

Praxis of the Gospel in the Secular Czech Republic: Some Missiologically Relevant Impulses

On 27 and 28 May 2011, there was a symposium at the Protestant Theological Faculty (PTF) of Charles University in Prague, called “Praxis of the gospel in the secular Czech Republic: *publice docere* or theology/theologian in the public”. The symposium was organized on the occasion of the jubilee of Prof Pavel Filipi, a pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) and professor of practical theology, well-known through his work (predominantly) from the disciplines of homiletics, liturgics and ecumenical theology. The festive event provided a rich program with plenty of inspiring ideas. The purpose of this article is not to describe in detail and reflect upon the symposium as a whole. This paper seeks to sketch and critically assess the most important missiologically relevant topics and impulses which were brought up at the conference. To pursue this goal the paper is going to focus only on some of the lectures from the symposium or even on their parts. It is thus going to attempt to show a close relationship between theological reflection from a perspective of various theological disciplines and missiology which, apart from its critical-reflective function, is also supposed to provide topics for mission activities of Christian churches.

After festive addresses, introductory speeches and official requisites had taken place, **Joel Ruml**, the ECCB Synodal Senior (Moderator), spoke on the sufficiency of the gospel. His main thesis was that the gospel is still principal and ample today, even in the competitive environment on the spiritual and religious field. Drawing on the Czech writer and Protestant pastor Jan Karafiát, Ruml reminded that the task of the church is not only to speak about a menace (judgment), but also (or perhaps primarily) to offer an alternative – to set out on the way of hope. He perceived uncertainty, fear and inferiority complex, found among a large part of the Czech Protestants, as greatest obstacles that prevent ECCB from witnessing to the gospel today. To the contrary, Ruml underlined that the Christian is to be filled with assurance because God promises and gives them his Spirit. Therefore, the fundamental question is: How to pass the gospel on in the contemporary Czech Republic? In his answer to this question Ruml put an emphasis on justice and authentic relationships within a community, which can be perceived on three levels: God – man, man – God, and man – man. The point is to build these relationships in the spirit and power of the gospel, constantly remembering that God bears man in His mind. That is, to the lecturer’s mind, the gospel which is able to make its way into the secular Czech Republic, too.

Although Ruml’s proposal can be assessed as too narrowly specified and unilaterally oriented on a civically interpreted witness to the gospel, it also has its – at least two – valuable contributions. First, Christians truly need to free themselves from the inferiority complex and become proud witnesses to the good news. And secondly, a relational dimension of the gospel, theologically founded on the doctrine of the Trinity, often remains in Czech churches to be looked down upon and trivialized in order to accentuate individual afterlife salvation.

Jan Sokol, a philosopher and professor at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague, discussed a topical issue: What could the gospel, that we as Christians want to proclaim, mean today? He attempted to present his vision of “*publice docere*”. He proceeded from the question, how Christians should interpret the world. If they saw the world exclusively as perverted and evil, or as something which is in God’s hands only, many aspects of the biblical message would get lost. Therefore, Sokol referred to Apostle Paul; together with the latter he emphasized that we are in the world’s debt, actively responsible for its destiny. While having agreed with the thesis that the gospel is eternal, the lecturer expressed his doubts about the belief that what matters should only be finding an appropriate form for delivering the gospel. What matters is not only the form, but, first and foremost, an interpretation which must take into account changed realities radically and seriously. Sokol

named two of these realities specifically. First, it seems that today the earth has been replenished and subdued (Gen 1) as evident from a demographic structure, status of family, approach to human life, etc. Secondly, the universe has recently begun to be viewed as finite, particularly with regard to time. It is understood as an event, having its origin and undertaking a development.

On the basis of these assumptions Sokol argued that our (majority) interpretation of the Scripture needs a revision. In their understanding of and teaching about salvation, most churches have traditionally focused on individual soul, individual death, and individual salvation. However, the significance of a fellowship and relationships is also beginning to be accented today (cf. the paper by J. Ruml, discussed above), i.e. the integral dimension of the gospel. Yet, Sokol believes that the “world” has gone much further than the churches in this respect. In our time, there is an increasing number of people who are not interested in afterlife anymore; biblically speaking they are “full of their years”. On the other hand, it seems that in the world today the element of solidarity plays a greater role than ever before. This claim applies, to Sokol’s mind, not only to interpersonal solidarity, but also to solidarity towards animals and, for that matter, the whole creation.

