

THE CZECH STRUGGLE FOR AND AGAINST RELIGION IN PUBLIC SPACE: The Case of Re-erecting of Marian Column in Prague from the Perspective of the Media

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ABSTRACT: Over the course of the last thirty years, that is from the fall of the Communist regime and the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars have been attempting to characterize the attitude of Czech society to religion. This article consequently attempts to deal with religion in public space, in Prague and specifically in place perceived as purely Czech and national. The most significant case of iconoclasm in modern Czech history – the demolition (1918) and re-erection (2020) of the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague – was consequently chosen as the example of Czech national narrative template. The re-erection of this column has become an interesting media topic. This article therefore attempts to define the basic ideological frameworks of this debate, which was most intense in 2020, the time of the re-erection of the column.

KEYWORDS: Marian Column, Modern Iconoclasm, Religion in Public Space, Religion in Prague.

INTRODUCTION

Czech society ranks among the most secular societies when it comes to both a European and even a world comparison of sociological data. Over the last three decades, that is from the fall of Communism and the newly attained civic freedoms after the year 1989, the numbers of declared and practicing believers has continued to decrease. This information concerning the state of the Czech population in terms of world-view has become a regular part of specialized articles and monographs published by prominent foreign scholars, who make mention of the Czech Republic as being among those countries which are the least religious on a world scale (Zuckerman 2016, 5; Ruse 2015, 249).

A great deal of research dedicated to this issue has come about as of the 1990s and a number of specialized studies have been published (Václavík 2009; Nešpor 2010; Hamplová 2013; Bubík, Rimmel and Václavík 2020). They make mention of the following reasons: 1) historical-cultural reasons connected first and foremost with the violent recatholicization of the Czech Lands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 2) massive industrialization and modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 3) the consequences of Czech nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 4) the influence of the Communist

regime and its anti-religious propaganda in the second half of the twentieth century, and also 5) individuation linked with the development of a free society after the year 1989. The prevailing tendency to explain the decrease in the importance of religion in Czech society and in contrast the emphasis on the growth of non-religion was usually attributed to the theory of secularization, as presented, for example (Lužný 2021, 70).

There is also an emphasis at present on the idea that the theory of secularization, apart from the structural level, also contains a historical level and that specifically “a strong tendency toward historization of the discussion on the roots of Czech non-religion” (Lužný 2021, 70–73) prevailed after a long period of time in the Czech academic environment.

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN GLOBAL AND COSMOPOLITAN PRAGUE

The issue of post-secular urbanism and the study of religion in the urban public space has moved at present to the forefront of academic interest. This work emphasizes the essential change in the direction, which is leading from secularism to pluralism, thereby also problematizing the traditional concept of the originally ‘holy city’ and its transformation into ‘a secular city’ (Schwenk, Steets and Berking 2018, 39–82). Various religious movements and their protagonists have also influenced the dynamism of the global city and are influenced by it in turn (Garbin and Strhan 2017). These realities are also evidence that there is a need for more marked subtle terminology, which would allow us to understand the position to religion on a much greater scale.

Prague, the Czech capital, is a city which is said to be not only global, but also pluralistic, a city with a relatively high number of foreigners and an openness to the multi-cultural way of life. According to the Research Network for Globalization and World Cities, it is actually a global city with a rating of Alfa minus (GaWC 2018). It is of interest, however, that despite this extremely positive evaluation certain key public parts of the city are perceived as ‘pure Czech’, and have a strong symbolic meaning specifically and only for Czechs and which have played an important role in crisis situations.

Two squares, Wenceslas and Old Town, consequently play a central role. Both are specific, first and foremost, in that they contain monuments of personages who played and still play an important role in the religious and secular history of the Czech Lands. These specifically consist of the statue of the first of the Czech Dukes Wenceslas, the sculptural group of the Medieval theologian Master Jan Hus and the statue of the mother of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, known as the Marian column. It should be emphasized that these monuments do not only have an aesthetic and architectural function in the eyes of the public as important artistic artefacts, but primarily have a symbolic and value function, being part of the Czech cultural memory. These symbols continue to resonate powerfully in Czech society.

