

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly 83 (2023) 2, 293—304

Besedilo prejeto/Received:10/2022; sprejeto/Accepted:01/2023

UDK/UDC: 141.45Halík T.

DOI: 10.34291/BV2023/02/Jasinski

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Tomáš Halík's Concept of Atheism

Pojmovanje ateizma pri Tomášu Halíku

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the main theses of the Czech philosopher, sociologist, and theologian Tomáš Halík on atheism. He departs from the dogmatic understanding of atheism as the conviction of the non-existence of God or the lack of conviction of His existence and argues on the side of atheism as a way of purification and maturation of faith. The article consists of two parts. In the first one the context of the emergence, sources and main types of dogmatic atheism are presented. In the second part, the concept of atheism as a way of faith's criticism (criticism of inadequate concepts and ideas about God) and a form of existential experience (experiencing God's silence, absence and "death" and the insufficiency of human mental powers in His cognition) is outlined.

Keywords: religion, faith, atheism, idolatry, existential experience

Povzetek: Namen prispevka je analizirati glavne teze češkega filozofa, sociologa in teologa Tomáša Halíka o ateizmu, ki odstopa od dogmatičnega razumevanja ateizma kot prepričanja o neobstoju Boga ali pomanjkanja prepričanja o njegovem obstoju in se zavzema za ateizem kot način očiščevanja in zorenja vere. Prispevek sestavljata dva dela. V prvem delu so predstavljeni kontekst nastanka, viri in glavne vrste dogmatičnega ateizma. V drugem delu je orisano pojmovanje ateizma kot načina kritike vere (tj. kritike neustreznih pojmov in idej o Bogu) in oblike eksistencialne izkušnje (doživljanje Božje tišine, odsotnosti in 'smrti' ter nezadostnosti človekovih umskih sposobnosti pri njegovem spoznavanju).

Ključne besede: religija, vera, ateizem, idolatrija, eksistencialna izkušnja

1. Introduction

Researchers who deal with religion define three main positions concerning the existence of God: theism (belief in the existence of God or gods), atheism (denying their existence) and agnosticism (no possibility of acquiring knowledge on the existence of Gods). Each of these approaches has multiple versions, which are justified in many ways. It is difficult to specify the number of people sharing each view.

Theists are sometimes estimated to account for a majority of mankind, whereas atheists account for a minority. The latter dominate, particularly in many countries of Western Europe.

Tomáš Halík – a Roman Catholic priest, philosopher, psychologist and theologian, lives in a country in which more than half of the residents declare themselves atheists. Therefore, it is not surprising that his studies in philosophy, psychology, sociology of religion, mysticism, and the relationship between religion and culture also deal with atheism. He presents descriptions of the phenomenon, looks for its causes and points to its positive aspects.

The aim of these considerations is to analyse Halík's concept of atheism, which he understands not so much as a negation of the existence of God but as a way of purification and maturation of faith. These considerations consist of two parts. The first will present the origin and the main types of atheism, identified by the Czech intellectual. The second is his concept of atheism, which has a critical function toward faith, and which is a certain type of existential experience. Halík's selected publications, which are not only the outcome of his scientific reflection on religion but also of his socio-pastoral commitment, will be the point of reference.

2. Origin and Types of Atheism

For a start, one should agree that the concept of atheism provokes many problems. Firstly, it appeared in the context of the monotheistic religions of the Western world, especially the Christian rebellion against the cult of the "divine" emperor in ancient Rome (Clark 2015, 277). Secondly, atheism is related to the specific concept of theistic God as a personal and transcendent being, and the specific religious tradition (Cliteur 2009, 2–4). Thirdly, this term and expressions of atheism are ambiguous (Diller 2016, 7–18). This may mean that one is convinced that there is no God or that one is not convinced that God exists. Therefore, an atheist may be a person who opposes a certain form of theism or one with (or without) a certain conviction. This means that considerations of atheism have to take into account the context in which the term is used.