These considerations lead to a serious question: What is the meaning of the salvation and redemption in Christ? Sokol rejected the Anselmian concept, known from the work *Cur Deus Homo*, as too individualistic and “hereafter-oriented”, on the one hand, and especially as one which makes God the Father an accomplice accountable for the death of Jesus Christ, on the other hand. Instead, he proposed to interpret salvation cosmologically in its broadest connotations. He based such an understanding on Apostle Paul’s vision from Romans 8:19ff which strictly rejects a notion of redemption as something which solely happens on human soul. Jesus Christ not only atoned for Adam’s fall; he also has an active role to play in the completion of the world. Sokol concluded his paper with a thesis that Christians should set out for the path of universal solidarity and mutuality between people and the world.

At least three following remarks need to be said with regard to the inspiring lecture given by Prof Sokol. First, the integral or holistic dimension of the gospel, advocated by the lecturer, is not at all a novelty in missiological or ecumenical circles. A lively discussion has been going on this issue from at least 1960s, and one can, more or less, speak about a general agreement with regard to the thesis that our understanding of salvation should be much richer than a mere image of afterlife salvation of individual souls. Nevertheless, Sokol is right that this “new” notion of salvation and redemption has been far from finding such an echo in the area of “ordinary” church life as required or wished. However, another aspect of the whole issue needs to be foregrounded as well, namely an enormous importance of dialogue between missiologists and theologians pursuing other theological disciplines or Christian philosophers. There they would inform each other about and discuss actual themes from their respective disciplines, co-creating them at the same time.

Secondly, in spite of its considerable problematic nature and with regard to the fact that it is not the only legitimate interpretation, the Anselmian concept of salvation has been held in high esteem among a substantial part of global Christianity. This alone is a sufficient reason for abstaining from dismissing it straight away; it is necessary to listen to the voices of those who defend it. For instance, Jan Štefan, professor of systematic theology at PTF, backed St Anselm up, saying that the medieval theologian had not narrow-mindedly fixed his eyes upon individual salvation only, but considered also a cosmological aspect of salvation in his theological reflections.

And thirdly, even though Jan Sokol is right to emphasize that solidarity has potential to become the key word with regard to witnessing to the gospel today, one should not forget the contemporary world is not only characterized by the longing for mutuality and

cohesiveness, but also strongly formed by individualism and estrangement. In our theological work, we must always bear in mind this tension between solidarity and alienation.

Martin Prudký, Pro-rector of Charles University and head of the Department of the Old Testament Studies at PTF, delivered a paper with the slightly provocative title “Gospel according to Isaiah”. Despite the fact that his lecture was from the perspective of a biblical scholar and was based on exegesis of some specific passages from the book of prophet Isaiah, it contained some implications which are also important for missiology and, consequently, for mission in the Czech Republic. First, if God the Lord is not active at work in the secular Czech Republic, preachers/missionaries will produce mission strategies in vain, no matter how sophisticated these may be. With such an understanding the Old Testament scholar Prudký stands very close to the missiological concept of *missio Dei*. The second implication is closely related to the first as Prudký reminds that God the Lord calls the whole creation. The gospel thus gets an open, even public feature. Third, the gospel is practical, speaking into everyday life situations. As such it is necessarily political and potentially dangerous. And finally, the good news always has its reception, i.e. the way it is received, and this reception does not necessarily have to be exactly the way the churches want it. That is one of the risks but also hopes of the concept *missio Dei*. M. Prudký concluded with saying that the gospel intended for the secular Czech Republic is the gospel we encounter in Isaiah as well as the New Testament; it is a practical, public and open witness to God’s salvation.

Pavel Černý, a preacher of the Brethren Evangelical Free Church and a mission theologian of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Prague, was the only lecturer who was pursuing an explicitly missiological topic when he spoke about mission of the church today. In the introduction, he pointed out some missiologically significant moments in the work of the honored Pavel Filipi, such as an accent on the gospel that crosses various borders, certain “preliminariness” of the church (from an eschatological perspective, the world is more important than the church) or a fact that the *raison d’être* of the church is not to do mission, but to be mission. In addition, Černý took note of an interesting fact that while mission/evangelization is far from being a matter-of-course term in the context of the Czech Republic, in the global oikumene (World Council of Churches, Leuenberg Concord, Lausanne Movement, but also the Roman-Catholic Church) one is able to find a strong emphasis on proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. It is legitimate to ask, whether this trend is an expression of the vestiges of the Communist regime, or whether the reason is to be looked for somewhere else.

