

The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity

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we must also take seriously the influence of these hidden philosophical incentives, so deeply rooted in the Czech intellectual tradition. Without them, the 'European' outlook of the Czech Republic would be incomplete, and many of the Czech people's reactions, responses and attitudes towards particular problems and challenges would appear irrational and unintelligible.

The Religious Society of Czech Unitarians (RSCU) and the Construction of Czech National Identity

Andrew James Brown

A. Introduction

The Religious Society of Czechoslovak (now Czech) Unitarians (henceforth the RSCU) was founded in Prague during 1922 by Norbert Fabián Čapek (1870–1942)¹ under the name of the Religious Liberal Fellowship.² Čapek was born in the South Bohemian village of Radomyšl to a Roman Catholic family but by the age of eighteen he had joined the Baptists, eventually becoming a successful preacher and missionary. His religious views developed considerably from 1898 onwards and by 1921, at the very end of his seven-year period in the United States of America, he finally adopted a Unitarian faith. Čapek had first been introduced to Unitarians in 1910 by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (whose wife was herself a Unitarian) during the World Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress in Berlin where an American Unitarian delegation was present.³

When exploring the religious roots of contemporary Europe we must take care to consider, not only the region's larger and more obvious manifestations of religion and spirituality, but also some of its smaller, more localized and subtly influential expressions such as the Unitarians in general and the RSCU in particular. Looked at carefully it is clear that religion and 'spirituality' has often been expressed across Europe in ways that have not tended to form large and highly visible institutions and communities. In part this has been because many of these smaller

1 The only English biography of Čapek is that by Henry 1999. An informative short online biography of Čapek is available at: www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/norbertcapek.html

2 Doláček 2000 points out that this name, 'Svobodné Bratrství', is better translated as 'Free Brotherhood' or 'Free Fellowship'.

3 Wendte 1911. At this initial meeting, however, they did not respond entirely favourably to Čapek's overtures and it would be a mistake to believe that the Unitarianism Čapek developed was of an American type. His Unitarian faith was wholly shaped by his exploration of faith within the Czech context and it is Czech through and through. Indeed his wife, Mája, noted, '[d]uring all his years in America Čapek never had an interest in finding out more about the Unitarian Church. Why should he be interested in a church that had no missionary spirit and was not willing to give a hand to a groping soul?': Henry 1999, 112. For a brief hint of the tensions that existed between Čapek and American Unitarianism see Henry 1999, 112, and Doláček 2000.

groups have developed mystically and pantheistically (or panentheistically) orientated theologies. Such groups, stressing the importance of the individual's encounter with God in and through all creation, have not needed to develop complex systems of clergy and clearly defined doctrine to mediate the faith to their members. We should also note that, from the Renaissance onwards, the use of human reason in exploring matters of faith also became increasingly important among a number of these groups. Reason, along with mysticism, locates religious authority firstly in the individual conscience and only secondarily (if at all) in the texts, doctrines and clergy of external institutions. In various combinations these tendencies became particularly visible in a number of radical groups during the period of the Reformation and particularly among those who became known as Unitarians.⁴ Many of these small groups held beliefs that inevitably challenged ideas which underwrote the prevailing religious and political power of Christianity (whether expressed as Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy or Protestantism – at least in its magisterial forms).

One such group with whose tradition the RSCU identifies was known as the *Bracia Polscy* (Polish Brethren), which assembled publicly for the first time on 10 June 1565 in Brzeziny, Poland.⁵ Initially called Socinians, after their leading lay-theologian the Italian Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), as their ideas spread, they became better known as Unitarians, a name derived from their insistence upon the absolute Unity of God and the humanity of Jesus. Their theology and the direct and painful experience of persecution for holding it led them to develop from the outset certain key principles which have not only marked all subsequent Unitarian congregations, but also become central to contemporary European secular society, namely,

complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; and generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.⁶

This chapter begins by briefly considering the two interconnected religious ideas central to the RSCU, first, their belief in One God and, second, their great stress upon the service of others, initially derived, of course, from Jesus' two great commandments summing up his own Jewish faith (Mark 12.29–31 and parallels). It then continues with an exploration of how their founder's interpretation of these two ideas, inherited in general terms by the modern RSCU, have impacted upon

⁴ See Williams 1992 and Baylor 1991.