Therefore, Halík indicates two basic contexts in which atheism appears. Christianity is the first (Halík 2006a, 75–76). According to American scholar Justin L. Barrett, atheism is always a phenomenon secondary to religion. It appears in a specific socio-cultural context, marked by criticism of religious beliefs, and attempts to explain human death (Barrett 2004, 110–111). In this case, that religion is Christianity.

The second context is Enlightenment. The Czech thinker is of the opinion that classic Enlightenment atheism no longer exists. It turned into a vicarious religion (e.g. Nazism, communism) or various forms of agnosticism (Grün and Halík 2017, 88–90; Halík 2010b, 163–164). According to Halík, atheism, which had its roots in the Enlightenment, was ideological, plebeian, and indifferent to questions of God (Halík 2011, 97–103; Halík and Dostatni 2013, 75). Therefore, it does not hesitate

to reject Him (Halík 2005, 99; 2006a, 12). Therefore, Christian religion and the phenomenon of faith, which is of considerable importance, will be the context of the Czech intellectual's reflection on atheism.

Some contemporary philosophers also see Christianity as the context for the origin of atheism. They stress that atheism came into being against Christianity, and it does not exist without it (Ruse 2015, 186). In consequence, one can say that atheism is a product of a specific religion and culture. The religion is Christianity, and the cultural background is provided by the rationalist West-European tradition.

Halík believes that there are two sources of atheism. It is noteworthy that the Czech intellectual is referring to dogmatic atheism in this case. He understands it as a conviction about the non-existence of God or the lack of conviction about His existence. However, he does not want to question the existence of God.

He rejects dogmatic atheism, as it can transform into an intolerant pseudo-religion and repeat the errors of the existing religion (Grün and Halík 2017, 29; 2010a, 74; 2022, 272). Moreover, the metaphysics which lies in its grounds is primitive (Halík 2009, 99). So, what are the two sources of dogmatic atheism?

One is ideological, and the other is theological in nature. In the first case, it emphasises natural materialism and scientism. According to the Czech intellectual, materialism has been discredited because it is information rather than matter that is the primary element of the world. In contrast, science is not an ally of theism or atheism, and the dispute between them cannot be settled by reason (Grün and Halík 2017, 30; 84; Halík 2011, 89–91; 2014, 67). The relationship between atheism and natural materialism of an ideological nature is also mentioned by the British philosopher Julian Baggini (Baggini 2003, 3–10). Modern natural science replaced according to Halík theology as the dominant language of the modern people (Halík 2015, 57). Theology should therefore adopt a scientific language in order to argue in the public square and to be understandable for ordinary people (Kočí and Roubík 2015, 120). However, in the Czech thinker's opinion, science cannot provide support for the purification of faith. If science is not mistaken for ideology, it helps to show theism and atheism as two possibilities of the world interpreted by humans (Halík 2014, 65; Halík and Dostatni 2013, 46–47; 53). Therefore, Halík seeks the reason for atheism in modern theories, in which reality is reduced to material elements and real and justified knowledge is reduced to cognition provided by natural sciences. These theories were the foundation of ideologies, which shape human mentality.

The development of science is also seen as the source of atheism by the world-famous theologian Henri de Lubac. This progress had its consequences in the absolutisation of the cognitive value of science (human power over the world through knowledge), and the elimination of delusions (the source of religion). Therefore, all mystery and transcendence are excluded from the world. However, in de Lubac's opinion, this approach is in contrast with the competencies of natural sciences and with methodological purity. Science and religion deal with different dimensions of reality. They are neutral with respect to each other, and they provide

answers to different types of questions. Science explains the nature of phenomena, whereas religion shows the sense of human history and life. However, they have one feature in common: a critical approach to magical thinking (de Lubac 1969, 20–27; 38–49; 51–53). American theologian Michael J. Buckley, on the other hand, believes that atheism is not the result of the development of science, but rather the result of a lack of religious experience. Science, in his view, supported religion (e.g. Newton's mechanistic system). At the same time, the importance of religious experience was overlooked. God was a deduced being, not an experienced one. Over time, science achieved autonomy, God did not have to fill cognitive gaps, and religion has been questioned (Buckley 2009, 51–60; 81–84; 90–92).

