Shall Thou Reincarnate or Not? A Quest for Spirituality among Czech "Irreligious" People

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Chapter 19

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SHALL THOU REINCARNATE OR NOT?  
A QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY AMONG CZECH  
"IRRELIGIOUS" PEOPLE

Petr Činčala

In-depth interviews with seven respondents provide insights into an alternative spirituality that has blossomed in post-communist Czech Republic. This article describes, analyzes, and assesses the qualitative data from a missional perspective to find out if the alternative spirituality is indeed not compatible with Biblical spirituality; yet, this spirituality has a number of common elements that may lead to find mutual understanding.

Czech Religious Context

An article titled "Shall Thou Reincarnate or Not?" appeared in the Czech atheist newspaper Mladá fronta Dnes on Tuesday, March 10, 2009. The article was describing a dilemma the communist Chinese government faces presently with the 14th Dalai Lama, who is aging in exile. Because the Chinese want to continue to control Tibet, they need to have the process of the new Dalai Lama's reincarnation under control. The Chinese government has even issued a "decree regulating the process of reincarnation."
The Czech Republic used to be a very religious country. Reformation movements took place generation after generation, from the Hussites in the fifteenth century to the Moravian brethren in the seventeenth century. Currently the Czech Republic belongs among the most secularized European countries (Hamplova 2008:703). Despite the recent missionary fervor, the church has not been growing. It might seem as though spiritual power has been in exile, as we have often heard of miracles and numerous baptisms taking place in some remote places. One naturally wonders what is happening. How long can the atheism continue to last? What happens next? Are the Czech Christians prepared to deal with it?

The Czech population is indeed not interested in traditional religion or in churched Christianity (Hamplova 2008:712). However, people do not seem to have definite answers. To describe the relationship of young people to the church, Martinek uses a scale from 1 to 10, 1 meaning active members of the Church and 10 meaning confirmed atheists. In between there are various degrees of belonging. Some people are partially identified with the church, others are unchurched Christians, etc. (Martinek 2006:81, 82). In other words, spirituality and religiosity is quite a complex issue in the Czech Republic. Some people claim to be atheists, and yet they believe in the supernatural (Sak 2000:106, 107). Sociologists speak of “worldview schizophrenia” (Martinek 2006:79).

Low church religiosity does not mean the Czech people are not interested in spirituality. Recent surveys indicate a significant number of Czechs are interested in alternative spirituality (Hamplova 2008:704). It is even suggested that the Czech society should not be called secular but rather unchurched (Hamplova 2008:712).

This trend may not be unique in the Czech Republic, as Thompson points out in her book about spirituality: “Older patterns of religious life may seem antiquated and inadequate. For the first time, people are separating their spirituality from religion. ‘Institutional religion’ has become a negative phrase. . . . People find it natural to devise private belief systems that are independent of historical faith communities of traditions. Many seekers consider themselves ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious’” (Thompson 1995:1, 2). As Jon Dybdahl said in one of his lectures on spirituality: “The question is not anymore whether or not one has spirituality. The question is ‘What kind of spirituality?’”

**Christian Concepts of Spirituality**

Let’s first briefly review what Christian scholars say about spirituality. Christian authors have been dealing with this issue for some time. Based on my literature review, there exist at least three kinds or models of spirituality:
Model A

A classic work on Christian spirituality is Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline*. Foster listed a number of inward, outward, and corporate "spiritual disciplines," which help people to live spiritual lives (Foster 1988). A decade later other authors provided slightly modified lists of spiritual disciplines (Thompson 1995; Ortberg 1997; Whitney 1997). This concept of Christian spiritual life may leave some people with the impression that it is about things to do. If you do this exercise, you will be spiritual. Do this and don't do that. This is a task-oriented spirituality based on effort and duty.

Model B

In this model we are told that there is no universal prescription for spiritual life that applies to everyone alike. Different people may choose to walk their own spiritual paths. There have been various spiritual streams throughout history, and they all come from the Bible (Foster 1998). There are a number of spiritual styles and colors available (Thomas 2000; Schwarz 2009) so that Christians can connect with God naturally (or according to their own preferences).

Model C

Still later we are reminded that spirituality is not a matter of things to do. It is not a matter of intellect alone but also a matter of heart. Our hearts are longing for something deeper; our hearts are hungry for God (Dybdahl 2008). Recent research has pointed this out based on new discoveries in neuropsychology on how mind and heart work together. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate more on this issue; however, it has important implications for spirituality. A healthy connection with God requires emotional health (i.e., healing). Our emotional side is perhaps more important for our spiritual life than our rational side. As the Rockeys explain: "Our feelings dictate our beliefs (the way we think), which then dictate our behaviors. Believe it or not, our feelings are stronger drivers for our behavior than is our logic!" (Rockey & Rockey 2008:174).

