

Generational shifts in scientific atheism: Ideology and strategy in 20th century Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

The paper delves into scientific atheism, distinguishing between atheist thought as mere opinion and its development into a comprehensive worldview under Marxist-Leninist influence. It explores scientific atheism's role as both a philosophical discipline and an ideology that has significantly impacted philosophers from our region across generations. Initially, scientific atheism represented an ideological commitment to materialism and rationalism. However, for subsequent generations, it evolved into a pragmatic strategy for consolidating political power, fostering social unity, and enhancing state control. This study not only outlines the integration of dialectical and historical materialism into Czechoslovakia's mid-20th-century scientific and education systems but also examines the shifting perception of scientific atheism through different philosophical generations, highlighting its practical significance in Marxist-Leninist-dominated regions.

Keywords: scientific atheism, Czechoslovakia, secular morality, education, generations

Introduction

The present paper delves into the ideological and strategic shifts in scientific atheism within Czechoslovakia during the 20th century. While much of the existing literature has explored Marxist-Leninist atheism's role as a tool for ideological state control and its impact on societal structures, there has been limited focus on the evolution of its application across different generations of intellectuals and political leaders. The present study contributes to filling that gap by examining how scientific atheism transitioned from an ideological end to a pragmatic tool for consolidating political power, promoting social unity, and facilitating state control in the context of Czechoslovakia. By providing a generational analysis, the present paper offers a fresh perspective on the practical significance of scientific atheism, revealing its dynamic role in the shifting political and social landscapes of the region.

A key motivation for this study is the recognition that younger generations, particularly those born in the late 1980s and beyond, have only a limited understanding of what scientific atheism was and its profound impact on the history and socio-cultural development of our society. The present paper seeks to clarify and reintroduce this crucial concept, which played a significant role in shaping the world as we know it today. By revisiting and analysing the influence of scientific atheism, this study not only contributes to academic discourse but also provides an essential historical perspective for contemporary scholars and the broader public who may be unfamiliar with this aspect of our shared history.

Furthermore, this paper explores how scientific atheism influenced various aspects of socio-cultural life, particularly in the realms of education, morality, and science. The study implies that scientific atheism was not merely an ideological stance but a force that shaped educational curricula, moral values, and scientific approaches in Czechoslovakia. By emphasizing a materialist understanding of the world, scientific atheism played a central role in the formation of secular morality and the promotion of scientific literacy, which were seen as essential for the development of a socialist society. This analysis highlights the deep and lasting impact that scientific atheism had on the cultural and intellectual fabric of Czechoslovak society, providing insights into how these historical forces continue to influence contemporary thought and societal norms.

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It is important to note that the views and arguments presented in this paper regarding atheism and scientific atheism are based on historical understanding and opinions that were accepted at the time of publication of the sources used. University textbooks (scripts) from 1975 emphasized the significant difference between atheism and theoretical atheism.² Both of those forms of atheism are united by the idea of rejection of the existence of God, but simple (common-sense) atheism misses the necessary philosophical and scientific foundation on which scientific atheism is built. Additionally, simple atheism predates Marxist atheism. According to Kubovič (1975), Marxist-Leninist atheism is the only rigorous and scientific form of atheism.³

Atheism and scientific atheism

Academic literature commonly distinguishes between pre-Marxist atheism and Marxist-Leninist atheism by examining their historical context, philosophical underpinnings, and political implications.⁴ These distinctions are crucial for comprehending the development of atheist thought and its impact on society, particularly in the context of socialist and communist movements. Pre-Marxist atheism refers to forms of atheism that existed before the development of Karl Marx's philosophical and economic theories in the mid-19th century. This form of atheism was largely philosophical and often individualistic, focusing on scepticism towards religious beliefs, critique of organized religion, and the promotion of reason and empirical evidence as the basis for knowledge. It included a variety of thinkers, from ancient philosophers like Epicurus to Enlightenment figures such as David Hume and Voltaire. These thinkers often emphasized the importance of human reason, science, and empirical observation, arguing against the existence of deities and the supernatural based on a lack of evidence.

On the other hand, Marxist criticism was not satisfied with a mere negation of religion (Daňhel, 1977, p. 9). Marxist-Leninist atheism is deeply intertwined with the political and economic theories of Karl Marx and further developed by Vladimir Lenin. Marx regarded religion as 'the opium of the people', a tool used by the ruling classes to oppress the working class by offering them the promise of a better afterlife and diverting their attention from their exploitation. Marxist atheism involves not only a rejection of gods but also a critique of religion's societal role. It is a component of a wider socio-economic ideology that aims to overthrow capitalist systems and establish a society without social classes or a state. Lenin integrated atheism into the political strategy of the Bolsheviks, promoting scientific atheism and eradicating religious belief as part of the Soviet state's policy. This policy was later adopted by countries under Soviet influence, such as Czechoslovakia. Marxist-Leninist atheism was institutionalized and became a state-sponsored effort to eradicate religious beliefs through education, propaganda, and sometimes repression, aiming to replace religious ideology with a scientific, materialist worldview.⁵

Atheism and Marxist-Leninist atheism differ in their philosophical foundations. Pre-Marx atheism was primarily based on philosophical scepticism and rationalism, while Marxist-

² In this context, the textbook separates atheism from other forms of religious critique (as they are called), such as: indifferentism, anticlericalism, religious scepticism, freethinking, deism, or pantheism. Even some of those positions today's scholars would not consider a form of religious critique, the authors of the textbook state that they played an important role in the history of the fight against the church, clergy, religious cult, and ideology.