Duke Wenceslas (907–935) was from the Přemyslid dynasty, is the patron saint of the Czech Lands and also a symbol of Czech statehood. The statue is one of the prominent aspects of Wenceslas square, its centre piece. The Old Town Square is represented in modern times by the monument to Jan Hus (1370–1415), a central figure of the Reformation in both Czech and the world, who was burned at the stake for supposed heresy by decision of the Church council in Constance in the year 1415. The Marian column was also erected in 1650 on the Old Town square as an expression of gratitude to the Virgin Mary for saving Prague from the Swedish armies at the time of the Thirty Years’ War.

The Jan Hus monument on the Old Town Square and the monument to Duke Wenceslas on horseback on Wenceslas Square are currently an essential part of the national public space, which is identified as purely Czech and national. These monuments are perceived at present as symbols of national identity and contemporary Czechs do not question them at all. The

Catholic Church even carried out a range of symbolic gestures in recent decades in the sense of a more positive evaluation of the legacy of Hus, contributing to an understanding of the so-called 'genuine' Hus. Many Czech Catholics consequently perceive this historical figure different than was the case in the past. An essential change in Czech-German relations also came about as of the year 1989, with an attempt at reconciliation from both sides, which has also had an influence on decreasing the historical criticism of Duke Wenceslas in the form of supposed 'political servility' to the Germans.

Both of these figures, that is the reformer Jan Hus and Duke Wenceslas, along with their monuments in 'the Czech' public space of the capital city of Prague, have been granted a great deal of authority, without which one cannot imagine modern Czech identity. This is completely a different case, however, with the Marian Column, which has resulted in numerous "conflicts about the column", which have been taking place from the changes in the political regime, that is from the 1990s (Novinky 4. 6. 2020). The efforts to erect it again have been accompanied by similar polemics over the last thirty years, as was the case with the Hus monument (1915), at that time primarily from the ranks of Catholics. The Marian Column is therefore a monument which has once again evoked passion, and this even among the contemporary Czech public.¹ It was demolished in 1918, but in 1990, efforts began to rebuild it, which finally took place in 2020 after 30 years of disputes.

This study focuses on the Marian Column because it aroused many emotions and reactions in Czech society in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, the re-erected column in the Old Town Square in Prague cannot be viewed in isolation, that is, without taking into account that other statues are also present in the public space, which is perceived as national, as an expression of Czech national identity and statehood. Specifically, we are talking about the statues of St. Wenceslas on Wenceslas Square and the statue of Master Jan Hus on Old Town Square.

As has already been stated, these two squares, Wenceslas and Old Town, fulfilled the roles of national gatherings in Czech society, which not only recall important events in Czech history, but express both an approving and disapproving position of the state of public affairs. The statues of the duke and Catholic Saint Wenceslas, Master Jan Hus and the Virgin Mary all therefore have not only a religious, but also a national political importance and are an expression of Czech national identity. These consist of three symbolisms which represent the historical oscillation of Czech society between Catholicism and Protestantism, between Czechness and Germanness, political independence and forced military occupation. They also define the narrative template of Czech society in its modern political and religious history, representing the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as the state and the Church, the nation and Church and the secular and religious character of Czech society.

The conflicts were specifically central for the intellectual debate concerning "the sense of Czech history" (1895–1938), which became a space for the development of opinion as to what is meant by the Czech national character (Havelka 1997; Jiřincová 2020, 272–273). Czech revivalists of the nineteenth century drew ideological inspiration "from the Enlightenment which strictly condemned the Baroque as an exuberant and distasteful style, Baroque piety as theatrical and dishonest, Catholic confessionalization as unjustified pressure on the conscience of the individual and even the entire Catholic Church in its period form as a dark and reactionary institution" (Jiřincová 2020, 276). This was one of the reasons why negative views prevailed about the period prior to the year 1918, that is the period under the rule of the

¹ Sociologist of religion Dušan Lužný explains „the current dominance of unbelievers in Czech society as a consequence of the replication of the narrative template about religion, which is part of the national collective memory“ (Lužný 2021, 70–83).

Catholic dynasty of the Austrian Habsburgs, amongst a large part of the Czech (non-Catholic) public.

THE MEDIA TEMPLATE IMAGE OF MARIAN COLUMN - METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

For the study purpose, use will be made of a collection of arguments 'against' the Marian Column presented in selected media, upon the basis of which a frame of positions will be created which strongly resonated in the Czech media space. I will not, however, want to make use of these frames containing the reasons 'against' the column presented in the media to demonstrate what Czechs think or what opinions they hold, but first and foremost what type of information interests them, what they pay attention to and what themes move society. I understand religious indifference, viewed as an attitude related to the traditional, that is church-conceived religiosity, in a different way from certain Czech sociologists. The debate around the Marian Column and the media picture concerning attitudes to its erection tends to demonstrate that the term 'religious indifference' consequently becomes flawed and is not sufficiently clearly defined.