Therefore, it seems that referring to the specific sciences does not have to result in atheism. This is because it is not possible to ask about the existence of God for methodological reasons in sciences. The emergence of atheism is rather linked with the crisis and elimination of metaphysics. The issue of the existence of God appears as part of metaphysical studies, whose objective is to show the ultimate reasons for the existence of reality. Showing such ultimate justifications is not possible on the basis of specific sciences, which seek answers to questions about how reality functions rather than about the ultimate reason for its existence (Szopa 2013, 162–163). Therefore, using Stephen J. Gould's words, science and religion are "non-overlapping *magisteria*" when it comes to the existence of God because they use different study methodologies. The relevant metaphysics plays a much more important role in this case.

According to Halík, the second source of atheism has a theological nature, as it concerns the issue of faith. In his opinion, faith means being open to others and overcoming being focused on oneself. A believer does not see self-fulfilment but rather overcoming oneself as the purpose of life. This is because self-fulfilment often conceals the danger of a narcissistic focus on oneself. Self-fulfilment can be only a side effect of overcoming oneself. On the other hand, faith is mainly a dialogue with "you". In Halík's opinion, in faith, it is always about the other "you". It finds its articulation in the praying dialogue with God, which, however, cannot neglect the dialogue with humans. There is the divine "You" present in meetings with the human "you". Therefore, atheism is caused by the narcissistic inclinations of humans (Halík 2004, 174–175; 2006b, 162; 2010b, 165; 202–203; 2013, 13–15; 2014, 127–128; 143). Atheism is related to the crisis of faith, which no longer involves an opening to God coming in oneself, but a closing of oneself in the circle of one's own affairs. Therefore, following the intuition of the German religious thinker Martin Buber, atheism is caused by a transformation of the dialogic into the monologic lifestyle. Therefore, faith becomes impossible as the dialogue is its essence.

Other researchers who study atheism mention its intellectual-cognitive and social-moral sources. The former include the lack of proper religious knowledge and the difficulties in acquiring it, empirical-practical education and excessive emphasis on human power resulting from scientific accomplishments. The latter include a rebellion against the requirements of faith and abandoning practising it, outrage with the life of Christians and bad examples from history, the materialism of mo-

dern civilisation and orientation towards the earthly life and non-rational reasons (emotions, traumas, lack of time, weakness of one's will) (Szopa 2013, 164).

It has also been pointed out that contemporary atheism is associated with a new context. Its novelty consists in proposing a new morality (without reference to the transcendent reality), warning against fundamentalism (intolerance and aggression), regarding scientific accomplishments as the base for one's actions (especially cognitive sciences) and religious pluralism (culturally conditioned religious experience and concepts) (Skurzak 2020, 18–23).

However, Halík points to two sources of atheism, mentioned above, which partly overlap with those mentioned by other researchers. He also stresses that contemporary atheism is not uniform, but it has many different forms.

"Apatheism", i.e. indifference to religious matters, is one of them. Silence in the face of the Mystery, close to the negative mystic theology, is another (Grün and Halík 2017, 30; Halík 2011, 89–91; 2014, 67; 2022, 153). Apatheism is sometimes called a "grey zone", which includes people basically being indifferent towards religion (Hošek 2015, 3). While negative theology can be regarded as the heir of authentic biblical atheism, which defends the freedom and greatness of the Divine mystery against subjectivisation (Halík 2011, 100).

Moreover, according to Halík, there is reckless atheism (one forgets about God and replaces Him with other gods), self-righteous (God is overshadowed by the inflated human ego), liberating (one gets rid of one's own projections of the Absolute), painful (rejecting one's faith because of suffering), atheism of indifference (one is not interested in the issue of God, as it is not consistent with scientific theorems), of enthusiasm (protest against evil and eagerness to seek good) (Halík 2009, 53; 107–111; 2013, 62–63) and so-called "atheism of the stomach" (one does not ask any questions concerning spiritual reality) (2020, 253).