³ The presented paper does not distinguish between scientific and Marxist-Leninist atheism. On the contrary, it uses these terms synonymously and interchangeably.

⁴ One of the most detailed works focusing on the distinction and interrelations of different forms of atheism is Tibor Halečka's text *On the questions of the relationship between Marxist-Leninist and bourgeois atheism* [K otázkam vzťahu marxisticko-leninského a buržoázneho ateizmu] (Halečka, 1976).

⁵ One might say that scientific atheism became a philosophical attempt to change human nature. For a better understanding of the issue of human nature see, e.g., Švaňa (2023).

Leninist atheism is grounded in a specific socio-political ideology that sees religion as a tool of oppression. Pre-Marx atheism had no or only very limited political implications. It did not inherently advocate for a specific political system, whereas Marxist-Leninist atheism is an integral part of a revolutionary ideology aimed at establishing a communist society. While both forms critique religion, Marxist-Leninist atheism specifically targets the abolition of religion as part of its broader goal of societal transformation, viewing it as essential to the liberation of the proletariat. In Marxist-Leninist regimes, atheism was promoted through state mechanisms (in our context it was the Department of scientific atheism at the Institute of philosophy of the Slovak academy of sciences, or/and atheism as a university study programme), unlike pre-Marx atheism, which was more of a personal or philosophical stance without direct state enforcement (McLellan, 1987). Atheism reflected by Marxist-Leninist authors emphasizes not only the scientific rejection of religious ideas, nor the historical-philosophical and natural-scientific critique of religion, but above all the unveiling of its essence from a materialist point of view. Atheism is understood as one of the most important aspects of the materialist worldview and materialist philosophy (AS, 1984, pp. 49–50; SVA, 1983, p. 43).⁶

As emphasized by the authors of scientific atheism, one might find three foundational differences between atheism in the pre-Marx period and Marxist-Leninist atheism emphasizing the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of Marxist thought (Jablokov, 1975, pp. 9–17). Atheist thought before Marx did not necessarily incorporate a systematic methodology for understanding societal development and change. It was more focused on critiquing religion from a philosophical, moral, or empirical standpoint without a unifying theory of history. Marxist-Leninist atheism introduced historical materialism as a framework for understanding the progression of human societies through the lens of material conditions and class struggles. According to this perspective, religion is considered a component of the superstructure that emerges from the material foundation of society. Its purpose is to serve the interests of the ruling class by legitimising and perpetuating their dominance. Atheism, in this context, is not only a lack of belief in deities but also a criticism of the social roles of religion. Scientific atheism, understood as Marxist-Leninist atheism, is undoubtedly a fundamental aspect of the Marxist-Leninist worldview (Okulov, 1977).

Pre-Marxist atheism did not have a specific philosophical system for analysing change and development within the natural world and human society. The critique of religion was more static and did not necessarily involve a dynamic model of change. The authors of scientific atheism adopted dialectical materialism, which partly derived from Hegelian dialectics but was applied in a materialist context. It provides a method for understanding the contradictions within society, including religious beliefs, as drivers of change. This approach frames atheism as part of the broader process of societal evolution towards communism, where the need for religious belief diminishes as material conditions and consciousness improve.

Before Marx, atheism often used natural science to challenge religious explanations of the universe, focusing on rationality and empirical evidence. However, this was not always connected to a broader social or historical theory. In contrast, Marxist-Leninist atheism emphasized the role of natural science in discrediting religious worldviews and validating a materialist understanding of reality. However, it goes further by integrating science into its socio-political agenda, arguing that scientific progress supports historical and dialectical materialism by revealing the material basis of existence and fostering the conditions for a communist society.

These distinctions highlight the extent to which Marxist-Leninist atheism goes beyond mere disbelief in gods. It encompasses a comprehensive worldview that includes a specific

⁶ AS is an abbreviation for *Ateistický slovník* – (AS) VAŠEČKA, F. et al. (1984): *Ateistický slovník* [Atheistic dictionary]. Bratislava: Pravda and SVA for *Slovník vedeckého ateizmu* – (SVA) VAŠEČKA, F. et al. (1983): *Slovník vedeckého ateizmu* [Dictionary of scientific atheism]. Bratislava: SAV.

interpretation of history, a methodology for understanding change, and a belief in the power of science as part of the struggle for a classless society. It shows how atheism, within the Marxist-Leninist framework, is deeply interwoven with the broader goals of societal transformation and the emancipation of the working class, making it a far more politicized and activist form of atheism compared to its pre-Marx counterparts.