How does the emerging alternative spirituality of Czech atheists fit into these models? The purpose of this study is to describe, analyze, and assess the spirituality of the Czech "irreligious" people. This study is limited by a narrow sample of Czech people and cannot be generalized; it serves as a case study. I will focus on qualitative research in an attempt to take a fresh look into areas that are concealed for passers-by.
Research Methodology

For the last four years I have been involved in starting a community mission project, which means meeting secular people every day. It has been a privilege to develop friendships with a number of people who slowly became part of “our” community. We have been working, eating, singing, walking, and talking together.

Because I am part of a religious organization of which many of these people have been suspicious, it has been difficult to reach them with the good news. People are open to community but slow to study the Bible and learn about the Christian God. It is not because they are not open to learn, but perhaps because God first wants me to learn something from them, as my friend Samir argues (Selmanovic 2009:15-19). The invitation to participate in this project gave me a great opportunity to do just that.

To explore the spirituality of a few un-churched Czech people, seven different people were approached in the Generations Center in Liberec, Czech Republic, between April 10, 2009, and August 15, 2009, and all agreed to an in-depth interview. The interview with each participant lasted from 1 to 3 hours. Those people were selected as a convenience sample.

No participant was officially religious or belonged to an organized religion. Of the four religious groupings—Catholic, Protestant, atheist, and other (Cincala 2002:156)—the seven participants categorized themselves either as atheist or other. All of them grew up in atheistic families. However, each of the participants confirmed their spiritual interest. They acquired spiritual knowledge either through reading books, attending seminars dealing with some aspects of spirituality, or encountering some kind of spiritual guru.

Introducing Research Participants

To help understand the spirituality of the respondents, “faith labels” have been created to describe how these people will be identified.

New Spirituality

She is a highly educated woman (university professor) in her 50s. Her grandfather was an evangelical pastor, and her dad was a communist who actually believed in communism. She identified, for example, with a series of books from Neale Donald Walsch called Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue. She stated:
“Spirituality is something that helps me find answers about who I am, where I am coming from, where I go, and why—by heart, by something else than rationality, rather by feeling.”

**Herbal Cleansing**

He is a man in his late 50s who has been dealing with extracts from herbs and healthy nutrition. He was brought up as an atheist. As a result of being raised in the communist regime, he has been resistant toward the church and has looked for alternatives such as Buddhism. Recently he started to inquire into spirituality through herbs. He explained: “People who are cleansed by the herbs are spiritually transformed . . . . I do not belong to any organized group, but through a healthy lifestyle I meet with people who see they should eat healthy. They are different; you can talk with them about something like there is energy here, chakras, and when you meet such a person, you are pleased.”

**Healing Energies**

She is in her 40s, a herb woman. She grew up in a communist family that was deeply convinced the teaching was true. Then she realized it was not so true and started to search. Although she initially believed in God as a person and in Jesus Christ, she found the Bible and Christianity too difficult to understand and sought for “more understandable ways” (reading other books and attending various lectures). Not long ago she found something she considers the ultimate answer for herself. Several times she mentioned experiencing a huge energy, which she gradually has not been afraid to call God’s providence (regardless of what people think about her). She described in detail the teaching about chakras—energy centers in each human. Now she is a deeply spiritual person, working with healing energies for herself and for others: “It is amazing; the time is coming when spirituality will be interconnected. Even scientists are able to measure energy; even doctors are leaning toward alternative medicine and nature.”

**Mystic Searching**

She is in her 30s working in a forest company. Although she grew up as an atheist, she seeks to experience something supernatural. She is open to faith, but more through experience and feelings than through dogmas. She has been influ-
enced a great deal by the works of well-known Czech mystics and yogi authors Eduard Tomáš and his wife Mila. She does not want to be indoctrinated but waits to experience spirituality from within. She reads books and acquires information, as she explains: “Through reading I receive some information about spirituality. . . . I read it and see how it impresses me. This is feeling information. . . . I would like to obtain information about God through me. I read about it; I like it very much, and I expect to experience something more.”

Positive Thinking

She is in her early 30s and at home with her toddler. About 11 years ago, her former boyfriend led her to positive thinking. She studied books such as *Heal Your Body*, *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*, and *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Since that period she has learned to meditate and repeat incantations every morning and evening. She says: “If I do not pray, my day is not good.” She has great testimonies about what has happened in her life as a result of prayers (repeated spells).