It is worth noting that there is also another typology of atheism in the literature. We are faced with theoretical (dogmatic) atheism (denial of God's existence after consideration), practical atheism (failure to draw consequences from theism), atheism of inattention (no question about God due to lack of time and interest), cultural atheism (criticism of faith by hedonistic and consumerist culture), scientific atheism (denial of the existence of God on the basis of the application of scientific methods and results) (Fafara 2016, 72–75), and militant atheism (struggle against traditional creeds and institutionalized dogmas) (Roubík 2015, 70).

Thus, Halík mentions a whole range of types of atheism. It is noteworthy that they are not isolated as a result of unrealistic speculations but rather reflections on human existential experiences. In consequence, they can lead to theism or atheism.

Halík is of the opinion that theistic faith and atheism are two points of view and two possible interpretations of reality. This is because God does not exist in the same way as the world and people do. He is primarily concealed and transcendent. It is this concealment of God and the radical dissimilarity of His existence that leaves space for both phenomena (Halík 2009, 58–59; Halík and Dostatni 2013, 142).

Faith and atheism are related to a feature of the world, i.e. an ambivalence which allows for both interpretations (Halík 2007, 79). Therefore, faith and atheism are forms of interpretation of ambivalent reality. They can be perceived and understood in a variety of ways. They give some people access to the cognition of the existence of the Absolute. However, they deny such cognition to others. In the words of the Romanian religious scientist Mircea Eliade, the world can become a sphere of *sacrum* or *profanum*, a place of hierophany or concealing of the Absolute.

In another place, Halík stresses that atheism is the antithesis of naive religion. Its elements include a type of faith which does not experience darkness (2009, 50). Meanwhile, the experience of the concealment of God and uncertainty of His existence and cognition is an inherent part of faith.

In this way, atheism reveals its tragic side. This is because a person can lose confidence and orientation in life, which is guaranteed by faith. In consequence, one starts to experience existential emptiness (Grün and Halík 2017, 20), and one can then start to absolutise relative values uncritically. Paradoxically, one who questions the existence of God, in Halík's opinion, starts to pretend to be Him (Halík 2007, 163). As a consequence of atheism, one can experience the meaninglessness of life and the specific deification of humanity. Therefore, it proves to be self-contradictory, as by denying the existence of God, it absolutises and deifies humanity.

However, Halík claims that nowadays, people tend to incline toward agnosticism rather than atheism. The latter is in crisis, and the future does not belong to it (Grün and Halík 2017, 30; 84; Halík 2011, 89–91; 2014, 67), especially since the Czech thinker points to another modern phenomenon – post-secularism, that is, the return and rebirth of religion.

The advent of the post-secular age was announced in 2001 by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (2022, 123–124). However, opinions can be found that this occurred at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries or the mid-1970s of the 20th century.

Halík stressed that we now see the so-called “return of religion” in several forms. Firstly, as terrorism. Second, in philosophical thought (e.g. J. L. Marion, G. Vattimo, J. Caputo, R. Kearney). Thirdly, in human interest in spirituality (Grün and Halík 2017, 147–155). Halík thus agrees with an ideologically close to him Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who also stresses the return of religion as spirituality. Its main features are subjectivism, emphasising the needs of one's own self and emotionality. The main focus is on the development of one's own personality and the search for the meaning of life. Religion does not have institutional forms but takes the shape of individualised spiritual life. Hence, what we see is a transformation rather than a vanishing of religion (Taylor 2007, 506–513; 519–520; 2011, 252–256). The postmodern era became the post-secular era. However, this does not mean the return of the sacral era and the earlier religious order, but it is rather related to the emergence of different forms and striving for a new spiritual experience. In this situation, there is a need for a deeper inner life and seeking a form of spirituality. It is noteworthy that not only believers engage in spiritual searches but also people who think of themselves as atheists.

In this case, post-secularism would be a result of a certain tension between the traditional religion (religiousness is wearing out) and atheism (atheistic worldview is unsatisfactory). A question would appear between these two options. This is also a question asked by Halík, who also assigns an important role to be played by atheism. He stresses that the only form worth one's attention is a form of atheism which is critical of faith, whose purpose is the purification of faith, and atheism which is a type of existential experience. Let us look at both types.

