In this thesis, David Koranda undertakes to analyze the contemporary rise in the number of atheists in the United States of America, basing this premise on numerous nation-wide surveys, primarily conducted by Gallup Poll and the Pew Research Center. He goes into depth on the definition of atheism and strictly delineates the meaning of this word and the use of its alternatives in the work. Emphasizing the point that the thesis is written by a Czech author, Mr. Koranda has also attempted to provide comparative cultural background covering the differences between Czech and U.S. perspectives on and expectations regarding atheism. Likewise, since the work is purposely not one of literary analysis but rather of a socio-political and cultural nature, Mr. Koranda plausibly outlines his reasons for this decision in a subchapter focusing on Flannery O’Connor’s novel Wise Blood.

The history of atheism in America is touched upon in the beginning of Chapter 3, but since the fundamental focus of Mr. Koranda’s work is on the contemporary religious/nonreligious situation in the U.S., the author has chosen to explore the roots of modern U.S. atheism mainly in the twentieth century. Focusing particularly on institutional factors in the growth of secularism and atheism, the thesis highlights: 1) Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s fights against church influence in public schools and against public funding for practices that the author sees as based on that influence; 2) the wide prevalence of anti-scientific beliefs in U.S. religion and the consequent institutional conflicts between the two; 3) feminist and gay rights challenges to church doctrine and practices; 4) the erosion of confidence, at least within a significant and sizeable constituency, following the Catholic sex abuse scandals after 2001; 5) the conflicting messages of various (nonreligious and religious) media outlets; and 6) the erosive effects of globalization and cosmopolitanism on religious particularism and insular religious orthodoxy.

Mr. Koranda devotes an additional chapter to the so-called “New Atheism” movement (about which he suggests there was “not much” particularly new); and, in a final one, contemplates the potential future of a “godless” America, drawing inspiration from many sources and suggesting multiple possibilities. In the end, the author suggests that the U.S. may develop in the same way the United Kingdom did, as represented, for example, by the ethos to be found in Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going.”

Mr. Koranda has written an interesting study, from the Czech perspective, of the phenomenon of “atheism” in the U.S., mostly since 1950, with particularly effective attention to the “forgotten” battles of Madalyn Murray O’Hair (although “forgotten” by whom is unclear, since they are quite widely known and acknowledged in U.S. discourse).

For Mr. Koranda’s good work, I can take little credit, since the thesis was prepared largely—excepting initial consultation some eighteen months ago—outside of contact with me.

At one level, that makes his work all the more impressive. At another, unfortunately, it has led to a divergence of opinion between Mr. Koranda and myself on some matters, particularly the degree of persistence of non-institutional (personal/existential) religious/spiritual dynamics within U.S. culture, within U.S. political culture, even within American
“secularism” (what both Walt Whitman and Harold Bloom dubbed “Emersonian religion”), and, at least partially as a result, with Mr. Koranda’s future vision of a potential, improbable “godless” U.S. In this matter, I believe that Mr. Koranda has proceeded based on some “European” or “Czech” perspectives on atheism, as I am now proceeding from some “American” or “U.S.” counterparts. Mr. Koranda does, to some degree, recognize and attempt in the thesis to delimit and juxtapose those perspectives, but, ultimately, he seems to have privileged the European ones. I have had an opportunity, very late in the process, to express my reservations to Mr. Koranda; but I do not believe, based on my reading of it, that he has incorporated or responded to these concerns in the thesis. However doubtful it may be that there is an objectively “accurate” or “inaccurate” interpretation and/or conclusion to be reached here, there is inescapably disagreement between us.

That said, I believe Mr. Koranda has produced, within the framework of his clearly-articulated premises, a workmanlike and scholarly study of a very interesting counter-current in U.S. culture. He has even delved, to some extent, into literary manifestations of the atheism issue, at the same time demonstrating through his literary excursus why he has chosen, in the main, not to use this mode and target of analysis to a greater degree in his study.

Overall, based on scope and accuracy of coverage, bibliography, and, general interpretative competency (despite my disagreements with his American religious Gestalt), I would evaluate Mr. Koranda’s thesis as worthy of a grade of “1, vyborne.”

Thesis evaluation: “1, vyborne.”

Signed:

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January 16, 2017

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz.