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Czechs object to authority, not religion, sociologist says

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Ted Turnau is an Evangelical Protestant who grew up in Pennsylvania, eventually earning a Ph.D. in apologetics from the Westminster Theological Institute. He?s lived for the last decade in the Czech Republic, teaching the sociology of religion and other subjects at the Anglo-American College, a small secular liberal arts college in Prague, and at Charles University.

Turnau spoke with NCR on Saturday about the religious situation in the Czech Republic, and about the prospects for the Catholic church in this heavily secularized society.

The Czech Republic has a reputation for being one of the most secularized societies on earth. Is that accurate?

It?s accurate as far as it goes, but it doesn?t go nearly far enough. There?s a long history here of animosity towards organized religions, but there?s actually a great deal of interest in religion, especially among the young. There?s a healthy New Age subculture here, there?s a lot of interest in Tibetan Buddhism, there?s a strong Hared Krishna group, there?s a lot of fascination with the occult, with death metal, with tarot cards, and so on. A lot of Czechs who identify themselves as non-religious will nevertheless read their daily horoscopes religiously.

It?s not that Czechs are a-religious, in other words, but rather that there?s animosity towards organized religion, and toward the Catholic church in particular.

In part, that?s a result of the history of the Czech lands. It?s true that there was a virulent form of anti-Catholicism during the era of Communist rule, but that doesn?t explain why other post-Communist societies are not so openly hostile to the Catholic church. It?s because of 300 years of domination by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with the Catholic church very much a participant in, and beneficiary of, that domination. The Communists took full advantage of that history. When they confiscated the church?s castles in Moravia, for example, they kept them open and sent people on tours, saying, ?Look how the church stole your wealth and made itself rich.? That?s why, when the Communists stole land from the church, the reaction of many Czechs was, ?Go get ?em, boys.?

That may help explain why it?s been so difficult to get a deal regarding restitution or compensation for that property.

Sure, because it would be political suicide to come out in favor of returning those lands to the Catholic church. It?s also worth remembering that the only indigenous Czech religious movement, the Hussite church, was squelched by the Catholic forces after the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. Between the world wars in the 20th century, there was a massive influx into the Hussite churches, which has sometimes been styled as a

religious revival, but it?s better understood as an expression of nationalism. The Czech Communists made Jan Hus into a people?s revolutionary who stood against the evil empire of the Catholic church. To this day, many Czechs think of Hus as a nationalist, rather than a religious, leader.

Those perceptions of Catholicism haven?t gone away. Still today, teachers still have these prejudices and they teach them to Czech kids. My own daughter went to a Czech school through the eighth grade, and she would come home repeating some of the stuff she had heard in school about religion and especially about the Catholic church. I would almost have to ?deprogram? her. That?s to say nothing about the basic ignorance and misinformation about religion in the schools. One day my daughter?s teacher launched into a lesson about how Luther had stood up to the Catholic church. She asked the teacher, ?didn?t Luther translate the Bible into German?? The teacher?s answer was, ?I wouldn?t know anything about that.? The paucity of understanding is remarkable. Quite often, what the kids still get is largely Communist-era anti-religious propaganda.

Based on what you?re saying, it seems that while religiosity may have a future in the Czech Republic, things look fairly bleak for institutional religion.

tIt can look that way, but I?m not sure it?s the whole truth. Among my students, there are a growing number who are growing tired of staunch, dour atheism and who are willing to give Christianity a try. It?s not a huge percentage, but it?s noticeable. I have one student, for example, who says that Evangelical Christianity is the only genuine subculture of resistance left in the Czech Republic!

tEveryone cites statistics about atheists and Catholics in the Czech Republic, and both sets of statistics are actually misleading. On the one hand, the Catholic church claims that somewhere between a third and forty percent of Czechs are Catholics, but that?s based on the numbers of people who are baptized. If you only consider practicing Catholics, the number is much, much lower, perhaps as low as two or three percent. The Czech Republic may be the only place on earth where the phrase ?Catholic atheist? isn?t a misnomer.

By the same token, the counts of atheists are also misleading. Fr. Tomas Halik has coined a phrase that translates as ?somethingists,? meaning that lots of Czech who identify as atheists actually believe there?s something out there, even if it remains undefined. As long as that ?something? doesn?t try to tell me how to live, it?s fine. Actually, this is one of the few things upon which Czechs actually agree. There was a national poll in 2003 which found that 97 percent of people between the ages of 17 and 70, which is obviously a pretty wide cross-section of people, agreed with the statement, ?Nobody gets to tell me how to live.?

What that suggests is that the problem here really isn?t with religion, but with the idea of authority. Czechs are allergic to authority, although there?s also a curiously collectivist mentality sometimes. There?s a strong pressure to conform, even if formal authority structures are a problem. Alongside hostility to authority is a real distaste for commitment. Czechs are very resistant to commit themselves to anything passionately, because in their experience it?s the people who are passionately committed to something who end up hurting other people, and they?re also the ones who are hurt themselves when the tide changes. So, the culture encourages a kind of pragmatism, settling for what seems reasonable.

You?re not Catholic, but based on the situation you?ve just sketched, what advice would you give the Catholic church about trying to build a future in this culture?

It will take a concerted effort. Right away, I see four challenges.

First, there?s a drastic shortage of priests. I know that?s true not just of the Czech Republic, but there?s a special problem here. In a culture that?s as sexually active as this one, the idea of a celibate priesthood in some ways is just a non-starter. This is a highly eroticized society in a lot of ways, and that complicates any effort to beef up the number of priests, especially among the young. Obviously, that raises issues that go beyond the capacity of

the church here to resolve, but it?s part of the picture.

Second, I think the Catholic church needs to rethink how it goes about connecting with the younger generation. In that regard, Fr. Thomas Halick is interesting. He?s very popular among the students here. I know that sometimes he strays from Catholic orthodoxy. What he?s trying to do is to build a bridge between Catholicism and a post-modern mindset. Personally, I think he sometimes goes too far toward accommodating post-modernity. But when you see so many young Czech students listening to him, it speaks volumes. It?s an example of the need for the Catholic church to reframe religious authority, so that it?s seen as healing and personal instead of stiff, hierarchical, and controlling. Right now that?s how many Czechs see it, as a kind of straightjacket.

Third, I think all of us need to put a new emphasis on grace. When I teach Christianity at the university, I talk about salvation by grace, and Czechs just don?t get it. They think of salvation exclusively in terms of a reward for good behavior, so that when they finally do get a sense of what grace means, it?s shocking and surprising. It?s so unlike what they believe Christianity to be, which essentially is that if they shut up, walk straight, and live a life of dull conformity, at some future point they?ll be rewarded. Of course, that?s just not where human beings are most of the time.

Fourth, there has to be some emphasis on apologetics. There are thought structures out there about religion, and about Catholicism, which need to be dismantled. Obviously without being aggressive or polemical, these assumptions and prejudices have to be deconstructed.

What do you make of the pope?s visit?

I think it?s good he?s reaching out. Because of who he is, the reception is a bit chilly. Czechs don?t like Germans to begin with, and they especially don?t like authoritarian dogmatists, which is this pope?s profile here. I remember when he was elected five years ago, my students were asking questions like, ?Wasn?t he in the Hitler Youth?? It will take more than just a single visit to bridge the canyon of suspicion about religion, the Catholic church, and this pope in particular, but it?s a start.

Like it or not, the pope?s a rock star. Czechs have a peculiar sense of themselves; half the time they think they?re the center of the universe, and the other half they think their country is a backwater. As a result, anytime someone important comes through, it?s appreciated.

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