3. Atheism vs Purification and the Maturation of One's Faith

Halík mainly stresses the critical function of atheism, which applies to a specific type of theism. He believes that only then can it be interesting and inspiring (Halík 2009, 99; 2022, 272). Moreover, in his opinion, atheism in its critical function is topical and important these days, when the return of religion – mentioned above – takes place. At the same time, this atheism should be closer to the tradition of negative theology (2011, 97–103; Halík and Dostatni 2013, 75). Therefore, atheism could be, in the view of some commentators on Halík's thought, integrated into theology as its relevant methodological tool (Kočí and Roubík 2015, 116). Halík believes that its importance arises from the phenomenon of post-secularism, which is present nowadays. Peter Berger's claim of progressive secularisation is no longer valid, and he replaced it with desecularization. Religion does not dwindle, but rather it undergoes the processes of transformation, privatisation, and pluralisation. Halík is also a proponent of a similar theory – that religion transforms rather than vanishes.

In Halík's opinion, atheism is mainly a critical attempt at purifying faith from its illusory, caricatural and outdated forms. The real enemy of faith is not so much atheism but rather superstitions and idolatry. One succumbs to the latter in two cases. Firstly, when one starts to worship and adore the products of the mind. Secondly, when one takes too seriously something that does not deserve it (e.g. money, politics, power) (Grün and Halík 2017, 101; 271–272; Halík 2005, 61; 2009, 12; 2010b, 161; 2011, 35–36; 2013, 60; 2022, 271–272). The Czech intellectual thus approaches the concept of anatheism, or faith renewed, purified in the fire of criticism and deeper (Halík 2022, 115–116). The author of this concept is the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney, according to whom anatheism is a third way between dogmatic theism and militant atheism (Kearney 2010, 3). Anatheism is linked to the critical recovery of sanctity and the return of divinity after the disappearance of its previous form. It is thus not only an experience of loss, but also an opening up to the newness of the divinity with doubts and uncertainties. Its essence is the loss and recovery of the sanctity in human life (2021, 79–83). The experience, therefore, of purification and renewal of faith, is common to Halík and Kearney. They have a positive attitude to it because it is an opportunity to abandon a superficial and immature faith and emergence of a deeper and more mature faith. Halík refers to the way of purifying faith as atheism and Kearney as anatheism.

Elsewhere, Halík points out that atheism performs an iconoclastic function, as its role is to topple idols (Halík and Dostatni 2013, 75). This is because society tends to produce idols by creating images and concepts of God. On the one hand, the fall of idols breaks human piety (Halík 2020, 253). Therefore, the main contribution of atheism to faith is its anti-idolatrous nature. Atheism functions as an interruption of idols (Kočí and Roubík 2015, 118). However, on the other hand, it provides an opportunity for humanity to open up to the mystery of the world (Halík 2007, 32). Atheism is also an ally of religion and faith, as it dismantles everything that is dead and rotten in it. However, the problem lies in that, as a consequence, it may lead not so much to discover the living and true God but to the emergence of new idols (2006a, 86–87).

Simon Weil, the French philosopher, and social activist, thinks along similar lines to Halík's – that atheism is a manifestation of human striving for purification of the idea of God from obsolete sociological, philosophical, and theological influences (Evdokimov 1996, 152). Moreover, in de Lubac's opinion, atheism gives an opportunity for purification, healing, enlightening and safeguarding faith against mixing the human and the divine element (de Lubac 1969, 19).

In this case, Halík sees atheism as a blessing, an opportunity for the purification of faith and opening a new space for it. This is because believers succumb to a harmful temptation to equate God with human notions and expectations (Halík 2006a, 285; 2009, 119). However, in Halík's opinion, one cannot forget that human notions of God change during a human lifetime. What is more, even an atheist has some idea of Him but assigns Him a different ontological status (Halík 2007, 106; 2013, 17–19; Halík and Dostatni 2013, 52). The Czech thinker believes that atheists are sometimes more faithful than they think. They know God under a different name, they reject a caricature of Him, or they struggle with Him in their lives (Halík 2010b, 72). Therefore, they are not completely indifferent to Him, but they rather try to discover the truth about Him.