Yoga

He is in his mid-30s and works as physiotherapist and masseur. Shortly after the Velvet Revolution he came in touch with books from Květoslav Minařík and learned about the spiritual teaching of yoga and how to self-discipline himself: “I see Buddhism, yoga, and mysticism very equally; they help people to grow.”

Esotericism

He is in his 60s. He is employed as an assistant in a transportation company. He was enrolled in yoga by his wife 25 years ago (during the communist regime), and that was his start. There he learned that “one has to follow certain rules to grow.” Ten years later he moved toward esotericism: “Esotericism is everything. Everything relates to everything. . . . Esotericism is an occult discipline.” This respondent described himself as a rather extreme follower. His disciplined lifestyle caused him to live alone, in isolation.
Data Analysis

Each interview followed a simple question guideline. After an introduction, participants were asked to share how they connect with the spiritual realm and how they nurture their spirituality. Then they were asked to respond to a list of words related to their spiritual life. The idea was for them to talk about what they believed and what they didn’t. The list of words contained terms such as: reincarnation;² horoscopes;³ healer;⁴ chakras;⁵ karma;⁶ reiki;⁷ meditation;⁸ divine in human; source of life, energy, love; sin; death; resurrection; hell; purgatory; harmony of body, spirit, and soul.⁸

Thus, the following concepts emerged based on the interviews as relevant to the respondents who depicted them and elaborated on them: (1) Higher Energy—God; (2) Chakras; (3) Reiki; (4) Healers; (5) Horoscopes; (6) Meditation; (7) Self-discipline; (8) Serving Others; (9) Reincarnation and Karma.

Table 1 shows these terms linked to the respondents. If a term is not marked by an X, the respondents either did not believe or agree with that term or they simply did not work with it. Interestingly, the respondents work with 5 to 7 of these spiritual concepts on average. Let’s take a closer look at these terms.

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Higher Energy—God

Six out of seven respondents placed significant emphasis on supernatural energy, higher energy, or God. One respondent described God as a creative power, which gives meaning to everything. “God is not an imaginary power. His presence is in everything.”⁹ Another respondent spoke of God as of light: “tremendous power which created everything here.”¹⁰
Although respondents spoke about God’s will, about encountering God’s sovereignty, His endless intelligence, a source, they did not seem to consider God as a being, a person. One respondent noted that God “is not a being, I would say because I do not understand how such a being could be in each one of us and in everything. Yet, God is in every person, animal, in everything . . . . God is source—all around.”

Most of the respondents would agree there is God inside of us. “I believe we all have a bit of divine in us—that does not mean we are gods, but we have a tiny bit.” Surprisingly, the qualitative research indicates that this does not seem to refer to heroism of humans, to their good skills, or to their ego. This notion refers more to God as a higher power, almost as the Christian God, only it is not a being, and one does not have to seek from without (in cathedrals, in the Scriptures) but from within. A person who discovers God from within is challenged to “work up to the unity with God. Unity with God is not a matter of course; it is the brightest goal.” Unity with God refers to proprieties such as humbleness, sacrificial service, justice, perfection, etc.

**Chakras**

Three respondents work with these “energetic centers in the body,” and one respondent senses a need to “wake them up” in order to have spiritual experiences. Lower chakras are of an earthly nature, such as clarifying our relationships with our parents, setting a right relationship with our spouse, sexual life, work life, and at another level, our personality. The fourth chakra connects with the heart and involves managing the emotions. To connect with the fifth chakra means to choose polite and nice words, not to hurt anybody. The sixth chakra allows a connection with our inner space and with information from our previous lives. The seventh chakra means connecting with the highest spiritual wisdom through spirit and soul all the way up to God’s wisdom. An atheist who refuses God cannot work with chakras at all. “Chakras are supposed to work all at once; I would like to develop them all; they are interconnected. They should be balanced—that’s optimal.”

**Reiki**

Whereas chakras work with energy from within, reiki works with outer energy, and not all want to cross the line to work with an energy from outside. In our study only two respondents out of seven identified with reiki. Others are either
afraid, do not have good experiences, or are not interested. *Reiki* works with energy that can heal. "A person who is attuned into *reiki* can warm other persons through touch and supply energy."18 Such persons can help others—supply energy, "un-block negative blocks, and heal mentally as well as physically."19

### Healers

These are people who know how to work with energy and use it to help other people. There are a number of people who do this officially and have a trade certificate to do this, and there are others who do this unofficially in their leisure time. In both cases, it might be a good source of income. Such people provide counseling, help people with everyday issues and relational problems, use alternative medicine to cure illnesses, or simply bring about a self-curing process in their clients. Although respondents are aware of the fact that not all healers can help and "some cheat,"20 four respondents approve of healers and recommend them to others.

### Horoscopes

Since 1989, horoscopes have become a part of societal culture in the Czech Republic. Newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio stations speak of horoscopes. It is beyond this study to examine how seriously people take their horoscopes in general. "I acknowledge astrological horoscopes . . . . It is possible to use them as guide and motivation. It helped me in times I needed it," said one respondent.21 "I feel it works. People are born in certain disposition of stars, and it influences them," said another respondent.22 The most radical interviewee in spiritual matters explained: "Horoscopes are like business cards of people. Horoscopes describe powers which a person gets for this life. . . . Horoscopes tell us how we are alike. Horoscopes convey dispositions one has when he/she is born in some sign."23 Four respondents did not work with horoscopes or believe in them.

### Meditation

All respondents confirmed the fact that they are learning and practicing meditation. Various techniques of meditation are used to "quiet down."24 "If I do not incant, my day is not good. . . . I repeat statements such as 'I believe in power much more powerful and stronger than me.' It strengthens all cells of my body," stated a proponent of positive thinking.25 When speaking about meditation, some respon-
dents also used the term “prayer.” In relationship to meditation, two respondents mentioned reaching an alpha state of mind. The alpha state of mind is an altered state of consciousness.

**Self-discipline**

Four respondents out of seven mentioned this concept. Although self-discipline goes logically along with belief in reincarnation, not all respondents believing in reincarnation listed self-discipline as part of their spiritual practice. Self-discipline is meant for growth and perfection. For some it includes a healthy lifestyle and nutrition, and for others it takes different means. “Unity with God does not happen by itself; it is possible to achieve through focused work on my spirituality. Most of the time, however, persons cannot manage such task in one human life.” “One has to 'eat humble pie' and start from within. If I work on myself, I shine. People notice how I act, how my family is, and that is my task.” Self-discipline leads to serving others.

**Serving Others**

Interestingly, all who place emphasis on self-discipline are also intentionally engaged in serving others (with the exception of respondent 7, who claims to love other people but is a loner by his nature). Serving others (i.e., doing good deeds, caring for and loving others) is considered a part of spirituality. “My spirituality involves work for others.... A path of love for people is very important.” For “love is God.”

**Reincarnation and Karma**

Research conducted in 1995 by IBS in the Czech Republic stated that 27 percent of Czechs believe in some way in reincarnation (Novotný & Vojtíšek 1995:39). There is no study available giving the latest figures about the percentage of Czechs believing in reincarnation. However, experience suggests that the percentage has grown rather than declined. Dealing with the spirituality of Czech youth, Martinek claims the most important spiritual question they are interested in is the question about the afterlife (Martinek 2006:79).

All respondents in our study believe in reincarnation. “After death the physical body falls off, and soul flies up high, recovers, and then during the time of conception goes back into . . . .” Why is this belief so attractive for participants?
It provides an explanation for things “we would otherwise not be able to explain.”

It is said to be “the only possibility how God can be just and righteous.”

It gives people some hope: “I believe in reincarnation . . . . When my dad died, it encouraged me that he will come back. I even saw him in one child.”

It may open a way to connect with God because “karma is the only barrier of our connection with God.”

Another respondent explains it more: “Karma is heavy baggage you carry from a past life, and you have to empty it in this life.”

It may bring motivation for living a better life: “I like the fear of being reincarnated into something you do not want to be—that brings you up; if you are killer, you become a dog.”

Missiological Assessment

When respondents were asked to relate to Christian terms such as “resurrection” or “sin,” they did not have much to say. Such terms are foreign to them. On the other hand, some of the respondents did not hesitate to use Christian terminology (such as God, grace, providence, expiation, law, transgression) but with meanings other than Biblical. The interviews indicated exposure of the respondents to church and the Christian faith. However, they were all resistant to and reserved about the Christian faith for one reason or another. One respondent had a bad experience with church in childhood; another did not see spirituality in churches; others did not understand dogma, blamed the church for forcing people into faith, criticized the church for mixing pagan customs with Christianity, and refused rational and intellectual approach to faith. The church and Christian faith in general were not perceived as plausible for any of the respondents.

Yet, they have been open to be part of our community center, developing relationships with Christians and doing things together. Two have participated in the Gospel Choir, two were involved in health programs, one has been volunteering, and one has attended the Family Center. Relationships and meaningful involvement in service are important to them. One said: “I don’t see spirituality in churches. I see that in the Dalai Lama and other lamas in Nepal who teach runaway children.”

One described how she was scared of the Seventh-day Adventist church as a sect, but when she realized through the internet that Health Expos, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Country Life Restaurants, Gospel Choirs, and Com-
Community Centers are connected with that church, she said in positive amazement: “Wow, they are everywhere, and they do not force anybody.”

Throughout the interviews one could notice that spirituality for the respondents is a matter of heart and feeling. Things may not need to make sense to them intellectually, but they must make sense emotionally. In this case, model C of Christian spirituality described earlier applies. However, their spirituality is deaf to Christian dogmas, proof texts, and rational arguing. They are receptive to experience, intuition, and supernatural power. (Would the Holy Spirit work with that?)

The spirituality of the respondents was not based on a uniform to-do list. It may have involved common disciplines, but it was subjective and personalized, it evolved over time based on their preferences, and it fit their needs as a result of trial and error. (This aspect somewhat reflects Christian spirituality model B described earlier.)

Although such spirituality is open to logic and wisdom, the authority of God’s Word has not been taken into account, and God is not viewed as a being/persona. Such “believers” have written off church, and the proclamation of the Gospel alone will not help to restore their trust. Only God knows whether such “believers” are reachable for God’s kingdom. They may not accept the “Truth,” but would they accept Christ? Only time will show if our mission and working together opened the door of their hearts for the Gospel.

**Conclusion**

This study was intended to provide a glimpse into the spirituality of a few Czech unchurched people, former and present atheists. We described, analyzed, and assessed the spirituality of selected individuals. We realized spirituality is present and blossoming in the stream of secular society. Unfortunately, that kind of spirituality is not acceptable for Christians, and from a human point of view, it is impossible to stop or change it (even a decree regulating the process of reincarnation could not prevent the spreading of that kind of spirituality).

This kind of spirituality is not Biblical; however, there are common denominators with Christian spirituality. Spirituality means connecting with God (god) and higher power; to be free from evil character, from unhealthy emotions, and from material burdens; to live selflessly, serve those in need, follow God’s will, and love others. Spirituality is a life-long process of growth and healing. It provides an explanation about life and death, good and evil, and hope for justice and the ultimate solution of evil.
The challenges remain in both Christian and secular spiritual camps: seeking secular people and being able to connect their spiritual experience with a loving God, their Creator, and to accept the authority of His Word. Christians must allow God’s transforming power to change their lives into selfless ministry for the sake of this lost world.

Notes

1Reincarnation is a religious belief that some essential part of a living being survives physical death to be reborn in a new body. See “Reincarnation,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation (accessed February 19, 2010).
2Astrological horoscopes refer to the astrologer’s interpretation of events based on the position of sun, moon, and planets, or based on calendar significance of events. Thus, horoscopes allow one to understand what is happening and what is to come. See “Horoscopes,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horoscope (accessed February 19, 2010).
3Healers have become common in post-communist Czech society. They work with alternative medicine, and provide counseling or healing cures to people. People learn about healers through word of mouth or through the web. A list of official healers in Prague, for example, is available at: http://prirodni-leciva.cz/seznam-lecitelu-praha/m-208/ (accessed February 19, 2010).
4Chakras are believed to be energy centers located in the human body. There are seven major chakras or wheels of light. See “Chakras,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chakra (accessed February 19, 2010).
6Reiki is a spiritual practice that comes from belief that there is universal spiritual energy that can be used for healing on physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels. Anyone can access this energy by means of the attunement process carried out by a Reiki Master. See “Reiki,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reiki (accessed February 19, 2010).
7Meditation in this study refers to Eastern techniques such as Buddhist meditation. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meditation#Buddhism (accessed February 19, 2010).
8The non-Christian concepts were selected based on preliminary research of the Czech spiritual market.
12Respondent 1, April 12, 2009.
13Ibid.
A Quest for Spirituality 297

15 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
16 Respondent 1, April 12, 2009.
17 Respondent 2, April 18, 2009.
18 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
20 Ibid.
21 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
26 Respondent 2, April 18, 2009; respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
28 Respondent 1, April 12, 2009.
29 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
31 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
32 Respondent 1, April 12, 2009.
37 Respondent 3, April 24, 2009.
38 Respondent 2, April 18, 2009.
40 Ibid.


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**Chapter 19**


**Chapter 20**