Marxist literature incorporates historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and scientific atheism into a comprehensive philosophical system that encompasses areas such as ethics, logic, and aesthetics (Kubovič, 1975). This integration demonstrates that Marxism is not solely an economic or political theory, but a complete worldview that aims to comprehend and transform all aspects of human society and consciousness.

Historical materialism is the foundation of Marxist theory, explaining how society evolves through different stages of development driven by material conditions and class struggles. It is a methodological approach to understanding history that emphasizes the primacy of the material base over ideological superstructures, including religion, ethics, and law. This approach also influences Marxist ethics and aesthetics by grounding them in the material conditions of society. For instance, ethical and aesthetic values are considered to be historically contingent, reflecting the interests and conditions of specific classes at particular times.

Dialectical materialism is the philosophical foundation of Marxism, applying dialectics to materialism. It asserts that reality is characterized by contradiction, change, and interaction, leading to the development of new syntheses over time. It influenced Marxist logic and epistemology by providing a dynamic framework for understanding truth and knowledge. In aesthetics, dialectical materialism provides a framework for analysing art and culture as processes that both reflect and contribute to societal change.

Scientific atheism reflects Marxism's commitment to a materialist understanding of the universe, free from supernatural explanations. It's an application of dialectical and historical materialism to the critique of religion, advocating for a worldview based on natural science and empirical evidence. The ideology of scientific atheism informs Marxist ethics by prioritising values based on human needs and societal well-being over holy commandments. It also influences Marxist aesthetics by encouraging art that reflects the real conditions of life and the potential for human liberation. All of these components are interwoven within a coherent philosophical system that aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of and prescription for human society. Ethics, logic, and aesthetics in Marxism are not abstract or universal principles but are deeply connected to the material conditions of life and the goal of achieving a classless society. This holistic approach is what distinguishes Marxism as a unique and revolutionary ideology, aiming not only to interpret the world but to change it.

The main feature of the whole Marxist-Leninist worldview system, of which scientific atheism is an important part, is not only the understanding, but above all the transformation, of reality (Okulov, 1977). Contemporary literature defines scientific atheism as a philosophical, naturalistic, and historical critique of any religion. Its subject is supposed to be the theory of religion as a social phenomenon. It is also the study of the history of atheism. Scientific atheism is understood as a philosophical discipline closely related to other philosophical disciplines (Kubovič, 1975).

The practical meaning and functions of scientific atheism

The practical meaning and functions of scientific atheism, especially within the context of Marxist-Leninist ideology, extend beyond the mere rejection of religious belief to encompass broader socio-political and educational roles. Scientific atheism was not only a component of a philosophical worldview but also served specific functions in societies that had embraced Marxist-Leninist principles. One of the main functions which were proclaimed was education. Scientific atheism was used as a means for the promotion of scientific literacy. It advocated for

education grounded in scientific knowledge and the empirical method, aiming to replace religious explanations with scientific understanding of the natural world. As well, it encouraged critical thinking and scepticism, teaching individuals to question unfounded beliefs and to rely on evidence-based reasoning.

A more useful function for the political system which praised scientific atheism was its socio-political function. Ideas coming from atheism were a tool for ideological state control. In Marxist-Leninist countries such as Czechoslovakia (in the second half of 20th century), scientific atheism was used as a mechanism to consolidate state control, diminish the power of religious institutions, and promote a unified ideological framework. It was seen as a means to liberate the working class from the “opium” of religion, which Marx argued dulled their awareness of their socio-economic conditions and hindered their revolutionary potential. The ambition of scientific atheism was to liberate people from religious superstitions (Gavalier, 1975).

One of the more humane objectives was the formation of a secular morality. The unfolding of cultural and ethical functions of scientific atheism contributed to the development of a secular morality based on humanism and social justice, rather than holy commandments. Thoughts based on an atheist worldview played a role in shaping a secular cultural identity, promoting values such as equality, community, and solidarity that are seen as essential for the development of a socialist society.

Scientific atheism played a significant role in scientific advancement by prioritising empirical evidence and the scientific method. Its aim was to encourage technological and scientific advancements that can improve societal well-being and economic efficiency (Graham, 2014; Hodovský, 1975).

However, one of the most important roles of scientific atheism was a critique and transformation of society. Without exaggeration, it can be claimed that use of scientific atheism as an instrument for social critique was its most significant goal. Scientific atheism served as a tool for critiquing existing social and political structures, challenging traditional power hierarchies that were often justified through religious authority. Atheism was used as a facilitator of social change. It was envisioned as facilitating social change by promoting a materialist understanding of history and society, which was seen as essential for the transition to socialism and, eventually, communism. Scientific atheism, within the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology, was described and utilized as a tool in the struggle for the victory of communist ideals (Okulov, 1977, p. 14). This perspective is anchored in the broader Marxist critique of religion and its socio-political implications. Marxism views religion as a form of ideological superstructure that reflects and reinforces the economic base of society. According to Karl Marx, religion serves as the “opium of the people”⁷ by providing an illusory comfort that distracts from the pains and injustices of the real, material world. According to this perspective, religion is a tool employed by the ruling classes to maintain their power by promoting a worldview that legitimizes and naturalizes the existing social order.

