

Mission of the Contemporary Church: A Meditation on the Missionary Practice of the Gospel in the Secular Environment of the Czech Republic

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Introduction

Due to the fact that it has been often misused by various ideologies and deformed by incorrect historical interpretations, the term "mission" evolved merely into a swear-word or at least into a word with pejorative connotations. Despite all these distortions it is still in use to indicate the mission of the contemporary church in the world. The term still appears in the language of the world ecumenical dialogue and it is a permanent issue of academic theological research. No wonder; as *missio Dei* it represents the key concept of contemporary biblical hermeneutics and never ceased to be an inspiring model of church service to the world. The mission of the church is closely related with the practice of the Gospel in the secular environment of the Czech Republic; through its new understanding, which springs from re-reading Bible in a "missionary" perspective and a radical contextualization of the Gospel of Christ, inspires ecumenical dialogue, helps churches in their orientation, and leads to their cooperation in the field of improvement of the current practice of the Gospel.

Repeatedly, articles and publications by Professor Filipi reveal the accent on the Gospel of Christ, which crosses various borderlines between people, connects, unifies and overcomes differences, contradictions and disputes. How can the Gospel of Christ influence the theology of mission of the Christian churches and practice of the Gospel in the secular environment of the Czech Republic? I try to answer this question on the basis of theological discipline called usually "theology of mission", which deals both with evangelization and social action, i.e. the church in the service to the world.

First of all we need to admit that in the Czech Christian environment the words "mission" and "evangelization" are not commonly used anymore. It may be the result of the long life of our churches in the totalitarian era, when very limited and restricted religious freedoms were preserved, with a focus mainly on the performance of liturgical acts inside churches, chapels and prayer rooms. The churches were not allowed to appear in public. Thus churches and congregations, little by little, got used to care more for themselves than for missionary work and evangelization outside their communities. Up to now some Christians react antagonistically upon even hearing the terms "mission" or "evangelization" and consider them to be anachronisms or relics of the past.¹ Surprisingly, such attitude cannot be found in the world church organizations—be it the World Council of Churches, which has produced a vast number of missiological

¹ Exceptions to this trend are the following publications and articles: SMOLÍK, J. *Současné pokusy o interpretaci evangelia*. Prague: KEBF, 1968; "Evangelizace: Ekumenická diskuse." In *Křesťanská revue*, Vol. 48, 1/1981, pp. 5-10; FILIPI, P. "Chudým evangelium se zvěstuje." In *Křesťanská revue*, Vol. 50, 1983, p. 123. Articles of Miroslav Heryán and Cyril Horák are also worth mentioning.

documents, or the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe–Leuenberg Church Fellowship² or the Conference of European Churches. *Charta oecumenica*, a document signed by a majority of churches in the Czech Republic, says: “The most important role of churches in Europe is the collective preaching of the Gospel in words and acts for salvation of all people”.³ Important conferences of the world ecumenical movement never miss out the issue of mission and evangelization. The same can be told about the Roman-Catholic Church, which often mentions the issue in its encyclicals and other important documents.

If we consider the European context, we can observe that it has been the two recent popes, who heavily influenced the discussion on mission and evangelization by their encyclicals. I have in mind especially *Evangelii nuntiandi* by Paul VI⁴ and *Redemptoris missio* (of permanent validity for missionary work) by John Paul II.⁵ The latter, acclaimed by almost all Christian institutions today, stated clearly and plainly that Europe needs a new evangelization.

The study of mission and evangelization in the Czech environment also evolves very slowly, and is still not adequately reflected at the academic ground.⁶ Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the interest in the issue slowly increases and the historically first study day, organized by the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic, focused on the understanding of mission in its particular ecclesial structures.⁷

In the Czech environment Professor Pavel Filipi often treats mission and related issues in his publications in connection with ecclesiology. He emphasizes that the church, mirroring the inner relations within the Trinity, must have a purpose other than itself; it is here for the world. The place of the church in the Divine plan of salvation is defined by its sending out to the world. In a certain perspective, the church does not “perform” mission, but rather the church as such is God’s mission to the world. This is exactly where Filipi seeks its *raison d’être* and the norm for its ecclesiological structures. The unity of church also has its missionary dimension and is a clear testimony of faith to the world. Besides the passive testimony of the church, i.e. when the church makes its teaching public and offers its “goods” to people, there is also the active model: mission work and evangelization, marching across marketplaces of the world with a prophetic appeal, a kind of a “home delivery”.⁸ According to Matthew 28:19, the Great Commission, i.e. entrusting the disciples of Jesus with a missionary quest, is understood as approaching people in their environment and conditions, seeking common language, not

² A document named *Evangelicky evangelizovat – perspektivy pro církve v Evropě*. 2002-2004, issued in 2006.

³ *Charta Oecumenica*. Article 2, <http://www.ekumenickarada.cz/index.php?setlang=1&a=cat.13>

⁴ PAUL VI. *Evangelii nuntiandi*. Prague: Zvon, 1990.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II. *Redemptoris missio*. Prague: Zvon, 1994.