P. Černý divided his paper into four main parts in his attempt to introduce those issues of the contemporary missiological debate which he personally regards as central. First, Christians must face the reality of mission in a multifaith environment. The lecturer argued quite strongly for such a concept of interfaith dialogue which goal and purpose is not in “dialogue for the sake of dialogue”. Černý agrees that respect towards adherents of other religions is a must, but witness to Christ cannot be concealed either. However, it must be said that such pluralistically or inclusivistically oriented proponents of interfaith dialogue as Leonard Swidler or Raimundo Panikkar could probably sign this statement, too; in their works they repeatedly insist on taking conversion as a possible outcome of interfaith dialogue into account as a reality of central importance, and on renouncing a derogatory attitude towards such converts. In this respect, however, Černý goes further because he openly professes proselytism for the purpose of gaining converts from non-Christian religions (nevertheless, he categorically rejects proselytism among individual Christian churches), provided that adherents of these religions are given the same opportunity with regard to Christians. Here a serious terminological problem must be pointed out. In contemporary ecumenical circles, the term “proselytism” is exclusively used with a negative semantic overtone as an improper and ethically unacceptable coercion (psychological, economic,

political, social, etc.) connected with some missionary efforts. Even though the thrust of Dr Černý's argumentation is correct and Christians should rejoice in converts, "gained" legitimately and without coercion not only during interfaith dialogue but also due to everyday witness of life, his choice of the term does not seem to be the most appropriate and demands reconsideration.

Secondly, Pavel Černý articulates serious doubts about a so-called secularization thesis, supporting them with the results of sociological research. Today, there is every indication that "God (god?) is back", at least as far as a global perspective is concerned. The problem with contemporary Christian mission is that it still relies heavily on the reality of secularization, even though the current situation should more likely be viewed as analogical to first-century Hellenism (mysteries, polytheism, etc.). One can ask a question, whether dialectical theology is still justified and whether it should not be replaced by narrative theology instead.

Thirdly, cooperation and dialogue with foreign churches seem to be of vital significance. In the Czech Republic, one can now find Korean, Russian, Japanese, Vietnamese or Mongolian churches among others. Some of them merged with the home denominations, others remain independent. In any case, however, their existence gives an opportunity to elaborate an intercultural hermeneutics of the Bible. One of the most important questions, addressed to contemporary Czech churches is, whether Czech Christians are able to be open to such a dialogue.

Fourthly, Christians must reflect upon the relationship between the gospel and culture over and over again. The issue of culture in its broadest connotations is an essentially missiological topic. It is insufficient to interpret the gospel only as something contrary to "worldly" culture; their relationship is complex and it deserves detailed attention. Moreover, Christians cannot do without culture as a universally anthropological phenomenon when proclaiming the gospel.

In his lecture, Pavel Černý proved to be an extraordinary expert not only on current missiological debate, but also on themes in practical mission which the churches should pursue. The whole talk was concluded precisely with an appeal to the Christian churches. According to Černý, they ought to give more space to non-European nations, engage in the study of culture(s) more profoundly, revise the curriculum at theological schools and seminaries, and be more sensitive towards "non-churchgoers", searching for purpose and authentic spirituality.

Michael Martinek, a Catholic theologian and lecturer, explored the relationship of the Czechs to the praxis of Christian churches. First, he asked a clear question: What do the Czechs expect from the churches? Right from the beginning, however, he must have admitted that most Czechs expect "probably nothing". Although the negative prejudices from the Communist era slowly but surely lose their power, there is no positive agenda that would replace them. Nevertheless, there is also a considerable number of those who do expect "something". These people could be, according to Martinek, divided into several subgroups. First, there are people who appreciate public work of the churches – on the field of charity, education or social services. Secondly, there are people in difficult life situations – the sick, disabled, unemployed, addicted, but also people with demanding jobs such as soldiers, managers, the police, etc.; they often realize that the churches can offer them invaluable spiritual service. The third group is represented by intellectuals and students, interested in honest dialogue. Similar to them is the fourth group, consisting of so-called "seekers" who are in for a "tasting" from the spiritual "menu" the churches can offer. And finally, there are also members of the churches, striving for a (re)new(ed) understanding of their faith.