Scientific atheism advocates for the use of science and rationality to comprehend the world. It argues that a scientific comprehension of nature and society can free humanity from the constraints of religious superstition and ignorance, promoting a materialist worldview that is deemed crucial for the establishment of a communist society.

In practice, the implementation and impact of scientific atheism have varied significantly across different historical contexts and regimes. In the Soviet Union and other socialist states, such as Czechoslovakia, these functions were pursued through state policies, educational reforms, and mass campaigns. However, there has been considerable debate surrounding the

⁷ The full quote reads: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx, 1970, p. 3).

effectiveness and ethical implications of these efforts, with critics highlighting the suppression of religious freedom and the coercive aspects of state-imposed atheism. To date, the public has not had the courage or will to fully address these issues.

Scientific atheism through different generations of intellectuals

The first attempt to develop scientific atheism on an institutional level in Slovakia dates back to the early 1960s. Based on a resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Republic, the Department of Scientific Atheism was established at the Philosophical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. However, it was not sustained and ceased to exist by 1967. A revival began during the process of normalization in 1970 when, following a resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, the Slovak Academy of Sciences established the Office of Scientific Atheism (later renamed the Institute of Scientific Atheism). This institution operated successfully until 1990, and in cooperation with partner institutions throughout the Republic, raised a strong generation of scholars in the field of scientific atheism as a specialisation of ‘philosophical science, dialectical and historical materialism’ (Kolárová, 2000).

The Prague Spring of 1968 marked a pivotal moment in Czechoslovakia’s history, with significant implications for the discourse on scientific atheism. During this period, a more open intellectual climate allowed for the emergence of critical perspectives on state-imposed atheism, particularly from dissident groups who questioned the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of Marxist-Leninist atheism. One prominent figure was Václav Havel, whose works, such as *The power of the powerless* [Moc bezmocných] (1990), although written later (1978), reflect the broader dissident critique of the authoritarian application of Marxist-Leninist ideology, including scientific atheism. Havel and other dissidents argued that the rigid imposition of atheism was symptomatic of a broader totalitarian impulse that stifled individual freedom and authenticity. In his essay, he provides a profound critique of the authoritarian application of Marxist-Leninist ideology in Czechoslovakia, which included the state’s imposition of a rigid, atheistic worldview. Although Havel does not explicitly address scientific atheism by name, his analysis of the regime’s use of ideology as a tool of oppression encompasses the atheistic dogma promoted by the state. Havel argues that this ideology, which he describes as ‘almost a secularized religion,’ strips individuals of their personal conscience and freedom, forcing them to live within a lie. The state’s insistence on scientific atheism can be seen as part of this broader ideological apparatus that demanded conformity and suppressed dissent. Through his critique, Havel illuminates how the rigid imposition of atheism, like other aspects of the regime’s ideology, stifled individual freedom and authenticity, contributing to the pervasive atmosphere of fear and complicity that characterized life under the post-totalitarian regime.

Existentialist and neo-Marxist thinkers, such as Milan Machovec, began to articulate alternative visions of atheism that emphasized individual freedom, existential authenticity, and a critique of totalitarianism. Machovec, a philosopher and former Marxist who became increasingly critical of the regime, was influential during this time. His book *Jesus for atheists* [Ježíš pro ateisty / Ježíš pro moderního člověka] (2023) exemplified his effort to reconcile Marxism with humanist and existentialist values, challenging the state’s dogmatic approach to atheism and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of spirituality and morality. The subsequent period of normalization, however, saw a reassertion of orthodox Marxist-Leninist atheism, with the state cracking down on these dissident voices. The regime’s response to the Prague Spring included purging intellectuals from academic institutions and reinstating strict ideological controls, as seen in the persecution of the signatories of Charter 77, a human rights manifesto that included critiques of the state’s suppression of religious freedom.

Scientific atheism could be seen as an ‘end’ in itself, a goal aligned with the broader Marxist-Leninist project of creating a secular, rationalist society free from religious “superstitions”.

However, as the political, social, and cultural landscapes evolved in the post-war era, the role of scientific atheism transitioned. For the new generation of philosophers and policymakers, it became more of a ‘tool,’ a means to achieve specific ideological, educational, and political objectives within the changing context of their societies. This shift reflects the adaptability of Marxist-Leninist ideology to new circumstances, using scientific atheism strategically to consolidate state power, promote a unified secular identity, and address the challenges of modernization and globalization.

Initially, scientific atheism represented an ideological commitment to materialism and rationalism. For later generations of philosophers and leaders, it became a pragmatic strategy to consolidate political power, promote social unity, and facilitate state control. The following sections of this paper elaborate on this suggestion through the different areas influenced by scientific atheism.

It must be mentioned that atheist thinking has a different story in the history of Czech and Slovak culture, even though Czechoslovakia was one country during the 20th century. Therefore, although I consider Czechoslovakia in this text, I will now focus more on today’s Slovakia. Using the Marxist terminology of scientific atheism and distinguishing Marxist atheism from bourgeois atheism, it can be stated that bourgeois (pre-Marxist) atheism was absent in Slovakia. While it is not possible to identify a systematic pre-Marxist atheist conception in Slovak history, various forms of anticlericalism and idealist critiques of religion appeared. Deistic critiques of religion are also identifiable in earlier history (turn of the 18th and 19th centuries) through figures like Pavel Michalko and Samuel Tešedík, followed by representatives of the Slovak national revival such as Janko Král’, Samuel Štefanovič, and Ján Horárik. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, around the time of the First World War, atheist ideas emerged among nationally conscious Slovak intelligentsia known as “Hlasisti”, and in the work of Edmund Borek (VA, 1980). A little later, in the 1920s and 1930s, these ideas were present in a group of left-leaning intellectuals called the “Davists”.

One of the most important promoters and theorists of atheism in Czechoslovakia in the first half of the 20th century was Stanislav K. Neumann (1875–1947). Initially, Neumann was a proponent of spontaneous and lively anticlericalism, which later evolved into materialistic atheism. An example of his early attitudes can be found in his work “Outside the Church”, written for anti-clerical propaganda purposes. In subsequent years, he continued to spread atheism mostly through journalism (Hudečková, 1977).

Neumann’s critical attitude towards religion was lifelong. Initially, it was based on exacerbated individualism, later transitioning to anarchism, leading him to formulate anarchist atheism. This appears especially in his early works such as *Mimo cirkve* [Outside the Church] (1903) and *Bez náboženství* [Without religion] (1904). Before arriving at the position of Marxism-Leninism, he temporarily relied on the platform of Czech socialism to understand atheism. This transition is best observed in his text *Národní církev* [National church] (1918), where he argued for the separation of state and church (Hroch & Zouhar, 1978). Neumann believed modern man does not need religion for life (civil or professional) or morality. On the contrary, he saw religion as a danger that needed opposition, associating the struggle against the church and religion with the cultural liberation of man (Hroch & Zouhar, 1978).

Another notable atheist was Emanuel Borek, who systematically expressed his atheist position in *Sociálna demokracia a náboženstvo* [Social democracy and religion] (1913). Borek argued that the church’s influence is harmful to society and that religion is the basis of an unscientific worldview, acting as a conservative element preventing social progress. Václav Chlumecký, in the context of my hypothesis, also held similar views. His literary work *Janko Kosák v nebi* [Janko Kosák in heaven] (1914) argued against religion, hypocrisy, and a corrupt worldview. Although his stance cannot be described as scientific atheism, it represented a form of materialistic pantheism (Hajko, 1986).

The epistemological foundations of pre-Marxist, Marxist, and neo-Marxist atheism differ significantly, each grounded in distinct philosophical traditions. Pre-Marxist atheism, largely rooted in enlightenment rationalism and scepticism, emphasized the critique of religious doctrines based on empirical evidence and reason. This form of atheism laid the groundwork for challenging religious authority by appealing to science and rational thought as the basis for understanding the world. In contrast, Marxist atheism is deeply intertwined with dialectical materialism, viewing religion as part of the ideological superstructure that serves to maintain the ruling class's power. Marxist atheism not only rejected religion but actively critiqued it as a tool of oppression used by the bourgeoisie to perpetuate class inequalities (Žižek, 2001; Eagleton, 2009). Neo-Marxist atheism, particularly as articulated by dissident thinkers during the Prague Spring, sought to reconcile the Marxist critique with existentialist concerns, focusing on human freedom and the critique of totalitarian structures. Thinkers like Milan Machovec highlighted the importance of individual autonomy and existential authenticity, critiquing the state's imposition of a rigid atheist ideology as another form of totalitarian control. The present paper points out these epistemological differences, offering an introductory analysis that highlights how each form of atheism approaches the critique of religion and the construction of a secular worldview. By examining these distinctions, a better understanding can be gained of how atheistic thought evolved in Czechoslovakia and how these varying perspectives influenced the intellectual and cultural landscape of the region.

The journey of scientific atheism through various intellectual epochs in Czechoslovakia illustrates a profound transformation in the approach to and application of atheistic principles. Initially embraced as an ideological end aligned with Marxist-Leninist goals of secular and rationalist societal reform, scientific atheism evolved into a more nuanced tool wielded by post-war generations to achieve specific ideological, political, and social objectives. This adaptation highlights the dynamic interplay between philosophical doctrine and practical necessity, reflecting broader shifts in the political, social, and cultural landscapes of the region. In the early stages, scientific atheism sought to dismantle the religious superstructures seen as impediments to social progress and scientific understanding. By the latter half of the 20th century, it had morphed into a strategic instrument for consolidating political power and fostering a unified secular identity, crucial for the state's control over the societal narrative and suppression of dissent.