Newspaper articles about the Marian Column from the three most popular news online portals in the Czech Republic in the year 2020 have been used for the purposes of this study (certain older articles have also been part of the analysis), as this was the year when it was re-erected. The criterion for the selection of the online portals was 'number of hits', as this can be registered sociometrically. According to the organisation NetMonitor,² the most popular portals in the Czech Republic in the year 2020 were Novinky.cz, SeznamZpravy.cz and iDNES.cz. Media Content Analysis was used as a method for analyzing newspaper articles of internet news portals. It is a very important and useful methodological tool for interpreting the more general patterns that shape social thinking and attitudes towards specific issues. Content analysis "refers to a general set of techniques for analyzing collections of communications" (Saraisky 2016; Macnamara 2005; Hijams 1996; Neuendorf 2002). For the purpose of the analysis, a code sheet was created for basic categorization of news portals and newspaper articles about the Marian Column in selected media, as well as a code sheet for identification of the basic media discourses that characterize this debate.

It is assumed that the greater and the more frequent the access is to information, in our case in the form of hits on these portals, the greater their impact on the formation of public opinion, societal priority themes and also value attitudes. I therefore chose this characteristic, that is the identification of the key reasons which were presented in the media to representatives of opponents to the column, as one of the main goals and which became not only part of the media space, but which also mobilized civic and political activism.

If we were to focus upon the brief development of Catholic activism, which finally led to the re-erection of the Marian Column, its beginnings date back to the year 1990, when the civic association entitled *Society for Renewal of the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague* (further only SRMC) was established. Its goal was to develop activities which would lead to the re-erection of its original shape on the original site. After several rejections of applications for renewal of the column (for the last time in the year 2017), its erection was classified as undesirable in the year 2019 by the municipal authority of the capital city of Prague. In January of 2020, however, the representatives of the City of Prague, who were the only ones with the authority to make a decision about this issue in the form of 'voting', revoked this earlier negative decision and expressed their consent about the structure (the vote, however, was extremely close).

² The source for determining the hits for the year 2020 was data which is provided for the public by NetMonitor (<https://www.netmonitor.cz/en>). This organization is a research project providing information about hits on the Internet and the socio-demographic profile of the visitors in the Czech Republic.

Preparation work for the ceremonial unveiling of the monument was launched in the middle of February 2020. The consecration of the column by the Prague Archbishop and Cardinal Dominik Duka was planned for 15 August 2020, this being the day of the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which ranks among the most significant Catholic Church holidays.

The case of the erection of the Marian Column had met over the long-term with specialized, religious, political and journalistic interest. Opponents of it emphasized that its erection excluded dialogue, that it was an emotional situation and “had not generated society-wide discussion, there had been no effort to determine what Czechs, or at least Prague citizens, actually wanted” (Novinky 12.06.2020). There was also discussion that the new column was problematic from the specialized perspective, that it was coming into being in a protected area without a public architectural competition, and the dispute was therefore compared to ‘a small cultural war’ (Novinky 7.02.2020). It undoubtedly consisted of a case, which over the long-term, had a relatively wide social impact and resulted in debate not only amongst specialists, but also met with a sharp reaction from the public (iDNES 23.02.2021). There were claims, for example, that it evoked “stormy discussion” (iDNES 29.05.2019), that it was “a struggle over a symbol” (iDNES 14.04.2013), etc. It was also a “struggle over religion”, which was unprecedented from the time of the end of the Communist Czechoslovak period, and was therefore deserving of adequate attention. The IDNES portal discussed this extremely aptly in this sense: “a discussion on the return of the Marian Column to a space which is undoubtedly the heart of the state, talking much more about the state and character of our society than we are willing to admit” (iDNES 14.04.2013).