In the case of believers, atheism is – in Halík's opinion – a moment in the dynamics of faith. It enables one's transition from the world of infantile religious notions and external signs of piety to the maturity of faith and spiritual development (2004, 327). Therefore, the Czech intellectual does not see atheism as being convinced about the non-existence of God or not being convinced about His existence. It is rather a form of criticism of all idolatry and purification of religion from human concepts, convictions, and notions of God. However, a question arises: can they be fully eliminated and avoided? It rather seems not.

Therefore, one should agree with the philosopher of religion, Ireneusz Ziemiński, that images of God are never free from human notions, and each conceptualisation of God is the process of creating an idol. Therefore, idolatry is a constant and inherent element of each religion – only its forms change. Idols become dangerous when people equate them with the object of religion and worship them. One should bear in mind that they exist solely as certain metaphors. Therefore, in Ziemiński's opinion, one should distinguish the real God from His images.

However, if one is aware of their inadequacy with respect to *sacrum*, they can be a tool for establishing and maintaining relations with Him. An idol cannot retain on itself but refer to the transcendent reality with respect to it. Ziemiński points out that some idols are replaced with others, but they are not removed completely. This is because destroying idols would be tantamount to destroying religion itself because they are means of reaching the transcendent *sacrum* (Ziemiński 2020, 145–157; 188–189). Therefore, one can say that a certain form of idolatry in religion, i.e. the creation of human notions and concepts of God, is unavoidable. Therefore, Halík is right when he claims that religion and faith need constant purification. People should bear in mind at all times that God is always greater than our concepts and notions of Him (*Deus semper maior*). He also exceeds our existential and cognitive categories. Purification would be possible owing to atheism performing the function of not so much the negation of God, but rather of criticism of His various conceptual and notional representations.

To Halík, atheism is a kind of existential and spiritual experience. One can describe it as “the silence of God”, His absence or even “death” (Halík 2006a, 88–89; 92–93; 2009, 47). This vision of atheism of the Czech intellectual brings him close to the Canadian philosopher John L. Schellenberg’s concept of “atheism of hiddenness”, whose view is that God does not exist because if he did, he would not be hiding. For if a perfectly loving God existed, He would then be open to a personal relationship with human being, just as a parent is open and present with a child in order to provide opportunities for growth and help in moments of crisis (Schellenberg 2004, 33–34; 2005, 203; 2015 21; 103). Halík, however, draws different conclusions from the hiddenness of God than Schellenberg. For the former, this phenomenon is an existential and spiritual experience for the purification of faith, while the latter treats it as a rationale in favour of dogmatic atheism.

Therefore, Halík emphasises the existential dimension of atheism, which is a kind of religious experience and a stage in faith development. Because it has to pass through the desert of God’s silence and dark night to reach a greater depth and maturity. In such situations, atheism is a manifestation of doubt, which should be taken seriously to prevent faith from becoming an ideology (Halík 2005, 99; 2006a, 12). In Halík’s opinion, this experience sometimes stems from a confrontation with suffering and related existential questions. It also appears at a moment of a crisis of faith and of limited human cognitive capabilities and volitive powers (2006a, 88–89; 92–93; 2009, 47).

In the opinion of the Czech thinker, the experience of the absence of God is a feature in each type of real living faith. An atheist responds to the experience of the absence of God with the conviction of His death, and a believer – with the patience of faith (Grün and Halík 2017, 79). Halík remarks elsewhere that the claim of “God’s death” is incomprehensible and unacceptable to Christians. It is nonsensical both with respect to classic Greek metaphysics and to positivistic atheism. However, the sense of the term can be understood positively, and the deep spiritual experience behind it can be articulated on the grounds of Christianity (Halík 2006a, 89–90). The phrase “God’s death” is used by the Czech thinker to describe

the death of specific notions of God, which are affected by historical, temporal, cultural and personal factors (Grün and Halík 2017, 269–270). Faith has to pass through the experience of death many times so that its existing form, marked with human notions of God, could die. Their death is an indispensable element of the religious maturation of a believer (Halík 2022, 220). Elimination of specific notions and concepts is familiar even to mystics, who often talk in this context about the experience of the “dark night” of senses and spirit (e.g. John of the Cross). Therefore, Halík moves considerations of atheism from the area of metaphysics to the sphere of existential experience, marked by the experience of Divine silence, absence and dying. On the one hand, this experience is difficult for the individual, but on the other, it can bring some benefits, as it leads to more mature faith.