⁵ Hewett 2004, 24; Wilbur 1947, 330–1.

⁶ Wilbur 1947, 5. In the *Racovian Catechism* of 1604 (co-authored by Socinus), a foundational document for all Unitarians, the Polish Unitarians wrote: 'Whilst we compose a Catechism, we prescribe nothing to any man: whilst we declare our own opinions, we oppress no one. Let every person enjoy the freedom of his own judgement in religion; only let it be permitted to us also to exhibit our view of divine things, without injuring and calumniating others.' Rees 1818, xcvi–xcvii.

their development of both a post-communist Czech Unitarian religious identity and an understanding of belonging to a far wider community – not just of Europe but, ultimately, all creation. This is followed by a brief consideration of their distinctive Flower Communion service devised by Čapek. This service has been adopted by many Unitarian churches worldwide but not always with success. As we shall see, although the service's 'headline' meaning is the universally transposable idea of the unity of God and all creation (an idea which can clearly underwrite large regional and global understandings of community), Čapek presented it in a way which only carries real weight when it remains rooted in a living understanding of the *particularities* of Czech history and that of the RSCU. It is a service which helps us see that indigenous practices (even when they point so clearly to a universalistic worldview) cannot be easily and without great care transplanted into another culture and context without changing their meaning in sometimes subtle but considerable ways. The chapter concludes with five points showing how the RSCU's faith may be seen to contribute usefully to current debates concerning the role of religion and the question of national identity in Europe as a whole.

B. Belief in One God and service of others

In common with all other Unitarians Čapek believed in One God. Of course, simple though this sounds, belief in the Unity of God can be unfolded in myriad and complex ways and in Čapek's interpretation it took on a particularly pantheistic and mystical quality, an interpretation adopted by the RSCU as a whole. Čapek believed that humankind knew God both as utterly transcendent and as immanent. Of the transcendent aspect of God Čapek wrote: 'God is above all, the only one, unexplored, misunderstood, our Father and Friend.'⁷ Of the immanent aspect of God Čapek believed that God was everywhere present, in and through all things and that: 'God has not revealed Godself otherwise than in nature around and in the depth of the soul.'⁸

Such a pantheistic understanding of the Unity of God inevitably also implied a deep underlying unity of humankind (and by extension all creation). One contemporary British Unitarian theologian, Clifford Martin Reed, has summed up this position as follows:

Because God is One, Creation is one. Because Creation is one, humanity is one. Because humanity is one, my neighbour and I are one. And, indeed, each of us is one integrated whole participating in one infinitely greater yet still integrated whole.⁹

Consequently Čapek's faith was never merely an abstract theological idea but always one which had profound social, psychological, political

⁷ Doláček 2001, 128.

⁸ Doláček 2001, 128.

⁹ Reed 2006.

and ecological ramifications. This was reflected in Čapek's lifelong commitment to the service of one's neighbour and a passionate love of the natural world – a combination that finds ultimate expression in his Flower Communion service. As Čapek noted at the founding of the RSCU: 'Religion begins with service for others' and, in a memorable passage from one of his sermons, *Bůh v mysli lidí* (God in people's minds), he wrote:

My conviction is that my life has meaning and purpose if I live in God and for God ... Anytime I want something only for myself, and anytime I hesitate to forgive, tolerate, suffer for truth, or sacrifice for goodness – it is me in separation from God. But anytime I want only truth and goodness and enjoy goodness and truth wherever it appears, and anytime I roll up my sleeves to start work that will serve the human whole and the world to progress so that everybody will live and breathe in a better way – it is God in me, who is in all other people in the same way. Then God's spark glimmers in me which is connected with all others in the whole universe as the source and substance and manifestation of the eternal fire, the fire of God.¹⁰

These twin aspects of Čapek's Unitarian theology (and that of the present RSCU), the transcendent and the immanent aspects of God, function in two connected ways relevant to the themes explored in this volume. First, the transcending, overarching aspect is what underwrites for them the desirability of working towards the creation of ever larger commonwealths of existence and, second, the immanent aspect is what has driven them to instantiate this in their own country and culture. They have always felt that one of the major tasks of religion should be to help people understand this directly and not to slip into a narrow religious sectarianism or political nationalism.

