures and dogmatically established contents of the faith. At the same

¹ Britannica, “Prayer,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prayer> (accessed March 13, 2023).

² Billy Graham, “What is prayer?,” <https://billygraham.org/answer/what-is-prayer/> (accessed March 13, 2023).

time, it is obvious how different the two parts of former Czechoslovakia are in this respect.

As a *pars pro toto* example, we can look at the specifics of the Czech Republic, which can serve as a basis for comparison with other V4 societies.

Regarding the form and fate of various church structures and the influence of church institutions on the life of society and individuals, the Czech Republic, in particular, is one of the most secularized places on the European continent. The reason is because more distant historical events led to a certain split in the national consciousness, which refers to the period of the Hussite wars in the fifteenth century, the forced re-Catholization in the sixteenth century, and the occupation of High Church positions by people of German nationality during the existence of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (while the so-called lower clergy was Czech). This problem of the contradiction between loyalty to the nation and a church is unknown to believers in Poland or Slovakia. The Bohemian lands within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy belonged to those areas that underwent industrialization relatively early and the associated population movements from rural to urban areas and changes in the social structure.

All these factors, social and psychological, then acted simultaneously. The last significant intervention was the removal of approximately three million Sudeten Germans from the Czechoslovak borderlands after the Second World War. This caused further disruption of traditional social ties, as people with no connection to a specific place came to the emptied part and, if they had formally belonged to a church in their original community, they lost this awareness when they moved to a new place.

After the communist takeover in 1948, the communist regime succeeded in destroying several organizational church structures, which affected especially the Catholic Church, whose style of pastoral care relied heavily on religious orders, schools, associations, and the press. Communist propaganda sought to erase the presence of religion from the consciousness of society. The loss of the possibility to act through the press, books, and radio meant that Christians became invisible.

The severely limited and practically non-existent possibility to travel to Western countries also made contact and exchange with the new and Christian thinking that had to deal with the problem of secularization after the Second World War very difficult.

It is obvious that the period of the communist dictatorship with its atheistic ideology was very destructive for the Czech Church and that this experience could not but have had an impact on its situation in the democratic society after the fall of communism [...]. To understand the subsequent development, however, it is necessary not to obscure the fact that in the Church there were not only

victims and martyrs, but also people prepared to compromise with the new power and even collaborators with the communist regime.³

After the end of the communist regime in 1989, the potential created by believers in non-public church structures was not even used. The communist regime succeeded in entrenching in the people the awareness that Christianity was a matter of pre-scientific or anti-scientific thinking and that, in the Czech environment in particular, religion was part of anti-national oppression. Although the official proclamation of this propaganda has ended, these ideas have automatically been passed on to the next generation.

The Shift of Secularization over Time

Other data shows us a phenomenon that we could call a shift of secularization over time.

Question: “Did you (previously) belong to a religious denomination?”

(in percentages – valid percent):	YES	NO
Czech Republic	11.2	88.8
Hungary	13.7	86.3
Poland	67	33
Slovakia	14	86

Here it is evident that Poland’s rate of non-members is several times higher than those who were once members but are no longer. We can probably interpret this to mean that in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, due to circumstances in those countries, those who wanted to leave have already left. Likewise, those who have not yet succumbed to secularization pressure are probably more immune to it. The rate of erosion of affiliation is higher in traditional religious societies. However, one would have to examine more closely what the statement “they were formerly members” means. Was it merely formal membership, i.e., they were entered in some church registers? Or were they at least involved, to some extent, in the practice of their religious beliefs?

Other surveys also show that the process of secularization is continuing in Poland and Slovakia. For example, in Poland, a study by the Centre for Social Prevention says that young people’s attitudes towards churches and religion are determined more by current events, especially those shrouded in scandal, than by deeply religious matters.⁴ This research was carried out by a research team led by sociologists Mariusz Jędrzejko (also a teacher) and

³ Petr Fiala, *Laboratoř sekularizace. Náboženství a politika v ne-náboženské společnosti: český případ* (Brno: CDK, 2007), 39; translation by the author.

⁴ “Sonda: Co modzi Polacy sdz o Kosciele?” [Young People Running Away from Church], *Warsaw: Rzeczpospolita Daily*, March 17, 2021, <http://www.pl/kosciol/art224801-sondaz-co-mlodzi-polacy-sadza-o-kosciele> (accessed March 13, 2023).

