

### **Persecution and Toleration of Non-traditional Religious Minorities before and after 1989**

A research team in the Department of Sociology and Adult Learning at Philosophical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc prepared a two year research project called Persecution, Exclusion and Toleration of Non-traditional Religious Minorities: the Case of Czech Buddhism and Unification Church before and after 1989. Work on the project has been under way since March 2012 and should be completed in February 2014. The purpose of this note is to present researchers interested in the study of religion with a basic outline of the project and to submit its conceptual framework and methodological principles for discussion.

Generally, the research conducted in the project is aimed at the processes of exclusion, inclusion, and various forms of inculturation in the area of religious life within Czech society. Followers of Czech Buddhism and followers of the Reverend Moon were chosen for the project as two distinct examples to focus on. While Buddhism (in its various forms) has been tolerated in the Czech Republic as a specific form of a different culture since approximately the 19th century, the followers of the Reverend Moon, since their first missions in the West during the 1960s, have been rejected as a 'dangerous sect' and in the period of communist rule were persecuted (and imprisoned) for political reasons. The project aims to observe the political and cultural contexts of the local penetration of these two different religions and compare the different strategies of penetration (inculturation) on the one hand and the different strategies of acceptance or rejection (inclusion and exclusion) on the other.

The main aim of the project is to find an answer to the basic research question: How has the discursive environment of Czech society changed when we compare

circumstances before and after 1989 and relate them to selected non-traditional religious groups. This discursive environment constitutes a frame for acceptance, rejection, or toleration of cultural 'otherness'. These attitudes are expressed in the relationship to religious minorities. Religious minorities, in the form of non-traditional groups, are from this perspective very appropriate research subjects because:

- (a) religion constitutes the highest and most general form of world-view legitimation;
- (b) religion evokes strong and long-lasting emotions;
- (c) religious conflict (conflict which is caused by differences in religious views and practices) often constitutes the background of wide cultural conflict;
- (d) since the emergence of Czech nationalism and the modern state Czech society has been very critical and 'cautious' in nature and is currently considered (together with Estonia and the eastern parts of Germany) one of the most secularised and de-religionised societies in the world.<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons, the attitudes towards religious minorities seem to be a more than significant indicator of a more general attitude towards cultural 'otherness'.

The research team approaches the selected groups as particular manifestations of cultural minorities grounded in the religious identities of their members. With this approach, it is possible to analyse the agency (including imagination and values) of members of these groups, with regard to the wider context, and to deal with the dimension of 'non-religious' action. This approach also makes it possible to include in the research those individuals that sympathise with religious movements, but do not count themselves as people of faith, or do not perceive the selected movements as religions. By viewing those individuals as

part of a cultural minority it is possible to minimise the danger of getting caught in an endless discussion about the meaning of the term 'religion'.

Implementation of the project is divided into three areas:

- (a) Elaboration of theoretical conceptions associated with the topics of inculturation, conversion, tradition and de-traditionalisation, cultural and social memory, new religious movements and minorities. The theoretical dimension is itself an essential part of the topic and the project itself. Therefore, one of the methodological goals of the project is to connect the theoretical dimension with historical analysis, discourse analysis, and other forms of empirical investigation.
- (b) Analysis of the teachings, practices and history of given groups. This part of the project's implementation is necessary in order to understand the groups in their uniqueness. This is a factor that is intrinsic to individual or group identities and also to individual and group 'strategies of survival'. This part of the research includes discourse analysis and analysis of the attitude of Czech society towards religion in general as well as towards the selected groups. A specific area of this analysis will be research in the archives of the Czechoslovak secret police (StB) and eventually other archives. Members of the research team have preliminary approval from the followers of the Reverend Moon to obtain access to personal files and confidential documents. This creates an opportunity that is unique and to an extent essential to our research.

- (c) Field research will focus on one hand on the reconstruction of the given group's history and on the ways in which its members integrate their own personal biographies into this history, and on the other hand on how they integrate their membership in a religious minority and religion in general into their individual biography. Methods used in the field research will include autobiographical interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

To sum up, the project will employ a combination of several research approaches such as discourse analysis, biographical method, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Naturally, the project also cannot avoid using comparative historical methods.

The project is supported by the Internal Grant Agency of Palacký University in Olomouc and its outcomes should include research papers and presentations at foreign and Czech conferences. Therefore, the team plans to inform Czech academia about the particular findings of the project and submit those findings for discussion. The team is composed of Dušan Lužný (team supervisor), Markéta Čučková, Jan Kalenda, Tomáš Karger, and Jiří Poslt.

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*Note*

- <sup>1</sup> This is confirmed also by the preliminary results of the 2011 census, which conform to the actual trends of decreasing numbers of people of faith claiming members in established traditional churches, and a gradually increasing portion of individuals 'of no denomination' and a not insignificant number of 'people of faith' who do not participate in any religious organisation.