

## **CZECH PROTESTANTS BETWEEN SOCIALIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND EUROPEAN UNION**

Petr Pokorný

*While a visiting scholar at Princeton's Center for Theological Inquiry, Dr. Petr Pokorný, former dean of the Protestant Faculty of Charles University (Prague) made the following presentation to the CAREE Annual Meeting on March 20, 2004 in New York. He is now Director of the Center for Biblical Studies jointly sponsored by Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences.*

I was born in Moravia and I started my studies of Protestant theology in the most difficult time, namely in 1951. Then I was vicar and minister in my church for ten years. Then I began teaching New Testament, first at the University of Greifswald in East Germany and in 1968, when it was possible to open another position in New Testament in Prague, I returned to my country. The faculty of Protestant Theology (former Comenius Faculty) was incorporated into Charles University in 1990. I retired some years ago and now I am director of a graduate school for Biblical studies (Center for Biblical Studies) sponsored partly by the Academy of Sciences and partly by Charles University.

My wife is teaching psychology at the same university. She suffered for my theological activities more than I did. She was prevented to teach at the university in 1972 because, according to the charge given to her, because of the structure of her family it was not guaranteed that she would teach in the Marxist spirit. She was rehabilitated in 1990 to resume teaching.

I called my paper Czech Protestants between Socialist Czechoslovakia and European Union. The Czech Protestants are not so important, they are only a small group (two percent of Czechs), but for some reason it is an interesting minority, the history of which can serve as a lab experiment about the vitality of Christians under the Communist rule.

## **THE PROBLEM**

What experience did we get during the time of discrimination and how can it serve in the present situation of joining the European union in April 2004? I will introduce this paper with several questions. As I noted, I started my studies in a difficult time. According to the program of the Communist Party the religious issue should have been solved within five years. So when we started our studies it was not sure whether we will be able to finish the studies.

Our teacher of systematic theology was professor Josef Hromádka. I am sure he was naive in some of his political views and prognoses, but in some respects he was not only an excellent scholar but also a prophetic personality. He gave us a consciousness of a great ecumenical mission: "You are the generation which by your activity in the church should prove that Christianity is not dependent on certain political conditions". This was the issue, indeed: Would Christianity come out of the Constantinian dimensions that still survived in Western society, or would it die out together with its structures? He tried to open a dialog with Marxists and in spite of their negative attitude towards such a project in the fifties his activity was directed toward preparing it. This was a vision that helped us to survive. Our church had at the time approximately 250,000 members in Bohemia and Moravia, in the small region of Silesia the majority of the inhabitants are Lutheran and there are some small Protestant groups like Baptist, Methodists and Moravians, altogether no more than 350,000 Protestants in the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia. We were not able to avail ourselves by any secondary supporting element like it was for example in East Germany the west German church supporting the East German church financially and by political pressure. We lacked also the great influence of a Catholic majority like it was in Poland. And of course we were also lacking our religious tradition deeply rooted in the national identity. We were living in a secularized state and even some of those opposing to Communists shared their antireligious attitude. In the same time we felt responsibility for our national heritage. In a nation which in theory should have been Catholic all the major spiritual traditions shaping our identity had originated in a pre-Reformation time or in the Hussite and Protestant tradition: Cyril and Methodius, St. Agnes, John Hus, Comenius, Palacký - the founder of the idea of

RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 2.

the Czech state, then Masaryk - the first president, all were Protestants. So we were more or less helpless in this society, we bore a responsibility for our national heritage, but we could rely only on the inner power of the gospel. A comparable group would be the Hungarian Protestants. We were always keeping contact, but we speak so different languages that the linguistic barrier complicated our cooperation with the much larger Protestant minority in Hungary. This was the situation.

## **HOW WE BEHAVED DURING THE COMMUNIST RULE**

We might say that we followed one of three strategies. The first was the Catholic strategy. After the second world war the Catholics had supposed that their political party, the People's Party, would protect them from the Communist pressure. However, when the Communists came, the Catholic party was compelled to collaborate with them. This strategy was generally not good, even if it had some positive side effects. For example the publishing house of the People's Party was allowed to publish non Marxist philosophical and theological literature.

A second strategy was the attempt at a direct dialog with political power. In our church it was the group of the so-called New Orientation. As to the influence, it should be considered an important group. In some areas they even reached some good results. However, the problem was that they tried to open a second channel of communication outside the church leadership. They presumed that the church leadership was too one-sided and were engaging in too many compromises. The church leadership on the other hand tried to follow a policy of representing all the streams and groups inside the Church and avoiding political debate. Some of the people from the New Orientation joined the Charta 77 at a later point.

I think that the majority of the church, that I am representing myself, decided for a third way. That is, to immediately create a social graspable alternative space within the society, an unofficial space. To shape the congregations in a way so that they became home for the people for the most important events in their lives, a social setting where they are judged according to a different scale than it was applied in communist society. Several politically compromised people became presbyters. Even politically I think it was immediately effective.

I was the second minister of a congregation which had originated in the most difficult time in 1951. I went to this congregation in 1963 after 12 years of its existence. These were mostly young families and no one was allowed to sell us a church building so we rented an old pub where we gathered. In another house we rented a part of a basement, where I got my office and where we had the clubroom for youth. We called it catacombs. So this was the visible dimension of our alternative space.

All the three strategies were backed by professor Hromádka who did not give up preparing the dialog. He gathered some of us and we discussed the Marxist philosophy and a new interpretation of the main statements of Christian dogmatics to explain them to the Marxist philosophers. This was a very good training done through a house seminar led by Hromádka. Then we created a small group who took part in a dialog with the Catholics in order that the Christians might not be split in discussing with the Marxists. These were the weekly meetings in Jircháře Hall on Thursdays. I learned a lot from Catholic philosophers, from people who were mostly not allowed to preach or teach.

Eventually, in 1964 the dialog started. It started with one of my colleagues making a written answer to an atheistic article of professor Machovec, the Marxist philosopher, and he invited him to discuss. Machovec did not realize that there are some thinking Christians in the country. Then Trusina (this is the name of my colleague) took Machovec and brought him to Hromádka. Machovec was shocked by Hromádka's openness when he discussed with him, and so he dared to open a Christian-Marxist dialog in the fall of 1964. This was a testimony of the power of God's spirit. Since Machovec was the chairman of the Committee for Atheism of the Communist Party at that time. The dialog continued until the Russian invasion of 1968. From that time I have my first friends from open-minded Catholics and from open-minded former Marxists.

## **WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?**

What are the long-term results of this period of discrimination? Already at the end of the 1970s the party had declared a new program in relationship to religion. RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 4.

Now during the dialogue era the program was: to find by the end of the century a model of coexistence with Christians in the same state. This was a retreat from the original positions. It may be influenced by perseverance of some Christian traditions, but on the whole I think it was a fruit of the dialog.

As to the statistics the number of Christians decreased. But the numbers were not so terrible as we supposed. At a small meeting of some friends in the fifties we discussed the possible future of the church. Some pragmatic colleagues stated that quite possibly about 10,000 Christians remain in our state. In fact the Christian population had decreased only by two-thirds, the Protestants by one-third. So about 25 percent of the population is Christian and 10 percent of that is Protestant.

Generally this means a decrease of Christianity in the Czech republic. But since the conditions changed so deeply, we may say that the Czech Protestant experiment proved that the existence of the Church is not dependent on the political structures. It is important how we interpret the statistical data, too. According to our files, the decrease of the traditional membership was deeper. On the other hand there are indications of persons joining churches as adults, Catholic and Protestant. This is a trend continuing since the early eighties. It became so important that our church had to draft a new agenda on procedures for adult baptisms, baptism combined with confirmation etc. Unfortunately till now, this useful activism applies mostly to students in the city congregations. So we survived.

My statistical remarks apply only to Czech republic, they are very different for Slovakia.

How did the situation develop with reference to the structures of the congregations? At the beginning of the 1950s we had Sunday school for children, but in the early 1990s we had only very small groups of children, their numbers had decreased by 90 percent. The parents did not send the children because they were concerned about their own future. But the decrease of the youth group was not so visible. The young people decided to go to church even if it was dangerous for their career. It was a strange experience that youth work did not change under these conditions as to their relative numbers, indeed some new people joined.

What were the new shapes of our activities? I think one of the most successful were the young parent groups who were gathering in families. They started to gather and discuss religious questions. They would sing or read from the Bible but it was not formal worship. Many participants were simply curious to know what Christians are but they would never come to a church, but they joined these groups. I distrust the so-called evangelisation but these young parent groups gathering in families were a successful means and we have kept them. Such groups are important especially in the diaspora and since we are a diaspora church, it is very important to have such points where people meet together in small groups. There they can discuss informally even with people outside the church. The general strategy should be: As many small groups as possible, but the mother congregation has to be strong and include all possible gifts of Spirit and groups of members. We were not allowed to re-organize our church and many weak parishes in the country became a burden for us.

Then during the communist time we organized youth work camps, since it was necessary to keep up the forests, where there was not enough money to pay for qualified workers. These were the areas where the Germans had been expelled after the second world war. So Protestant youth simply offered to come and help. The central forest administration was pleased, the local party people tried to prevent it, also sometimes there were quarrels between the party and local administrators. But these camps were successful and many young families had their origin under such demanding conditions in working in the woods. So this tradition of work camps is still being continued in our churches.

The last good experience is ecumenism. We now know all those in the Catholic Church who are able to cooperate with us and we do cooperate. There are several channels for this cooperation. There are those on the grassroots level through the local congregations. Secondly there is an organization of Catholic origin, the Czech Christian Academy that organizes lectures where many of us have been invited to speak and some even to chair the various sections. There are mostly good groups that come together to attend the lectures or seminars.

As to the youth work of the church, after 1989 there are large meetings twice annually which involve not only Protestant youth. On average such rallies are attended by about 900 people. Since the venue is changed for each event, most youth get to participate in such a big gathering once in three years. About one-third of the participants are Catholics, another third are open-minded people looking for new contacts, and one-third are those of stable Protestant background.

As you may have deduced from the statistics, the main change is that we left the model of the church that is a People's church (Volkskirche), where all belonged to the church. In our country this was mostly the Catholic Church but in some remote areas there were also still some Protestant villages. That period is over. In the country only a small fragment of the inhabitants are practicing Christians. The percentage of the population pursuing agriculture in the villages has dropped from 15 percent to only 1.8 percent and still we have an overproduction of food. Therefore most of the churches exist in the cities in re-opened or re-generated churches or parishes. *From the model of church of all we had to switch to the model of a church for all.* I think we should not give up this Catholic element of our confessions, but the Catholic element is the church for all.

In some respects it is already working in our setting. For example we have at our faculty now 450 students. All the Protestant churches need yearly about 25 new ministers. Even if we add the need for new ministries for hospitals, prisons, armies and so forth, still the majority of our students are studying not to become ministers but simply because somehow they need theological study. They find it useful. Maybe they feel a spiritual vacuum after the depression of communism. Of course partially it is because our faculty has a good reputation. And those having our diploma got good positions in several areas -- administration, of social work, publishing houses, diplomacy.

Gradually there have emerged special schools for these new areas of study, but developed a short three years course leading to bachelor's degree for the Christian laity who intended to get theological education. I think every Christian academician should have received a basic theological education. So we introduced a shorter program without Greek and Hebrew called Theology of Christian Traditions. About RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 7.

100 of the 450 students, mostly students of other departments of the university (but also some doctors or engineers) are in this program, about fifty-fifty Protestants and Catholics. In addition to it there are about 70 people who are studying in a special bachelors program developed in cooperation with a Catholic college for pastoral care for those lay persons holding higher positions in diaconal work, or in the Catholic Charity.

In the theological Commission of our church we are aware of a still larger mission. Our contemporary society is pluralistic, democratic. In this respect we are not that different from the Western democracies, but we lost contact with our Christian past. And the Christians are now called to interpret for the nation its cultural heritage. This is not so easy. For example, the national Gallery had to employ a theologian, in order that he may interpret the themes of the paintings, to learn them Christian iconography. One of the graduates of our program became the director of the national Gallery. So voices from the Protestant minority are there.

Finally one of the highest concerns is the representing of our national culture in discussion with the other religions which must be an important task for the future. I think Hans Küng is right when trying to open the dialog with the other religions. We would not like the dialog to replace personal witness and mission, but we have to create certain atmosphere even for our mission by such a kind of dialog. It is a strange phenomenon in the time were Christianity seems to be decreasing in the West, almost all nations of the world have accepted the declaration of human rights which was deeply influenced by the American declarations about human rights inspired by the biblical heritage.

## **IS THERE A CHRISTIAN ECONOMICS NEITHER COMMUNIST OR CAPITALIST?**

*Christian economics* should be some form of capitalism with a care for social security, if you like a capitalism with a human face. I am not sure how to attain this, structurally speaking. The Christians should try to re-orient the capitalist competition towards improving the ecology and to prevent the development of military industry. We are living through a time where the people are preoccupied with surviving the

RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 8.

legacy of communism, by rejecting an absolutely forced solution. We have not yet adequately thought about the options. We only rejected the bad solutions. But we are those who have to tell, even our society, that we must measure our living standard not only against that of the Americans and Germans over the border, but with reference to those in the East and South. This is undoubtedly our first task.

How have *Roman Catholics in Czech Republic* dealt with the impact of Vatican 2, to which they were not directly exposed? Has the ecumenical interaction with the Protestants had any influence? Yes there is a very strong majority in the Czech Christian Academy, supported by a few bishops, but the majority of the bishops are conservative. The problem with the Catholic faculty of the Charles University was that they practically rejected Vatican 2.

How to account for the *youth returning to the church*? It has to do with the disillusionment with communism.

Why is there *not a new generation of committed Marxists*? I think they realized that the ideology does not work. After the Soviet invasion in 1968 in the '70s, 300,000 Marxist intellectuals were expelled from the Communist Party and they were discriminated more than the Christians.

What are the *younger scholars now interested in*? One interest is in biblical studies, which explains the origin of the new research center of our faculty. Second there is an attempt to recover the systematic theology tradition and of course new interpretations. For example Karl Rahner is very popular as a theologian, and possibly the American David Tracy. Many are reading the German Eberhard Jüngel. In the past years there is a new interest in the Czech Reformation. There are some excellent new studies, by the way, by Jindrich Halama. Then another important theme is Jewish Christian dialog. There are very few Jews in the Czech republic who survived and they are very conservative, not interested in dialog. But to re-establish new links to Jewish culture, that is a very hot thing.