Moreover, the historical exploration of atheist thought in our cultural area, from Enlightenment critiques to the radical stances of figures like Stanislav K. Neumann, underscores a rich tradition of questioning and rejecting religious orthodoxy. These intellectual endeavours were not merely isolated philosophical positions but were deeply embedded in the socio-political struggles of their times. In conclusion, the metamorphosis of scientific atheism from an ideological commitment to a practical strategy encapsulates the complex relationship between philosophy, politics, and societal change in 20th century Czechoslovakia.

Scientific atheism and ethics – formation of secular morality

The relationship between scientific atheism and morality/ethics is a complex issue that has been the subject of much debate. The discussion is often based on the conflict between scientific-materialistic and religious-idealistic worldviews (Okulov, 1977, p. 188). Scientific atheism, which emphasizes empirical evidence, rationality, and a materialist understanding of the universe, often challenges traditional religious foundations of morality and ethics. From the beginning of its formation, scientific atheism claimed the role of a tool that would challenge traditional morality. In addition to its role as a philosophical and ideological framework, scientific atheism had profound ethical implications within Czechoslovak society. By promoting a materialist and secular worldview, scientific atheism sought to establish a moral foundation independent of religious doctrines. This shift was particularly significant in the

realms of education and public life, where secular ethics became a cornerstone of the state's efforts to foster a new socialist morality. The ethical framework that emerged under scientific atheism emphasized humanism, social justice, and the collective well-being, contrasting sharply with the religious-based moral systems it sought to replace.

Moreover, the influence of scientific atheism extended to the development of new ethical theories in the region, which focused on humanity and well-being. Notably, it contributed to the creation of the *ethics of social consequences*, which is grounded in the idea that the ethical value of actions is determined by their consequences for human welfare (Gluchman, 1996; Kalajtzidis, 2019; Komenská, 2014). Similarly, the concept of *humanized deontology* emerged, integrating the rigid principles of traditional deontology with considerations of human well-being (Kišš, 2006). Additionally, the rise of scientific atheism played a significant role in the institutionalization of moral philosophy as an academic discipline. This led to the establishment of ethics as a university study program and the inclusion of ethical education as both a school subject and a university study program. These developments underscore the enduring impact of scientific atheism on the ethical landscape, shaping the way morality is taught and understood in educational institutions.

However, the imposition of this ethical framework also raised significant challenges, particularly regarding individual autonomy and freedom of belief, as the state's efforts often involved coercive measures to suppress religious practices and promote atheism as the state ideology. This paper highlights these ethical dimensions, pointing out the tensions between state-imposed morality and individual ethical agency.

One of the central issues was that scientific atheism rejected supernatural explanations and divine authority, which are central to many moral and ethical systems. This removal of a religious basis for morality raised questions about the foundation and universality of moral principles. This endeavour brought an issue of moral relativism which was adopted by critics of scientific atheism. They often argued that without a divine or supernatural basis for morality, ethical systems become relative, leading to moral relativism where notions of right and wrong are seen as culturally or individually determined rather than universal. However, proponents of scientific atheism came up with an answer which they found in the value of humanity (Hlavoň, 1977). They argued that morality can be grounded in humanism and the intrinsic value of human well-being and suggested that ethical principles can be derived from rational considerations about the consequences of actions on human happiness and suffering, independent of religious beliefs. Many advocates of scientific atheism thus become popularisers of ethical frameworks which do not rely on religion such as utilitarianism or deontological ethics. This approach, which asserts that morality can exist independently of religion, is now widely accepted in the field of ethics.⁸

The debate also touches on the observation that different cultures have developed diverse moral systems, which can both challenge and support the idea that morality can exist independently of religion. Scientific atheism advocates argue that this diversity points to the possibility of constructing a universal morality based on shared human values and empirical understanding of human needs. Advocates of scientific atheism opened many interesting topics in this context, such as search for the role of science in the ethics.

Another very interesting topic in this context is the notion that morality serves as a support for the ruling, exploiting classes (Gavalier, 1975). This idea originates from Marxist theory, which views the structures of society, including morality, as deeply intertwined with the economic base. This perspective argues that moral systems are not neutral or universal but are instead shaped by and serve the interests of the dominant economic class. Morality often promotes values that justify social and economic inequalities as natural, deserved, or inevitable.

⁸ Some of the examples would be the *Practical ethics* of Peter Singer (2011) or *Life after faith* by Philip Kitcher (2015).

For example, the protestant work ethic valorises hard work and frugality, suggesting that wealth is a sign of moral virtue and divine favour, thereby legitimizing capitalist accumulation and class disparities. Moral norms foster social cohesion among diverse social groups, which is essential for maintaining order within a system marked by inherent class conflicts. By promoting a shared set of values, the ruling class can mitigate the potential for class consciousness and revolutionary sentiments among the exploited classes. In this context, morality serves as a mechanism for social control, encouraging compliance with laws and social norms that protect property rights and the capitalist mode of production. Ethical concepts such as duty, loyalty, and lawfulness are emphasized, often sidelining questions of justice, equality, and the well-being of the working class (Marx & Engels, 1998; Marx, 1992).