THE MARIAN COLUMN ON THE OLD TOWN SQUARE

The Marian cult has been part of Catholic spirituality for centuries, and it is no different in the Czech Lands. The Catholic Church consequently speaks of Mary as “the Mother of Czechs” and Czechs are traditionally viewed as “a Marian nation”. The building of Marian columns³ has a long tradition in Central Europe and concretely on the Old Town Square it was built as an expression of thanks to the Virgin Mary by the Emperor Ferdinand II in 1650. Its intentions are expressed primarily by the inscription, which was part of the column: “The pious and just Emperor had this statue erected to the Virgin Mary, without blemish, for defending and liberating the city” (Přítomnost 21.06.1939). Apart from the inscription, this column also contained allegorical scenes concerning the victory of the Catholic Church over Reformation heretics.

The building of this column is linked historically with the end and the political consequences of the so-called Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which impacted all of Europe. This long-lasting conflict was of great importance for its consequent development, the political layout of power and in particular the religious situation. It essentially changed and also more importantly divided Europe. The beginning of this war is linked specifically with Prague, concretely on the Old Town Square, where 27 Czech lords of the Protestant faith were executed, having revolted against the government of the Catholic Habsburgs. The Marian Column was actually built-in close proximity to this place of execution.

This war meant a loss of political sovereignty for Czechs, the emigration of the Czech Protestant nobility, the confiscation of their property by Catholic families (primarily Austrian, German and Italian), strict catholicization of the population and even gradual Germanization. In other words, the erection of the Marian column by a Catholic Emperor was not viewed at all in earlier Protestant Czechia as a gesture of thanks to the Virgin Mary for protecting Prague from Protestant Swedish soldiers and for the end of the ravages of war, with the loss

³ The Prague Marian column has to be viewed, however, within the context of similar Marian columns in Munich (1638) and in Vienna (1647).

of a third of its population, as the Catholic Church presented it (Katolické listy 17.01. 1899, 2). The erection of the column was instead perceived as the enforcing and sealing of the future direction of Counter-Reformation politics, the beginning of strict re-catholicization and an inglorious ‘monument’ to the public execution of the Czech elite. The consequences of the Thirty Years’ War therefore had an essential influence not only on the formation of European, but also on Czech, national identity, which began to significantly become manifest primarily at the time of the national revival.

One of the expressions of the essential social changes linked with the emergence of the democratic Czechoslovak Republic was the toppling of the Marian column in 1918 (the first attempts appeared as early as the nineteenth century). The Catholic Church naturally viewed this act extremely negatively. They viewed it as “a crime of sacrilege”, as an act which was also in direct contradiction with the Hussite position (Kašpar 1926, 113). Catholic intelligence in addition emphasized that it involved the behaviour of rabble whose motives arose out of supposed patriotism (Hlídka 1918, 742). They also made reference to it as “a sign of a cultural war” (Rádce duchovní 1919–1920, 19).

Anti-church Social Democrat politicians, in contrast, were convinced that the column was one of the last monuments to the forced catholicization of the Czech Lands, a symbol of duality, and made reference to the legacy of President Masaryk and the “fracturing of the Czech soul”. They therefore viewed the removal of the Marian column as an attempt to remove this disunity. There was also talk that the column was actually a mocking historical symbol, a disturbing counterpart to the Hus’ monument (Umění 08.1919, 268), or that the entire situation was actually a living satire on the Czech character (Přehled 18.07.1903, 546), it being a reference to its duality and ideological division. The consequent permanent expression was “a struggle over the public space” (Vlnas 2020, 12). The Social Democrat daily *Nová doba* (*New Era*) stated, for example, that the column was toppled accompanied by the joy of thousands, thereby obviously trying to emphasize that this consisted of an expression of the general (shared) will (Nová doba 4.11.1918, 1).⁴ Other period dailies wrote that the column had been toppled by people (Večer: lidový deník 4.11.1918, 2). There was also the conclusion that the column actually belonged at a cemetery or in a lapidarium, which is also where its torso finally ended up.⁵

Shortly after the Velvet Revolution in the year 1989, however, an initiative emerged to erect the column once again. The Catholic Church had quite a good reputation after the fall of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia (almost half of the population, which is a particularly high number in comparison with the present, declared their affiliation with it during the census in 1991 after forty years of Communism), and the re-erection of the column was again soon initiated. This finally became reality last year, that is in the year 2020. Over, however, the thirty years of efforts the erection of the column was accompanied by similar polemics to those which the Hus monument experienced, and this from the ranks of both politicians and from the public. This is undoubtedly the monument which evoked the current passion in modern Czech history.