Tomasz Kozłowski. According to the study, 1,051 teenagers aged 14 to 18 from all over the country were interviewed about religious issues and social problems, including pathologies in the Catholic Church. It turns out that more than 62% of young people consider themselves religious, but a third do not. At the same time, 59% of them say their religiosity has weakened in the past two years. One in five respondents admitted they had stopped going to Sunday Mass, and it was not because of the pandemic.

Up to 64.8% of young people see the reasons for the change in their religiosity in the inconsistency between what religion says and what the Church does. Slightly fewer, 63%, say that the Church does not respond adequately to pedophilia in its ranks. 43.2% are bothered by the Church’s involvement in politics and 41.2% by the ostentation and unjustified wealth of Church representatives. 38.9% say that the Church does not understand the needs of young people and 34.7% say that the Church does not understand the modern world. 31.4%, or almost one in three respondents, also state the Church’s inappropriate attitude towards civil partnerships and abortion as a reason for their change in religiosity, and 28.9% say the reason is due to the Church’s lack of involvement in the affairs of ordinary people.

The young people also defined their future relationship with the Church. More than half of them, 51.1%, emphasize that they want to bring up their children in the faith in which they were brought up. However, 13.9% of respondents say that their future relationship with the Church would be more formal, but that they would hold traditional celebrations. 28.8%, almost one in three respondents, intend to give up participation in religious life.

Up to 72.8% of respondents do not trust the Polish hierarchy to reform the Church and regain its authority. They trust Pope Francis – 71% believe he wants to reform the Church and eliminate pathologies. For half of those surveyed, Francis is a moral authority.⁵

Worship Attendance

For data on worship attendance rates, we can select data that may indicate how large the hard core religious communities are.

Question: “How often do you attend religious services?”

(in percentages):	MORE THAN ONCE A WEEK	ONCE A WEEK
Czech Republic	1.4	5.2
Hungary	1.8	9.1
Poland	6.4	42.6
Slovakia	7.3	23.7

⁵ Onet Wiadomosci, “Sondaż: młodzi ludzie w Polsce mniej religijni i bardziej krytyczni wobec Kościoła,” <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/sondaz-religijnosc-wsrod-mlodych-i-stosunek-do-kosciola/7b70jn6> (accessed March 13, 2023).

As we know from other sources, Roman Catholics are the largest religious group in all these V4 societies. Since the Catholic Church requires its members to attend Sunday services at least once a week, participation/non-participation can be considered with high probability as a measure of loyalty to the Church's authority. (There is also a secular analogy where a weekly rhythm is required for an action to be effective: work meetings, publication of periodicals, attendance at psychotherapy, scout meetings, etc.)

According to a survey of worshippers conducted by the Czech Bishops' Conference in October 2019, 375 000 people attend church at least once a week in the Czech Republic, which is 8.2% of the Catholic baptized in the Czech Republic. Almost one-fifth of the attendees are young people under the age of 20. The result of the poll, which is organized by the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic once every 5 years, corresponds to opinion polls, according to which 5% of respondents indicate that they go to church regularly once a week.

Religious and Nonreligious Persons

The mere affiliation to a religious denomination that respondents declare is a matter of form. Following the principle that faith is known by deeds, we can look at what respondents say they practice and what they think.

Question: "Are you a religious person?"
(respondents answered by selecting one of three options)

(in percentages):	YES	NONRELIGIOUS	I AM A CONVINCED ATHEIST
Czech Republic	34.2	44.9	12
Hungary	53.9	36.1	6.9
Poland	83.5	9.7	3.3
Slovakia	73.6	17.9	4.7

These answers are among the most interesting findings because they confirm that there are very few convinced atheists. Self-identification as a nonreligious person then means something different from atheism. We can assume that nonreligious persons have their own conception of spirituality but do not accept the pronouncements of official religious authorities.

But the concept is complicated and highly vague. According to Merriam-Webster.com, synonyms for nonreligious are "churchless, unchurched, heathen, pagan, paganish, ungodly, unholy, blasphemous, impious, irreverent, profane, sacrilegious, agnostic, atheistic, unconsecrated, unhalloved, profane, secular, temporal, worldly."⁶ Without qualitative research, we will not know where to place an individual respondent.

⁶ Webster Dictionary, "Nonreligious," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/nonreligious> (accessed March 13, 2023).

Ideas about God

The previous question about whether someone is religious/nonreligious/convinced atheist is probably related to the concept of God. A high percentage of people in the Czech Republic do not believe in a personal God, as would be consistent with the Christian tradition, but imagine God in some other way.

Question: “Which statement is closest to your beliefs?”
(in percentages):

which statement closest to your beliefs (Q20)						
country code (ISO 3166-1 Alpha-2 code)		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Czechia	Valid	personal God	117	6,5	7,1	7,1
		spirit or life force	672	37,1	40,5	47,6
		don't know	403	22,3	24,3	71,9
		what to think	467	25,8	28,1	100
		no spirit, God or life force	1659	91,6	100	
	Missing	no answer	54	3		
		dont know	98	5,4		
		Total	152	8,4		
	Total		1811	100		
	Hungary	Valid	personal God	497	32,8	33,8
spirit or life force			454	30	30,8	64,6
don't know			255	16,8	17,3	81,9
what to think			266	17,6	18,1	100
no spirit, God or life force			1472	97,2	100	
Missing		no answer	25	1,7		
		dont know	17	1,1		
		Total	42	2,8		
Total			1514	100		
Total		no answer	25	1,7		
	dont know	17	1,1			
	Total	42	2,8			
	Total	1514	100			
Poland	Valid	personal God	845	62,5	65	65
		spirit or life force	232	17,2	17,8	82,8
		don't know	154	11,4	11,8	94,7
		what to think	69	5,1	5,3	100
		no spirit, God or life force	1300	96,2	100	
	Missing	no answer	10	0,7		
		dont know	42	3,1		
		Total	52	3,8		
	Total		1352	100		
	Slovakia	Valid	personal God	524	36,6	38,4
spirit or life force			487	34	35,7	74,1
don't know			186	13	13,6	87,7
what to think			168	11,7	12,3	100
no spirit, God or life force			1365	95,3	100	
Missing		no answer	40	2,8		
		dont know	27	1,9		
		Total	67	4,7		
Total			1432	100		

Several questions should be asked here. For example, why is it that 12% of the respondents from the Czech Republic are convinced atheists, while 25.8% claim that there is no God as a spirit or life force. We see a similar contradiction in Hungary.

At the same time, it is obvious that a high percentage of people, even in secularized societies, have an idea of a God, but do not want to give God any dogmatic attributes. We cannot expect nonreligious persons to be clear about

the notion of person or personal when even theologians themselves have complex debates about it, for example, with regard to the trinity.

Influential 20th-century theologians Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Karl Rahner (1904-84) endorse one-self Trinity theories, and suggest replacements for the term ‘Person.’ They argue that in modern times ‘person’ has come to mean a self. But three divine selves would be three gods. Hence, even if ‘Person’ should be retained as traditional, its meaning in the context of the Trinity should be expounded using phrases like ‘modes of being’ (Barth) or ‘manners of subsisting’ (Rahner).⁷

Eschatological Questions

- 29.9% of Czechs, 40.2% of Hungarians, 64.4% of Poles, and 51% of Slovaks believe in life after death.

- 22.5% of Czechs, 38% of Hungarians, 63.5% of Poles, and 48.4% of Slovaks believe in the existence of heaven.

- The existence of hell is believed by 16.2% of Czechs, 25.7% of Hungarians, 53.2% of Poles, and 41.3% of Slovaks.

- 22% of Czechs, 27.7% of Hungarians, 20% of Poles, and 18.8% of Slovaks believe in reincarnation.