These ideas are based on Marxist theory and its dialectical materialism, which serves as a lens for acknowledging the dynamic and contradictory nature of society, including the realm of morality. The dominant moral system reflects ruling class interests, but it is also a site of struggle where competing moral visions can emerge, particularly from the working class and oppressed groups. The theory predicts that changes in the economic base will result in new forms of morality that align with socialist and communist ideals. These ideals emphasize collective well-being, solidarity, and the eradication of exploitation. Scientific atheism played a significant role in this process. Education and enlightenment of the people were tools used to achieve these goals.

Scientific atheism and education in second half of 20th century Czechoslovakia

It is noteworthy that nearly all ethical topics explained from the perspective of Marxist ethics claim to have a significant, distinctly atheist educational impact (Hlavoň, 1977, p. 198). Therefore, the focus will be on the forms, content, and methods of scientific-atheistic education, with a partial focus on the Czechoslovak context. It must be understood that all three (forms, content, and methods) changed (evolve) dramatically during the second half of the 20th century in Czechoslovakia, but still there are some general notes which can be made. The goal of scientific-atheism education was not only to eradicate religious belief but also to instil a materialist understanding of the world, in line with Marxist-Leninist ideology. Another goal was the formation of the new individuals in socialist society (Kopčan, 1975, p. 170).⁹ All this could be achieved through various forms of atheistic education. Whether it is atheist education in the work collective, in the family, or at school. Scientific atheism very idealistically stated its goals as highly humane. Among these goals were ranked the positive emancipatory function and sense of freeing people from the spiritual oppression of unscientific, false ideas and opinions, the effort to make them conscious of their own power, ability and reason, to show the way to achieve the all-round harmonious development of each one of these goals, and at the same time to satisfy material, cultural, and spiritual needs in a realistic way (Loukotka, 1977, p. 282).

Scientific-atheistic education heavily influenced educational curricula and the ideas were incorporated into school curricula at all levels.¹⁰ Subjects such as history, science, and social studies were taught from a materialist perspective, emphasizing scientific explanations for natural phenomena and historical events, often contrasting these with religious explanations to highlight the latter's perceived inadequacy. Among other means, theatre, visual art, newspapers,

⁹ This objective, as well as others in this context, emerged from the reports as well as the plenary sessions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Cf., e.g., (Sekot, 1977, p. 266). Prešov, in this context, also has a prominent place, since the Department of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy and Scientific Atheism of the Faculty of Philosophy of University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Prešov was the first institution that began to develop scientific atheism as a field of higher (university level) education in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (VA, 1980, p. 245).

¹⁰ An interesting polemic on the issue of (philosophy) teachers' responsibility in this context, but in today's understanding, can be found in contemporary texts, such as (Ambrozy, 2017).

magazines, radio, and state television were used to disseminate scientific-atheistic content (Okulov et al., 1977, p. 239) This included documentaries, news articles, and other programs that critiqued religion and promoted science. The state published a wide array of literature, including books, pamphlets, and educational materials, aimed at critiquing religious beliefs, and promoting atheism and scientific understanding. In Czechoslovakia, the journal *Ateizmus* (*A journal for questions of scientific atheism*) became popular. It was published from 1972 under the supervision of the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (AS, 1984, p. 50). In Soviet Russia, organizations like the League of Militant Atheists organized discussions, lectures, and events promoting atheism, often targeting specific religious beliefs and practices. Their Czechoslovak equivalent was called the Union of Proletarian Infidels [*Zváz proletárských bezvercov*] (SVA, 1983, p. 53)

Content often included critiques of religious doctrines, texts, and institutions, highlighting contradictions, historical inaccuracies, but mostly it focused on the role of religion in justifying social and economic inequalities. As mentioned above, it had previously had some positive influence as well, mostly when scientific-atheistic education provided naturalist explanations for phenomena often attributed to divine intervention, such as the origins of life, the universe, and natural disasters, based on evolutionary biology, cosmology, and other sciences. The philosophical underpinnings of Marxism-Leninism, particularly dialectical and historical materialism, were taught to provide a theoretical basis for atheism and to critique idealist and religious worldviews. Dialectical and historical materialism were understood as a tool for comprehending and resolving societal issues. They can be viewed as a foundation for cultural and educational work that shapes a worldview. This in turn shapes social conditions in accordance with the environment and its thought world (Kopčan, 1975, pp. 166–167). Historical and sociological analysis of religion in line with Marxist theory almost always concluded the same results – religions are tools of oppression and social control.

Educational methods encouraged critical thinking and debate, but with clearly defined boundaries – what can and what can't be criticized (Marxism-Leninism). Despite its critique of religious morality, scientific-atheistic education also sought to promote a secular ethics based on socialist principles, highlighting values such as equality, solidarity, and collective welfare. In this sense, scientific-atheistic education emphasized the importance of evidence, experimentation, and observation, encouraging a sceptical approach to claims lacking empirical support.