There will therefore be a focus in the following part on how Czech society reacts to the historical monument and how the Czech media focused on these reactions. The aim is to determine to what extent these present reactions and attitudes to religion in the public space

⁴ *Nová doba* even states that the torso of the column was crowned with the flag of the Czech kingdom (red and white) and the American flag.

⁵ Some of the parts of the original column are, by coincidence, actually part of the collections of the National Museum in Prague and its lapidarium.

correspond to prevailing religious indifference.

THE COLUMN AS AN INVASIVE ART RECONSTRUCTION

“Certain monuments have great importance, others are weaker. And this was a monument [Marian Column] of great importance” (iDNES 14.04.2013), stated Miloslav Bednář from the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences, which ranked among its critics. The reasons behind the criticism, which were most frequent, can be labelled as nationalist, historic or religious (reformation) or anti-religious. The purely specialized reasons were also extremely interesting. Some of the Prague city counsellors, who made the decisions regarding the erection or non-erection of the column, emphasized that this conflict should be decided by academics through formulating the key arguments. The leadership of the capital city of Prague, under the umbrella of the specialized municipality, expressed in January 2020 that “there exists a judgement by art historians and architects that a column should not stand on the square and their view should be respected by (all) the representatives (council)” (Seznam Zprávy 23. 1. 2020).

It is a known fact that specialized circles were interested in carrying out a debate about the look of the column, but were unable to essentially influence it in the end as the Catholic initiative *SRMC did not want to debate it*, apparently pushed for a more radical and expressive replica. The main argument of art historians, against the planned appearance of the column, amounted to the fact that only the torso had been preserved from the original demolished column and therefore it was impossible to create a replica. For this reason, the art historian Michal Šroněk argued that the new column was not a copy since unfortunately the monument care did not comment on the artistic treatment. He further states that one can consequently speak of it as more of “an invasive reconstruction, whose artistic importance is doubtful”.⁶ Additional leading Czech art historians are also of the opinion that the current look of the column is only ‘a loose imitation’ (Novinky 23.01.2020). It would, however, be more acceptable from a specialized perspective to speak of ‘a monument novelty’, which would take into account the period development and situation.⁷

Not only art historians, but also historians, such as the respected Czech scholar Jiří Mikulec, a specialist on the question of Baroque piety and re-catholicization, do not view the renewal of the column as ‘a fortunate idea’. Mikulec is of the opinion that the space of the square developed differently without a column and that this should be respected. He adds, however, that “its non-existence is, in contrast, a symbol of the values of the twentieth century” and that “he views debates around the return of the replica as first and foremost Protestant and Catholic disagreements which revived after the year 1990”, when “two religious minorities accept the interpretation of parts of history” in a non-confessional society (iDNES 28.06.2017). The participants in ‘the struggle over the column’ are viewed as ‘the hard core’, although the majority of Czech Protestants and Catholics do not experience the ideological aspect of the issues all that intensely, according to Mikulec. Petr Macek, an architecture historian at Charles University, comments on this controversy in a similar fashion arguing that the entire situation “corresponds to the character of the time after the founding of the First Republic” (Lidovky 29.01.2020), dividing Czech society even at the time of its demolition and also as an igniter of extremely passionate discussion even amongst his university students (Lidovky 29.01.2020).

The activities of the specialized community were generally viewed by the *SRMC* in an extremely negative light and also evoked an aggressive reaction. Certain specialists were even labelled as ‘leftists’ only because they wanted to carry out a debate and because they did not share the aesthetic and value views of the representatives of the *SOMSP* association.

⁶ From the content of the lecture delivered by doc. PhDr. Michal Šroněk, CSc. on 3 October 2020 as part of the doctoral colloquium of the Institute of Historical Science of University of Pardubice.

⁷ Šroněk, 3 October 2020.

The debate consequently moved from the aesthetic and academic levels to the an ideological one and a number of opponents from the specialist ranks even received the label of ‘former Communists’, when their motivations were interpreted as anti-religious. This categorization may also be linked, however, with the fact that some of the protest petitions in the capital city were actually organised by former communist functionaries (Seznam Zprávy 04.06.2020). Opponents of the column, be they specialists from art history or history in general, were labelled as ideological antagonists, even despite the specialized arguments of the opposite side. They supposedly only wanted to understand that efforts aimed at the re-erection were a direct expression of personal piety, an act of reconciliation, as opposed to a remembrance and defence of the historical injustice committed against the Czech nation. The Marian Column is consequently a symbol which demonstrates how powerfully contemporary public opinion is influenced by historical events and how it is able to mobilize historical memory in these situations.