Subsequently, M. Martinek asked a question, whether there is a "right praxis" which would be able to appeal to people. Looking for an answer he self-critically acknowledged that

the churches still have much work to do in this respect. For example, public service of the Czech churches is well-known and appreciated, but certainly much more could be done. There are still noticeable lacks in the sphere of training of the pastoral and social service personnel. With regard to the intellectuals and “seekers”, it is necessary to develop a new discourse for dialogue and to keep in mind that these people are going to choose only the bits and pieces that fit into their concept. Finally, one must ask, whether the members of the Christian churches do not have too low expectations with regard to their respective churches, whether they have not settle for the obligatory minimum in the form of Sunday worship.

From the missiological perspective, however, it is striking that M. Martinek did not attempt to bring any proposal with regard to the issue what “good praxis” could appeal to those people who do not expect anything from the churches. That is a fundamental question addressed to Christian mission: How to approach the people who could not care less for the gospel? What points of contact can be found in such a case?

Martinek ended his paper with the words of Pope Benedict XVI saying that the church should be a “creative minority” which is aware of the fact that its values are vital and relevant also for non-members. That is both an inspiring and potentially dangerous thought. It is inspiring, of course, with its stress on open dialogue with society. But should Christians really a priori assume that they will remain a minority? What if “the Lord adds to their number daily those who are being saved” and the church will be becoming a majority on a certain place? Should it then “put the car in reverse” and discourage people from faith in order to remain loyal to its characteristic as the “creative minority”?

The whole symposium was concluded by **Pavel Filipi** himself in a final talk, in which he also sought to demonstrate what has been at the center of his theological work, what his presuppositions are, and what questions he asks. According to his own words, he is not so much interested in practical theology as a whole, but rather in the praxis of the gospel. In his theological work he asks questions such as: What are the centers of gravity or neuralgic points of this praxis? Filipi works on the presumption that no theology today can afford to be non-ecumenical (cf. A. Molnár). However, it does not mean that the search for a mutually inoffensive and acceptable unity would be all that matters. Quite the contrary, discordance is, to Filipi’s mind, more attractive than agreement, and real theological work begins where consensus ends. Efforts aimed at anxious protection of the so-called “Christian identity” are strange to the Prague theologian. He applies the famous words about life/soul from Matthew 16:25 (“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”) to Christian identity as well. Therefore, he is not afraid that Christian emphases would get lost in culture. Nevertheless, they might become superficial and idle, if Christians lost their roots.

These considerations lead Filipi to the central question: How to attract attention of the Czech person for the gospel? He works with the axiom that the average Czech thinks that a God hypothesis simply does not work. It allegedly does not matter whether or not God exists; even if He did exist, there would no reason why people should believe in Him. In this connection, however, one is justified to ask, what is the ultimate difference between the “average” Czech and the Czech Christian? How come that there is a certain percentage of the Czech citizens (no matter how high or low this percentage is) that finds sufficient reasons for the faith in God?

Filipi genuinely attempts to find a way how to appeal to the “average” Czech. He finds it viable to emphasize not transcendence, but rather condescendence, i.e. God’s permanent coming down to man. Therefore, it does not (primarily) matter whether and how people relate to God, but how God relates/descends to man. The Christian churches can give precisely this offer of the descending God to the secular Czech Republic. However, a possible problem of common discourse emerges here – is the “average” Czech going to understand at all what the

Christian tries to offer him? Another potential danger was articulated by Prof Filipi himself in his talk: Christians must avoid the temptation of paternalistic attitude of those who know best what is appropriate for non-Christians. In opposition to such an attitude it seems viable to introduce a program of “accompaniment”, as presented in the Czech Republic by, for example, Tomáš Halík. It concerns a witness of everyday life, a way Christians act in work, family and civic life, their attitude to property, environment, minorities, etc. That is the praxis of the gospel which can always be, according to Filipi, an invitation only.

We wish Prof Filipi for his jubilee all the best. May he be able to invite both “average” Czechs and experienced churchgoers to hope and celebration for many years to come.

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