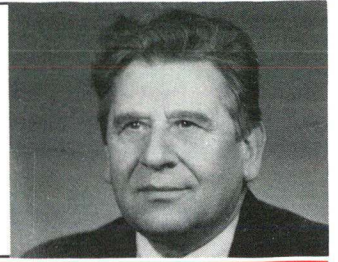


# Religion and Secular Humanism in the Slovak Republic



## Jaroslav Čelko

In the 1991 census of population in Slovakia 72 percent of adults declared a religious belief and 10 percent said they were atheists. No religious affiliation was declared by 18 percent. A non-religious spiritual platform was thus adopted by 28 percent of people counted in the census.

The results were to some extent a surprise. Some religious dignitaries had been proclaiming since the overturn of the former regime that Slovakia was a “Christian country,” because more than 90 percent of the inhabitants had allegedly embraced religion. The results of the 1991 census didn’t confirm such views.

Secular humanists, in contrast to this, have noticed a substantial difference between the results of this census and data acquired by a poll made before the regime’s demise in 1989. At that time 24 percent said that they were willing to publicly declare their atheism while another 15 percent wished to keep their atheistic convictions private. Between 1991 and 1986 there was an 11 percent decrease in the number of citizens professing no religion.

First, we maintain that some decline must have occurred in the numbers of people who before the government changed in 1989 had been adherents of a scientific life stance. Second, one must take into account the overall political atmosphere, varied kinds of pressure against people without religious faith, absence of anonymity, the ideologic and political profile of census-takers performing the census all exercised a great influence, especially in rural localities. Certain distortions occurred when some citizens didn’t fill in the space about religion in the questionnaire. When census-takers asked others whether they had been baptized, they were registered as religious if their answer was affirmative.

In July 1993 an opinion poll conducted by the Slovak Institute of Statistics found that 57 percent of Slovakia’s citizens considered themselves believers (15 percent less than in the 1991 year’s census) and 20 percent considered themselves non-believers, if we combine the two groups of “atheists” and “non-believers.” One can state an increase of more than 11

percent in favor of atheists. A third group labeled as “undecided” appeared as 23 percent of the results. In accordance with our previous experience one can presume that some of these are atheists, especially ones who in 1989 claimed to “keep their views for themselves.” Further, this group may consist partly of people who, despite the proclaimed anonymity of the poll, didn’t want to disclose their stance. Finally, it may include people who were simply in a stage of searching and refining their own spiritual platform.

In general, the latter are not citizens who can be claimed unequivocally by clergy as “theirs.” It is a potential pool of candidates for secular humanism and about whom we have to care.

It appears that data acquired in the 1991 census will be used with a continuing stress put on “declared” numbers but not on real religious belief. The efforts of religious organizations to ground all social activities in religion are finding substantial support not only with politicians, but also with certain public and state officials.

In this context the circumstances of the formation of the new Slovak Republic are interesting. In the Constitution of Slovakia, in its first article there is a statement reading as follows: “The Slovak Republic is a sovereign, democratic, law-abiding State. It is not linked to any ideology or religion.” Yet, there is official support for religion. An opposite tendency correlates, namely a negation of everything that is non-religious. This applies also to humanism when its atheistic aspect is emphasized. Amorality, consumerism, pornography, a high crime rate—all this is ascribed to atheism.

Atheism is being identified as the basis for all evil that socialism represents, as well as the source of many present-day difficulties. Furthermore, atheism is being connected with the Communist Party and its activities. But before November 1989 in Slovakia nearly one-third of all party members consisted of people professing some religion. At that time those who were functionaries didn’t declare religious creeds. After a change in the society they often take the stand of devoted believers, and from their ranks are recruited the most active adversaries of atheism, or at least what is considered to be atheism.

The preference given to religion and religious institutions has had a considerable economic impact on Slovakia. Churches and religious societies are supported by government funds. In this respect the new Slovak Republic sticks to the

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model of the former socialist state. Churches and religious societies get about 400 million Slovak crowns. They also receive other funds, such as subsidies for editing youth literature, cultural magazines, etc. Spending for education and culture have been cut by about 40 percent compared with 1992. But these cuts don't apply to churches and religious societies financed by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic. The bias against non-denominational citizens and atheists is reflected also in the economic situation of the Prometheus Society. It doesn't receive any support from the state administration.

Today in the Slovak Republic there are obstacles for humanists also in education and publishing. During the former socialist system religious institutions published newspapers and magazines (altogether ten periodicals). The print run was about 120,000 issues; these days the volume is many times higher. Issues of religion are dealt with also in periodicals not connected with any church. In Slovak television and radio, which are publicly owned, a special editorial board for religious broadcasting has been created. Special religious programs are produced and room is given for religious broadcasting in daily news reports and several other programs. On the other hand, as concerns humanist news, before November 1989 a bimonthly periodical called *Atheism* was published in Slovakia, which dealt with theoretical problems. It stopped at the beginning of 1990. Later on another periodical about civic ceremonies, the "New Way," was stopped as well.

For secular humanism there is no periodical. The Prometheus Society tries to publish a newsletter for its members and supporters. Demands to Slovak television and

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radio broadcasters for more attention to issues concerning non-denominational citizens have not been met with positive acceptance.

In the field of education, two religious initiatives are underway: first, a complete renewal of the church school system, and second, efforts to introduce religious indoctrination into state schools. These efforts have received support in government circles and, due to this, to a great extent also in the state administration. The occasional open expressions of discontent by teachers and parents are disregarded, even in such cases when the majority disagrees.

These days in Slovakia there is no equality between religious citizens and those with different life stances. Secular humanists are ignored or even subject to discrimination. Therefore, many people don't dare to express their stance in public. This has a definite bearing on the difficulties in expanding the Prometheus Society.

Slovakia is in the process of transforming principles of human rights and liberty into legislation. We hope that the government will make a commitment to tolerance and real equality for humanists in Slovakia. Our Prometheus Society is prepared to support such efforts as much as we can. ●

**Paul Kurtz**

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