Conclusion

In examining the intricacies of scientific atheism within Czechoslovakia's unique socio-political context, this paper has elucidated the profound impact of Marxist-Leninist ideology on atheist thought and education. Scientific atheism, characterized by its reliance on dialectical and historical materialism, served not merely as an ideological stance but as a cornerstone for a comprehensive educational system aimed at fostering a materialist worldview. This system, deeply intertwined with the state apparatus, sought to replace religious belief with scientific rationality, reflecting a broader aim to transform society in accordance with communist ideals. The implementation of scientific-atheistic education, through its various forms and methods, underscores the extent to which ideology was embedded within the fabric of daily life, shaping not only the intellectual landscape but also the moral and ethical frameworks of individuals.

The evolution of scientific atheism through different generations of intellectuals further highlights its dynamic role. Initially seen as an end in itself—a goal of creating a secular, rationalist society—scientific atheism transitioned into a pragmatic tool for the post-war generation of philosophers and policymakers. This shift illustrates how scientific atheism was strategically used to consolidate state power, promote social unity, and address the challenges of modernization and globalization. This adaptation reflects the broader shifts in the political,

social, and cultural landscapes, demonstrating the flexibility and enduring influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the importance of reintroducing the concept of scientific atheism to younger generations, particularly those born in the late 1980s and beyond, who may lack a thorough understanding of its historical significance. By clarifying the role of scientific atheism in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Czechoslovakia—particularly in education, morality, and science—this paper provides a crucial historical perspective that is essential for both contemporary scholarship and public understanding.

As we reflect on the legacy of scientific atheism, it becomes clear that its influence extends beyond the historical confines of the Czechoslovak socialist experiment. The debates it sparked about the nature of belief, the role of education in shaping worldviews, and the relationship between science and religion remain pertinent. In the contemporary era, where the interplay between science, religion, and politics continues to shape global discourse, the historical example of Czechoslovakia offers valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities of constructing a secular, rationalist society.

As the Czechoslovak socialist experiment concluded with the fall of communism, atheism in Slovakia and the Czech Republic underwent significant transformations. In the contemporary period, atheist thought has diversified and is no longer monolithically tied to a specific political ideology. Today, atheism in the region is discussed in various forms, often with a focus on humanism, secularism, and the defence of rational inquiry as a basis for ethics and public policy. One of the key platforms for these discussions is the journal *Prometheus*, published by the Society for humanism and ethics [*Spoločnosť Prometheus*]. This journal, along with the associated society, represents a significant contemporary forum for the exploration of atheist thought in Slovakia. *Prometheus* covers a wide range of topics, including the history and philosophy of atheism, critiques of religion, and discussions on the role of secularism in modern society. The journal has been instrumental in promoting a more nuanced and diverse understanding of atheism, moving beyond the rigid frameworks of scientific atheism to embrace a variety of perspectives, including those influenced by humanist and existentialist traditions. The society and its journal emphasize the importance of a secular, humanistic approach to ethics and public life, advocating for the separation of religion from state affairs and promoting rational discourse as a cornerstone of democratic society. This evolution from scientific atheism to a more pluralistic and human-centred form of atheism reflects the broader changes in Slovak society, where the focus has shifted from state-mandated atheism to a more voluntary and philosophical exploration of non-religious worldviews.

Ultimately, the exploration of scientific atheism in Czechoslovakia not only sheds light on a pivotal chapter in the history of atheist thought but also invites us to reconsider the enduring questions of morality, ethics, and human understanding in a scientifically informed world. This study has demonstrated that scientific atheism in Czechoslovakia was far from a static ideology. Instead, it evolved significantly over time, influenced by the changing needs and perspectives of different generations of intellectuals and political leaders. Initially perceived as a philosophical and ideological commitment to materialism and rationalism, scientific atheism gradually became a more pragmatic tool, strategically employed to consolidate state power, promote social unity, and address the challenges of modernization and globalization. However, as the region transitioned away from state-imposed ideologies, atheism in Slovakia and the Czech Republic has diversified, embracing a broader spectrum of humanist and secularist thought. This generational shift in the application of atheism—from a state-enforced doctrine to a pluralistic, human-centred philosophy—provides a deeper understanding of its practical role in both historical and contemporary contexts.

In conclusion, by examining the trajectory of scientific atheism within Czechoslovakia, this study not only contributes to the historical understanding of Marxist-Leninist ideology but also

engages with ongoing global discussions about the place of secularism and atheism in modern societies. The insights gained from this exploration offer valuable perspectives on the challenges and possibilities of constructing secular, rationalist societies, a topic that remains deeply relevant in today's increasingly interconnected and ideologically diverse world. The study thus advances the existing literature by highlighting the adaptive and dynamic nature of scientific atheism within the broader context of Marxist-Leninist thought, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its legacy.

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