THE COLUMN AS A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL OPPRESSION

The column, according to opponents of the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague, is first and foremost “a symbol of Habsburg rule and the intolerant recatholicization of the country” (iDNES 15.08.2020) and “a symbol of national oppression” (iDNES 14.04.2013). It was to be built on a site of a reverential character as a monument of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and political despotism, where 27 Czech lords had been executed, “representatives of the non-Catholic revolt of the Estates” (iDNES 07.06.2020), which stood up against the rule of the Austrian Habsburgs on the Czech throne. As concerns the historical circumstances of the emergence of this symbol, it was, according to its opponents, a reminder of the former loss of political rights and religious freedoms.

In order to at least briefly clarify the historical circumstances of this revolt, it should be stated that the Estates system formed back in the Middle Ages in various countries in Europe, with its sense being to limit the power of the ruler by ensuring that part of the political power was held by the diet. The Czech estates, divided in the sixteenth century into lords, knights and burghers, created the land diet of the Czech crown. One of their privileges and rights also consisted of the election of the ruler. Conflicts between the members (Czech estates) of the Czech diet and the Emperor, from the line of the Austrian Habsburgs, began to escalate in the years 1618–1620 when the revolt culminated, consequently leading to the unleashing of a European-wide military conflict known as the Thirty Years’ War. The reasons behind this European conflict were primarily two, these being an attempt to maintain the sovereignty of the Estates in relation to the powers of the ruler (in various countries) and the conflict between the Roman Church and Protestantism.

This conflict culminated in the Czech Lands in the historic battle at White Mountain in the year 1620, when the armies of the Czech Estates were defeated. The following year in June 1621, a group execution of the Czech elite (by elites I mean the burghers), who were part of the resistance, took place on the Old Town Square in Prague as a demonstration of Imperial power. The Marian Column was consequently erected on the site of the execution, which had become an important site of piety. The goal of this demonstration of power, which also included disrespectful treatment of the remains of the executed, was the consolidation of the position of the Habsburgs on the Czech throne, the intimidation of additional opposition and the establishment of forced renewal of Catholicism in the Czech Kingdom. This event, the symbol of which was, in the eyes of opponents, specifically the Marian Column, served to mark the political, religious and cultural development of the Czech Lands over the following three centuries, and this up until the time of the founding of democratic Czechoslovakia in the year 1918, which came into being as a consequence of the defeat of Austria-Hungary in the First World War.

In light of the fact that the Czech Republic (earlier Czechoslovakia) is a relatively young political body, it is even more comprehensible that the still present recollection of the historical circumstances and injustices, which led to the loss of the political and religious autonomy of the Czech Lands, still strongly resonate within Czech society. All of the key media, which have been the subject of the present analysis, perceive the erection of the column primarily from a historical perspective, serving to recall the events which led to the national humiliation and repression. As a consequence, the execution of the Czech elite on the Old Town Square became one of the key events once again even many years later.

This is seemingly the reason why a significant part of the Prague political elite expressed themselves over the long-term as follows in relation to the Marian Column, that “it did not contribute to reconciliation or the redress of pertinent historical injustices” (iDNES 30.07.2019), that it did not bring people together, but “evoked conflicts and symbolized the suppression by the Habsburgs after the battle of White Mountain” (iDNES 21.06.2019), that it consisted of “a political column, a symbol of the historical humiliation of our country [...], the erection of which used to be a tragedy”, “a farce” and “a replica of humiliation” (Lidovky 23.01.2020), that it was “a national disgrace and defeat” (Seznam Zprávy 20.06.2019).

The paradox of this political rhetoric is that the decisive influence on the re-erection of the column was, apart from the influence of the Catholic Church on the city and parliamentary level, specifically the political establishment of the city of Prague. Another paradox consisted of the fact that political and legal support for the erection of the column came about even despite the fact that the Czech Republic is very much a secular state, this being documented, among other things, by the statement of the press secretary of the current President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, who expressed to the media that “the return of the Mother of God to the heart of Europe was extremely important” (iDNES 13.08.2020).