Even in the case of beliefs about what happens after death, further questions would need to be asked for respondents to explain any discrepancies in their statements. In Poland, for example, 87.58% of the population claimed to be Catholic in the 2011 census. 7.1% did not answer. Nonbelievers accounted for 2.4%, other faiths and religions 1.3%. However, according to the EVS 2017, only 63.5% of Poles believe in heaven, 22.9% do not, and 12.6% do not know. Therefore, there is a large number of Catholics who do not believe in heaven or are not sure. In the case of hell, the discrepancy is even greater. 53.2% of Poles believe in it, 32.8% do not, and 7.2% do not know. The same applies to belief in reincarnation, where the sum of “believe in” and “don’t know” is 34.6%. In terms of the other three V4 societies, the discrepancy is not so noticeable, but this is probably because they do not have such a large formal Catholic majority.⁸ However, this kind of discrepancy in beliefs is not a new phenomenon, and it is also appearing elsewhere.

⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Trinity,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/> (accessed March 13, 2023).

⁸ Zakład Wydawnictw Statystycznych, *Ludność. Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna* (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2013), https://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/LUD_ludnosc_stan_str_dem_spo_NSP2011.pdf.

Though the U.S. is an overwhelmingly Christian country, significant minorities profess belief in a variety of Eastern or New Age beliefs. For instance, 24% of the public overall and 22% of Christians say they believe in reincarnation – that people will be reborn in this world again and again. And similar numbers (25% of the public overall, 23% of Christians) believe in astrology. Nearly three-in-ten Americans say they have felt in touch with someone who has already died, almost one in five say they have seen or been in the presence of ghosts, and 15% have consulted a fortuneteller or a psychic.⁹

Or from another survey:

In a Christian context, it is reasonable to assume that belief in heaven and in life after death would be found together. However, a Gallup poll concluded in 1968 fully 15 percent of a random sample of Americans aged 21 and above expressed belief in heaven but not in the afterlife. This finding underscores the fact that beliefs are subtle and complex and cannot be fully understood from the simplistic yea-nay data gathered in most surveys of belief. Gliock and Sark's (1965) new denominationalism, with its focus on the degree of conviction, is a step in the right direction. Better yet is Berger's (1974)¹⁰ recommendation that sociologists of religion break free from the time-honored taboo against an investigation into the supernatural per se. While social scientists cannot throw a spotlight on the gods, they can, and should, inquire into the details of what it is that individuals believe and do not believe [...].

Bellah (1970)¹¹ argues that what is inconsistent for the researcher need not be inconsistent for believers, for whom logical consistency is not a relevant test of the validity of beliefs. The logic of particular believers might be different from the logic employed by social scientists. This position gains support from a large body of empirical studies conducted on a variety of beliefs, in a variety of settings, and over a fairly long period. Piker (1972)¹² found that Thai Buddhist monks perceived no conflict between their doctrine of karma (good works) and their wearing of good-luck amulets. He

⁹ Pew Research Center, "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths," <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/> (accessed March 13, 2023).

¹⁰ Peter L. Berger, "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (June 1974): 125-133.

¹¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9 (Summer 1970): 89-96.

¹² Steven Piker, "The Problem of Consistency in Thai Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11, no. 3 (1972): 211-229.

also found that the monks were unaware of many Buddhist doctrines. Thus, differences between traditional teachings and actual behavior might pose no conflict for these modern-day practitioners [...].

These findings and theoretical perspectives challenge the very idea of inconsistent beliefs by raising the question: “Inconsistent in what sense?” We are unable to answer this important question satisfactorily with our limited data. However, we will seek answers to the preliminary question: “Who are the people who hold what appear to be inconsistent beliefs?”¹³

Summary

The V4 societies are a kind of interesting sociological laboratory. Two countries represent a strongly secularized form of society, and two still retain many traditional structures of religious communities with influence on society. While from a global perspective the secularization thesis does not seem to apply, things seem to be otherwise in the Czech Republic. Evangelical movements, Catholic fundamentalism, religions other than Christianity, and new religious movements do not play a significant role here. On the other hand, it is also evident that, in this country, religion is an anthropological constant, while taking on forms that are very vague and manifest themselves in various forms of alternative lifestyles, occultism, and the practice of pseudo-science. In any case, it would be useful to follow the developments in the V4 societies over time and to study the data provided by the EVS survey to further investigation through qualitative sociological methods. It seems necessary that such an investigation should be interdisciplinary, involving psychology, history, and religious studies.

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¹³ Bradley R. Hertel, “Inconsistency of Beliefs in the Existence of Heaven and Afterlife,” *Review of Religious Research* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 171-183, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3509882>.

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