C. The relationship between the RSCU's theology and the construction of Czech national identity

Key to understanding Čapek's thought and the RSCU is to realize that for them the universal is always accessed through the particularities of existence, in nature and, as we have seen, through service to others. This recognition of the value of the particularities of human existence helps to explain why he was so concerned to explore his homeland's history and identity.¹¹ His research led him to discover the radical Czech Christian tradition of Jan Hus (c. 1370–1415), the *Unitas Fratrum* (the Moravian Brethren) and the Czech Brethren, and it was with this tradition that Čapek began strongly to identify as a Unitarian. What he discovered assured him (and he hoped other Czechs) that his panentheistic Unitarianism was not some alien engrafting but in fact firmly grounded

¹⁰ Doláček 2001, 129–30.

¹¹ See Čapek 1905.

in the history and particular experiences and faith of his homeland. Čapek's desire to make this explicit can be seen when he describes the history of the Society's church building (now called *Unitaria*) in Prague at 8 Karlova Street:

The house is of great historical value. In 1404 it was occupied by a sort of liberal Christian body. They called themselves 'Brethren & Sisters of the Free Spirit.' They were accused of laying more stress on a Christian life than articles of faith. They believed more in the 'inner light' than the letter of the Bible. Further they did not believe in the Trinity and were accused of pantheistic tendencies. I regard these people as the first Czech Unitarians.¹²

In the following passage, written in 1924 and delivered to a Unitarian audience in the United States (which also reveals clearly how he was concerned to make clear the distinctive Czech character of his Unitarianism), Čapek sums up the faith of the RSCU:

What kind of religion is this Unitarianism? It is humanity lightened by divinity. It is humanism and theism combined. It is not the kind of humanism without God and without a soul, but the humanism of those great men who from time to time called our nation to a new life. When John Hus appealed to reason and conscience against the authority of the pope, it was work for humanity. When Comenius conceived school as a workshop of humanity, it was the continuation. I specially quote his words: 'man finds himself best in his own innermost, nowhere else, for then in himself he easily finds God and all.' What else is it but to begin with man when seeking God? The opinion that religion is outgrown can be held only about the religion that was not human enough, that remained under the level of humanity or remained, so to say, hanging in the sky, and could not answer the needs of men in their daily life. ... While worshipping the liturgical Christ people could not hear the human Jesus who asked for love to men. Unitarianism is the religion of humanity in the best sense of the word. It has rejected the inhuman and barbaric conception of God and by this brought God nearer to human understanding; it has established a more intimate relation of Jesus [by emphasizing] the value and sovereignty of man. Today it looks as if mankind was on the crossroad not knowing in what direction to move. ... Our age calls for watchmen who would stand on the crossroad and warn people not to go back to barbarism and bestiality, but to go from views only terrestrial and selfish to cosmic views, from Humanity to Divinity.¹³

The church Čapek founded met with considerable success and in its first twenty years the church in Prague had become the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with 3,200 members, with approximately 8,000 Czechs considering themselves Unitarian. We will never know what

¹² Henry 1999, 154.

¹³ Henry 1999, 195–6.

might have happened had the RSCU been able to develop in a relatively stable non-violent environment because the course of Czech history (and therefore its self-identity) was, in quick succession, radically altered by the Nazi and then the communist regimes. Not surprisingly the liberal theology held by Čapek and the RSCU was not highly regarded by either regime. It appears that the Nazi regime had plans to close the church but the war ended before they could see them through. Although the congregation and its buildings survived the conflict a number of leading figures in the movement were killed, the most notable being Čapek himself. After being arrested on 28 March 1941 he was tried and, in June 1942, ordered to Dachau by the Prague Gestapo. He died on 12 October of the same year at Hartheim Castle, near Linz, Austria, during one of the Nazis' infamous 'medical tests'. Leadership of the movement passed to his son-in-law, Dr Haspl.

The liberation of the country in 1945 naturally brought the RSCU a sense of hope for the future but the moment of respite was short-lived. The rise to power of the communists in 1948 brought with it a renewed and extended period of religious and social repression which severely curtailed the community's activities. It was during this period that most of the long-term damage to their identity as both Czechs and Unitarians occurred. The regime did not allow churches to organize any youth meetings such as Sunday schools and, whilst worship for adults was permitted, many people were simply too frightened to attend services because this could result in serious consequences, such as the loss of employment. This inevitably impacted upon the community's desire and ability to congregate and worship freely and so nourish and pass on its faith. Not surprisingly commitment to, and knowledge of, Czech Unitarianism declined rapidly and left the RSCU as a whole thoroughly demoralized. No longer having a confident sense of identity, it was inevitable that other influences would come into Czech Unitarianism and, especially after Dr Haspl's death, many of these were postmodern and eastern-influenced 'New Age' ideas (in common with some other Unitarian churches in Europe and America).¹⁴

One of the leading contemporary Czech Unitarians, Jaroslava Dittrichová, described the religion practised in Prague during this period as being like a 'mixed grill' and it very nearly allowed the death of Unitarianism in the Czech Republic.¹⁵ Even after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 the troubles of the RSCU were not over because this 'spiritually vulnerable situation' made it possible for a man called Vladimír Strejček to be accepted as the leader of their church in Prague at the beginning of 1991 with what Dittrichová calls 'all his irrational ideas'.¹⁶ Strejček even managed to take over their building, a situation which was, happily, reversed by the courts in May 2000. The

14 It is vitally important to understand that, today, in both the USA and Europe, one can find a variety of 'Unitarianisms'. Some have maintained a clear Christian identity while others now see themselves as decidedly post-Christian. If in doubt about any particular group's position the reader may encounter - check and don't assume!

15 Hill *et al.* 2002, 197.

16 Hill *et al.* 2002, 197.

recovery from this low point has been slow but today, in 2006, the RSCU has three congregations in Prague, Brno and Plzeň and one fellowship in Liberec and consists of about 420 members.

Their response to these very damaging experiences was expressed most clearly and succinctly at an international Unitarian/Universalist theological symposium in Oxford during 2000. The audience contained many American and Western European Unitarians who, echoing general trends within wider secular culture (particularly in Western Europe), have become increasingly suspicious of all forms of religious expression and practice. Religion and religious belief are perceived by them not as positive influences on the world but instead as some of the key root causes of conflict and division. In consequence many of them are desirous of abandoning 'God-talk' entirely and wish to transform themselves and their communities into secular humanist moral/ethical societies which are simply concerned to address issues of social justice. Jaroslava Dittrichová's paper, coming from what is at present one of the most secular countries in Europe, came as quite a surprise to such hearers and deserves to be quoted at length:

[B]elief in one God - is certainly the main Unitarian principle from the historical point of view. We think that this principle is one of the main principles also in the contemporary Czech Unitarianism. Many of you are of different opinion. Perhaps those of you who are non-theists do not find language about God useful. You may think the word God is much abused, and often used to refer to a kind of personal God. You may believe that the fruits of our life matter more than beliefs about God.

This may be partly true, but there is a possible hidden danger in this idea. We who lived under the communist brand of totalitarianism were able to see and experience the consequences of a system without God, a system that considered man to be the centre of the world, without responsibility to something higher than himself - or even without a sense of responsibility to 'the order of being.' [...] We believe together with Václav Havel that in our contemporary world, we should respect what is beyond us. It seems to us that it is not important whether we call it the order of nature, the absolute or God. We are not afraid of the word 'God.' We use it because Dr. Čapek and Dr. Haspl used this word in their sermons and books, and because the word 'God' is used in other churches in our country which are close to us more now than at any previous time.

We believe that a humanism which considers human beings the centre of the world without respect to something higher allows humans to be driven by their particular interests rather than governing their behaviour in a way that takes account of general interests. This results in the plundering of natural resources and other dangers existing in our civilization.