According to some, Halík’s opinion mentioned above can be called “moderate theism”. In which the limitations of theism and atheism are repealed, the strengths of both options are preserved, and religion is authenticated. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the concept of moderate theism applies to our thinking about God rather than to God Himself. This is because He is a non-empirical being, and there is no certainty about His ontic status (Ciesielski 2018, 90–99).

Therefore, the brave concept of complementarity of modern theism and atheism would be close to Halík. Atheism would be linked to a precious existential experience of “God’s death”, which would be the death of idolatry. In this regard, Halík’s concept would be close to the representatives of the so-called “theology of the death of God”. They drew attention to the necessity to free God from a description in concepts present in our culture (idols), the result of which is a kind of objectification of the divine being and postulated the need for a living reference to God in the world by taking into account new ways of His presence and worship (McGrath 2005, 160; Trotter 1965, 46–47). However, they would not be completely free of any notions and representations of God because worshipped notions and symbols are elements of ritual. The existing notions and symbols of God’s presence would be replaced with new ones, and the existing rituals could be replaced with new forms of worship.

4. Conclusion

The aim of these considerations was to analyse Halík’s concept of atheism, which he understands not so much as a negation of the existence of God but as a way of purification and maturation of faith. They consisted of two parts. The first part presents the origin and the main types of dogmatic atheism. The second part presents a concept of atheism which has a critical function toward faith, and which is a type of existential experience.

Firstly, it must be stressed that Halík abandons the dogmatic understanding of atheism as a conviction about the non-existence of God or the lack of conviction about His existence. Therefore, he does not want to question the existence of God. He understands atheism in two main ways. Firstly, he sees it as a way of cri-

ticising and purifying the faith. Its objects include mainly various notions and ideas of God, which lack an adequate concept of Him. Moreover, they are always affected by historical, temporal, cultural, social, and personal factors. Secondly, atheism is a kind of existential and spiritual experience. It involves experiencing God's silence, absence or even "death" in situations marked with suffering, existential questions, doubts, crises of faith and insufficiency of cognitive capabilities and the volitive powers of a person.

Halík enhances atheism understood in this way. He does not regard it as a threat to religion or an obstacle in the life of a believer but rather as an opportunity for the maturation of faith and for opening up new ways of experiencing the presence of God, who is primarily a Mystery to humans. Such atheism is close to the tradition of negative (apophatic) theology, whose proponents believed that positive cognition of God's nature was beyond human cognitive capabilities. They wanted primarily to maintain respect towards the divine Mystery. Hence, they rejected all images and abstract notions as inadequate to describe the nature of God, and they approached His mystery with negative formulas, paradoxes, and antinomies. However, the assumptions of the negative theology are problematic, as they result in religion and faith with no content. However, it seems that they cannot be empty with respect to contents as religion and faith always contain a cognitive element because it is significant in each dimension of human life, despite the fact that human cognition must always be corrected or questioned.

Therefore, Halík's concept of atheism should be regarded as a form of objection to the immaturity of faith and an antithesis to naive human religiousness, that is, an attitude based on infantile imaginations and anthropomorphic notions. In the post-secular era, marked by the return and metamorphosis of religion, the Czech intellectual appeals for mature faith in the case of the modern believer. If faith is to mature, it must be constantly purified and confronted, to use the words of Karl Jaspers, with various "limit situations". It must also be emphasised that purification is not a one-off activity but a permanent process. This effort seems to be worth making, especially given the insufficiency and deficits of traditional religion and the challenges associated with the secularisation and pluralism of religiousness.

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