THE COLUMN AS A SYMBOL OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND TOTALITARIANISM

The Catholic Church, with the Prague Archbishop and Cardinal Dominik Duka at its head, continued to emphasize and convince the public that the column was “a symbol of reconciliation” (Lidovky 15.08.2020), a symbolic memory of those who protected and also defended mother Prague from the Swedish armies, that it was an expression of gratefulness for help during wars and finally that it consisted of an important Baroque work of art (Seznam Zprávy 04.06.2020), which led to the development of Baroque sculptural art in the Czech Lands (Seznam Zprávy 15.06.2019). The efforts of the Catholic Church were to consequently refute the conviction that the column was an expression of its arrogance, a symbol of the Counter-Reformation (iDNES 22.05.2012), an expression of “intolerant re-catholicization of the country” (iDNES 15.04.2021). Supporters of the renewal of the column consequently repeatedly emphasized that the new column was actually “a symbol of reconciliation” (iDNES 20.07.2019), “an expression of conciliation and tolerance” (iDNES 07.06.2020), by means of which they wanted to win over not only the Czech public, but specifically the representatives of the capital city of Prague.

As concerns the position taken concerning the column by the Ecumenical Order of Churches, the emirate chair (Pavel Černý) argued that it would be appropriate to see on the spot where the original column stood another art work, which would “come about from a competition and which would not be a one-sided proposal” (Novinky 23.01.2020). An agreement was not made, however, between the Ecumenical Order of Churches and the Czech Bishop’s Conference.

A number of Protestant pastors also took a much stronger position recalling the historical injustice. Their view on the political level was represented by a counsellor of the Prague city government at the time Jan Zeno Dus, a Protestant theologian, pastor and signatory of Charter 77, who regularly made reference at the meetings of the local government which was

discussing the application for re-erection of the column on the Old Town Square to the fact that the initial construction was linked with the execution of the 27 Czech lords (generally of a Protestant faith) in the year 1621 and that this consisted of an important place of reverence. The issue of the new column therefore lied in the fact that it was going to stand at that same place. The counsellor Dus also argued at the local government meetings that Prague had the responsibility to first ask qualified historians as to whether “this monument had been built for a shameful purpose in order to celebrate a barbaric act of execution” or not (Novinky 06.02.2015), in order to actually contribute to the confirmation or rejection of the views of the current Catholic church and its representatives as to what purpose it was initially erected.

Apart from positions taken and activities from the ranks of the non-Catholic denominations and their clergy, secular, that is non-religious activism, was also quite active and thereby met with media attention. Amongst the organized opponents to the column, were for example *The Association for Preserving the Current Historical Appearance of the Old Town Square*, which in the spring of 2020 (after the approval of the structure) asked the Prague city government to bring a stop to the construction of the Marian Column and postpone the work. The association justified its request by “the spreading of the coronavirus infection”, as believers would gather in front of the column for prayer and “could get infected around it” (iDNES 23.03.2020). One of the opponents to the column even expressed that the covid situation could be “a punishment for the arrogance behind the building of the monument” (Novinky 23.02.2021), and that this virus will remain amongst us as long as this column will stand on the Old Town Square.

Additional opponents of the column, the hard-core of which gathered to protest on the day of its ceremonial unveiling, were entitled *An Informal Gathering for a Secular Old Town Square*. During a celebration led by the Prague Archbishop on the Old Town Square, the protestors expressed, with the police present, what they disliked about the column and called out slogans such as ‘Shame’, ‘the column is dividing the nation’, ‘Prague is not the Vatican’ or ‘column of shame’ (iDNES 15.08.2020). These slogans were called out by the opponents not only in front of the actual column and the church which is part of the square, where mass was taking place, but also in front of the Prague town hall, which had issued permission for its construction. Criticism was therefore not only directed at the Catholic Church, but also at the politicians of the city of Prague. The association was primarily interested in pointing out that that this consisted of an example of the linking of Prague politics with religion, the democratic state and with a totalitarian religious institution.