What we have told you does not mean that we set belief in God against humanism. What we want to emphasize is that humanism

should be open to transcendence. Such a humanism may be called religious humanism.¹⁷

It can be seen that the RSCU's response to the period of Nazi and communist rule has been to reconnect strongly with their founder's vision, which was, in essence, to offer a religious community that was not simply Christianity-'light' but, instead, a coherent indigenous Czech Unitarian expression of faith consistent with, but not identical to, the region's earlier radical Christian tradition. Having said this it is important to note that the initial relationship with Christianity is often downplayed in the contemporary setting even when the continuity is affirmed. For example Ivana Fišerová (one of the RSCU's current members) is careful to insist that 'Czech Unitarianism was not based on Christianity in times of Čapek and we have never considered ourselves to be Christians. Čapek calls himself a logical/rational mystic.' She goes on to add, however – and thereby revealing the sense of continuity with the past that exists – that although the present RSCU does not self-identify as a Christian church, they most certainly still consider themselves 'to be the heirs of persecuted Christians – [the] Moravian Brethren, as well as of [the] Czech Brethren'.¹⁸ But the collapse of the communist regime brought, not only new opportunities for them to re-explore their identity as Czechs *and* Unitarians, but also new and significant challenges to it. The rediscovery of their religious and cultural roots is also providing the RSCU with positive responses to these challenges. In the opinion of Fišerová one of the most pressing challenges has been the collapse of trust, not only in Czech society as a whole, but within the RSCU itself. This trust was destroyed in part by the lack of church attendance and 'partly destroyed by animosity and mistrust embedded into society by the horrors we experienced'.¹⁹

A second challenge has been the loss of a sense of the spiritual dimension of life. Travelling through Western Europe after 1989 Fišerová remembers being 'moved to tears' by this freedom and the sense that she belonged, at least potentially, to a 'global family'. But this was quickly coloured as she came to feel that 'our Euro-American culture' was problematically 'centred on our own prosperity'. Summing this up Fišerová believes that there is today 'an orientation to a material well-being to such an extent that people [have] mistaken it for real satisfaction and happiness. Living in freedom I am again experiencing a loss of one of the essential life dimensions: spirituality.'

Fišerová feels that these two challenges can be particularly well met by a revived RSCU. She recalls that, as a child, it was within the RSCU that she had her 'most important spiritual and religious experience' (in the

¹⁷ Hill *et al.* 2002, 197–9.

¹⁸ Personal communication, June 2006. I would like to express my thanks to Ivana Fišerová for her patience in carefully answering my many questions. The interpretation of those answers is, however, the author's own.

¹⁹ This and the following associated quotations from Ivana Fišerová are taken from an address delivered to the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada on 4 January 2004. Available online at www.firstunitariantoronto.org

Flower Communion Service) which she has carried with her 'as a model of the congregation which loves, provides a safe environment, cares, and enables its members to experience free spirit. Religion was truly lived in that community.' Her concern, as a Czech and a Unitarian, is to help bring about 'a rebirth' of the values she experienced as a young child 'in a loving and trusting church', a wish she desires, not only for her own immediate family, but for the RSCU as a whole and the wider contexts of the Czech Republic, Europe and, ultimately, globally. Although her response is rooted in the RSCU's own history and experience, it is not surprising she and other Czech Unitarians find many resonances with the thought of Václav Havel.²⁰

D. The Flower Communion

Čapek realized soon after the founding of the RSCU that they needed a symbolic ritual which would help bind the Czech Unitarian community more closely together. The service he created combined the key themes and ideas this chapter has been exploring. He also realized, primarily because so many of his church's members had recently left the Roman Catholic Church (often because of its emphasis upon the atoning sacrifice of Christ upon the cross and its representation in the Mass), that he could not, in any simple and straightforward way, simply reuse traditional Christian symbols and services. For example, about the cross Čapek said,

Once it was the degrading instrument of execution, but it grew into an important symbol in the name of which millions of people underwent the greatest sacrifices. Unfortunately under the same symbol many people suffered terrible death. By that the symbol of the cross was polluted and therefore it is no more the powerful symbol, as it once was.²¹

Another connected and problematic symbol for Čapek was the communion chalice. Even though among the Hussites it was adopted as a symbol of communion²² and rebellion against the power of the Church, Čapek felt it, too, had become 'misused and polluted' and, although at first the followers of John Huss formed 'an unusual brotherhood under the spell of that symbol, later the chalice was the sign of warriors and much human blood was shed'.²³ Čapek turned, therefore, to his own pantheistic Unitarian theology and love of the Czech countryside to create the Flower Communion Service which was first celebrated on 23 June 1923. This service captures in a distilled symbolic form the RSCU's

²⁰ In an unpublished paper Fišerová says: '[The ideas] of V. Havel on the importance of discovering again respect for the order of being are close to ideas of Unitarianism-Universalism that consider humans to be not the measure of all things but a part of an interdependent web of all existence that should be respected.'

²¹ Henry 1999, 144.

²² See Thomas Fudge's *Hussite Theology and the Law of God* in Bagchi and Steinmetz 2004.

²³ Henry 1999, 144.

self-understanding as Czechs, as Unitarians, and as members of a wider, and ultimately global, community.

Members were asked to bring a flower of their choice and, when they arrived at church, they were asked to place it in a large vase on a table in the centre of the church. This was understood as a symbol of each individual's free desire to join with others in community. The vase that contained the flowers was a symbol of the church community itself. There followed hymns, a reading of 1 Corinthians 13, a prayer of consecration, one of blessing and a sermon. At the close of the service each member was to leave with a different flower from the one they brought, taking it, as Čapek said, 'just as it comes without making any distinction where it came from and whom it represents' as a public confession that they accepted 'each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who is a human and wants to be good'.²⁴ And so the chalice, which had in Čapek's eyes become sullied and betrayed by centuries of Christian violence and bloodshed, was transfigured into a vase as a symbol of loving and open community:

For us in our Unitarian brotherhood the vase is our church organization. We need it to help us share the beauties but also the responsibilities of communal life. In the proper community by giving the best that is in us for the common good, we grow up and are able to do what no single person is able to do. Each of us needs to receive in order to grow up, but each of us needs to give something away for the same reason.²⁵

It is no accident that the symbol for the RSCU's church in Prague (over the words, *Veritas Vincit* – truth prevails) is that of sunflowers turning towards the sun while being held together in a 'U', symbolizing both the vase/community and the name of their church building, Unitaria.

We can see from this that the service's 'headline' themes are universal ones and are capable of being understood, at least in general terms, in different cultural contexts. But the real 'bite' of the service is only maintained when any non-Czech Unitarian community celebrating it carefully acknowledges the particularities of Čapek's life and Czech history and then, just as carefully, ensures they relate it to the particular faith, life, experiences, suffering and hope of their own country and community. This is often done, but when it is not, the service quickly becomes a merely sentimental celebration of the beauty of nature and a rather naive and prosaic expression of the general desirability of 'just getting along with others'. Even when great care is taken, the service is so intimately linked with Čapek's life and death, the particular sufferings of the RSCU and the Czech countryside and its history, that when it is transposed into other regional, historical and cultural contexts it is inevitable that something is always lost in the process. The more difficult

²⁴ Henry 1999, 144.

²⁵ Henry 1999, 145.

and creative question is, what is gained in the process? It is not the place of this paper to answer this for non-Czech Unitarians but we can say that for the RSCU the service's worldwide adoption by other Unitarians has brought a great sense of pride and helped instil in them greater confidence in the universal value of their own distinctively Czech Unitarian tradition.

E. Concluding remarks

So, how may (a study of) the RSCU's faith contribute usefully to current debates concerning the role of religion and the question of national identity in Europe as a whole? I offer the reader just five possibilities.