The protests did not come to an end even after September 2020, that is after the erection of the column, when activists at the Marian Column protested, for example, against the attitude of the Catholic Church to LGBTQ minorities. One of the expressions of protest consisted of a banner hung in front of the column with a so-called ‘non-binary Madonna’, who would be viewed as “a protector of nature, defender of suppressed people of various skin colours or sexual orientations” (iDNES 02.09.2020), in other words as a symbol of the renewed relationship between humanity and the natural world. Activists also expressed their disagreement “with the approach of the Church to, for example, the Istanbul Convention, women’s rights to an abortion, the hateful attitude to LGBTQ minorities or the question of the climate crisis” (iDNES 02.09.2020). A similar expression consisted of an individual protest by a political activist who actually went as far as to intentionally damage the column. He defended his actions by stating that he viewed the column as “an insult to the Reformation”, and referred to the erection of the column itself as “a disturbance which ridicules part of the population and which would lead to suppression of the rights and freedoms of citizens”, and which was “an insult to our ancestors and our culture” and finally “a celebration of the victory of totalitarianism” (iDNES 15.04.2021).

The argumentation of the opponents of the second (new) column consequently contained

reasons which we could label as anti-Catholic in the sense that they emphasised that the column was a symbol of a totalitarian regime, religious suppression, intolerance and lack of freedom. It consisted of an expression within Czech history of political and religious dominance, forced recatholicization of the country, wherein Reformation efforts and Protestantism almost completely disappeared. The demolition of the column was therefore viewed as a protest against the violent recatholicization of the Czech Lands, which was the policy of the Habsburgs from Vienna, that is from abroad. The term 'Austrian Catholicism' consequently also became established in the Czech Lands for these reasons and Catholicism was viewed as a non-Czech, non-national religion, not only by Protestants, but by many other nationalists. It was viewed not as a religion which united the Czech nation, but as one which, in contrast, divided it. The column cannot therefore be viewed, according to contemporary opponents, as a symbol of reconciliation, but as a symbol of division, of religious intolerance, authoritarianism, and an undemocratic conception of power.

CONCLUSION

If one relies upon the assumption from contemporary Czech sociology of religion and religious studies that Czechs are particularly indifferent to traditional religion, in particular concerning their relationship to Christianity, and at the same time, that by indifference one means lack of interest in questions linked with the traditional understanding of faith, one has to ask oneself how can the so-called struggle over the Marian Column be explained, which in modern Czech history undoubtedly ranked among the greatest expressions of iconoclasm. The issue of this column actually problematizes this assumption to some extent.

We worked in the case of the Marian Column with the media content which was published by the main Czech news Internet portals in particular in the year 2020. This consisted of a crucial year as it was finally erected after thirty years of extended debates. The numerous expressions of civic disagreement, which the media informed about, undoubtedly led to discussion within society about the location and meaning of religion and religious symbols in the public space. An analysis of media content revealed that although the Czechs are said to be indifferent or apatheistic to traditional forms of religion, the re-erection of the column was certainly not an issue which confirmed this stereotype.

We can agree it seems with the argument that if and when traditional religion does not manifest itself externally, and does not act publicly, then Czechs truly are not all that interested. In cases, however, when religion steps into the space which is perceived as strictly national, state-forming and Czech, a mobilization of civic activity does occur, and even strong (negative) interest in the issue of religion. In the case of the Czech 'struggle', the goal of which was to protect the national space on the Old Town Square in the capital city of Prague, various civic groups and individuals became active. These were not only clergy from non-Catholic denominations, who criticised the column first and foremost as an expression of religious intolerance, but also scholars with their criticism from a specialised perspective, politics who rejected the column as a symbol of national and political suppression or even secular associations and individuals who viewed the column as a monument to civic absence of freedom and totalitarian power. This varied activism was also not merely a momentary expression of disagreement, but involved long-term, organized and public efforts. I am therefore of the opinion that this kind of activism needs to be taken into account when attempting to characterize the position of the majority of Czech society to religion.

The example of the Czech 'struggles against the column' indicates that scholarly opinions concerning the views of Czech society on religion rather differ from how the situation was depicted by the media. At least, the following can consequently be derived: 1) the concept of "religious indifference" deserves even more scholarly attention than it has received so far; 2) the picture of Czech society's relationship to religion is probably more complex and

is undoubtedly influenced by the conceptual tools of Czech sociology and religious studies; 3) the issue of the greatest Czech iconoclasm in modern history, within the framework of the study of Czech unbelief, is deserving much more specialized attention and both in the form of quantitative and qualitative research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article has been published as part of the research project *Freethought, Atheism and Secularization in Central and Eastern European Countries in the 20th and 21st Centuries* supported by Czech Science Foundation (GAČR), grant no. 18-11345S.

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