First, Čapek succeeded in founding a religious community that, while being intensely proud of and dependent on the particularities of Czech history, has always been cognizant of the desirability of developing ever wider and more pluralistic visions of community. The RSCU reveals that a strong local religious and cultural identity need not necessarily lead towards ever more narrow and exclusivist communities but can in fact provide a strong theological/philosophical underpinning for greater, transnational and, ultimately, transglobal identities. The RSCU has developed one practical and positive solution to the question of how one may be committed simultaneously to a single religious expression, a single country and to a wider community such as Europe.

Second, their history reminds us that principles such as those of tolerance and freedom of speech, so valued in secular European politics and culture, were given birth and decisively shaped within religious contexts. Whenever principles are disconnected from the particular context in which they arose and come to be seen as freely floating and self-evident they quickly lose their effectiveness and can begin to be used by political groups with intolerant and coercive agendas.²⁶ It is clear that, at present, European legislation concerning tolerance and freedom of speech is increasingly being used by minority religious/political groups to impose upon wider society controversial views and practices which can actually run *counter* to the spirit of the legislation itself. The RSCU is one example of how a strong religious faith need not necessarily be a threat to so-called secular principles and values, but can in fact be a valuable partner in maintaining and promulgating them more widely.

Third, because their theology holds that the whole of creation is an expression of the divine, the discoveries of all the sciences are also highly valued. I have not explored this in the chapter but it is important to know that Čapek was himself passionately committed to scientific research and particularly interested in the psychology of religion.²⁷

Fourth, the Unitarian emphasis upon the Unity of God potentially

²⁶ See the interesting exploration of this subject in Fish 1999.

²⁷ See Doláček 2000.

offers a genuine and creative point of contact with Islam. Although the RSCU has not itself formally opened up such lines of communication with Muslims the fact that an indigenous European Unitarianism can be shown to exist may contribute towards helping Muslims see that European religious history is both amenable to their own faith and can be adopted as part of their own history of faith.²⁸

Fifth, Čapek's panentheistic Unitarian theology connects in many positive ways with contemporary secular European ecological and environmental concerns. It should be clear that Čapek's theology is one which can theologically underpin and encourage a deeply responsible and careful attitude to the use and distribution of the region's natural resources.²⁹

To conclude, I want to raise one last point and ask what seem to me to be a couple of important final questions. Obviously, religious belief and its role in the contemporary world is very much back on the political and social agenda. Much work needs to be done in understanding the role that large, highly visible and powerful manifestations of religion can and should have in secular Europe and how secular governments may best open up effective lines of communication with them. However, as this chapter suggests, the religion and spirituality of Europe has never been fully and exclusively expressed by these large groups. Governments clearly prefer to deal with religion in forms that it can easily categorize and which have clear institutional forms but, what they do not do well, is to engage in dialogue with small religious groups such as the RSCU. The perception of governments and the large established religious groups is often that such small groups are 'cranky' or 'esoteric' and have nothing useful to contribute positively to the development of a stable contemporary European cultural and political identity. In some cases, perhaps many, this is clearly true, but the story of the Unitarians in general, and the RSCU in particular, shows that the faith experience of a small religious community can result in the development of religiously rooted ideas and principles which go on to become important to many others beside themselves.

Now to my final two groups of questions. First, who is to decide whether a religious group is to be considered legitimate and whether it should be categorized as belonging to Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist etc., traditions, or as some miscellaneous 'other'? The religious communities themselves or the secular state? Under what category does a group like the RSCU belong?

Second, who decides (and how) whether a particular minority religious group is worthy of being listened to and its ideas taken into account in the debate over the future shaping of modern Europe? I do not propose to offer an answer to this complex and problematic question

28 In the British context Tim Winter (Abdul Hakim Murad) has written about how this can be the case in Britain (Winter 2003). A similar case can be made in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Romania and the Czech Republic where Unitarianism has flourished, and in some cases, still does.

29 There are clear connections possible with the 'Deep Ecology' movement initiated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. See Naess 1989.

here, but what is clear is that if attempts are not made to listen to the quieter, smaller and often gentler religious voices of Europe then we all stand to lose what might be important and valuable insights, not only those concerning our shared past, but also those which can help us shape together a positive future that is both secular and religious, local and global.