⁶ *Do we need missiology? And if so, why do we not teach it and develop it systematically?* The conference proceedings from the 1st conference of the CECMS. Issued in the Czech-Slovak and English version by the CECMS, Prague, 2007.

⁷ The 1st Study day of the ECC CZ took place in Prague on May 24, 2004. Various perspectives on mission and missionary work were presented there: the Roman-Catholic (by Bishop Fr. Radkovský), the Eastern Orthodox (J. Hauzar), the mainline Protestant (L. Beneš) and the evangelical (P. Černý).

⁸ Cf. FILIPI, P. *Církev a církve: Kapitoly z ekumenické eklesologie*. Brno: CDK, 2000. pp. 34-35

respecting any borders and division lines. Filipi concludes: "From the eschatological perspective the world is more important than the church. Noah's Ark mentality, the high self-confidence of an isolated island of a few rescued from the global flood, does not have place in the universal vision of the Kingdom of God."⁹

However, application and development of the active model of the church based on mission and evangelization is rather problematic in the Czech environment. After all, it means to approach people, search for a comprehensible language, disrespect any limitations and disturb the self-confidence of an isolated island of a few rescued. This is exactly the point where we have to deal with serious questions of our understanding of the missionary work of the church. I dare to pick only four most pressing questions from the vast and multi-layered issue.

Mission in the multi-faith world

In one of his articles, Dr. Ed Stetzer, editor of Christianity Today magazine,¹⁰ recalls a multi-religious conference, similar to hundreds of others being currently organized all over the world. The participants represented the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church and Protestant churches, Jews, Muslims, and members of the Baha'i Faith. According to his memories it was an assembly of nice and warm people. In the beginning the conference host explained that a collective research should lead to cooperation in sharing resources and mutual help. He suggested that the participants create, publish and distribute resources to help particular fellowships to develop and grow. Ed Stetzer asked to speak and he said, smiling: "I appreciate your kind support, which enables to make research on churches to improve our understanding of their life and service. Nevertheless, I am not here to make partnerships, which would lead to mutual help in growth of all religions. I want to help churches I serve and one reason of their existence is to make some of you to convert to Christianity." The conference room began to ferment. Some stayed still, staring in surprise, others nodded their heads in agreement. A Muslim imam sitting next to Stetzer said his view is similar. It came clear that both Stetzer and the imam represented dynamic and growing communities. Both believed in the sense of sharing and spreading their faith. Their aim was not to create a syncretistic model made of parts of all religious beliefs. The Christian theologian and the Muslim imam stayed together in a friendly talk long after the conference had ended and laughed together at certain trends of the conference.

Peaceful coexistence of world religions is very important and inter-religious dialogue is deeply rooted in the ground of the theology of mission. Nevertheless, it is important to discern what exactly we expect from this dialogue. It seems that proselytizing among Christian churches has been overcome and nearly eliminated. The churches mutually respect their annunciations of Saviour's grace and diversity of gifts of the Spirit. Is it possible, however, to adopt such a stance also towards other religions? Is it not the case that we should rather proselytize among members of those religions and to give them the same chances? Is it not rather important to grasp anew the theological reflection on what the Christian churches worship and serve and what other religions

⁹ Ibid. p. 35

¹⁰ STETZER, E. "Proselytizing in a Multi-Faith World." *Christianity Today*, April 2011. pp. 20-27

do? Theological research should help us make a clear decision of whether we want partnership or religious association with other religions or whether we should try to proselytize among them—on the assumption that the other religions will do the same. It is no doubt that we have much to learn from other religions and that inter-religious dialogue is an essential part of mission. The Scripture testifies the Lord as God who is in dialogue with his people. God incarnated in Jesus Christ remains in the dialogue. The early church leads dialogue with the Jewish synagogue and the Hellenistic society.

There is no doubt we have to respect other religions and treat them with dignity, but it does not mean that our testimony of Jesus Christ should be concealed as an esoteric teaching. In an inter-religious dialogue it is the very integrity of our faith which is tested. A dialogue with a partner who hides the most precious thing he has ceases to be interesting soon. Members of other religions very often express disdain and mockery for those unable or unwilling to confess their faith.

Filipi also warns about a danger of confessional vagueness. False tolerance, which defends itself with such vagueness, is not a positive value.¹¹ Inter-religious dialogue should not be taken as a "warehouse" of diverse beliefs. Friendly relations among people of different religions should not be an obstacle to confessional straightness in the context of universalism of the Christian understanding of salvation.

Secularization or the return of God?

Friedrich Nietzsche foretold the death of God and many after him repeated monotonously "God is dead". But it seems that the "God is back" phrase would fit the current situation better. Everything points towards the fact that the global trend of secularization has stopped. In 1990, 67% people admitted to belonging to one of the four world's biggest religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism). In 2005 it was already 73%. According to estimations it will be 80% of the world population in 2025.

In 1960s and 1970s, world Christian conferences were dominated by secularization theses. Since then many theological documents have considered secularization to be an irreversible and natural process. European theology in particular has been strongly affected by secularization theses as member bases of the churches got thinner and thinner year after year and Christianity gradually became a minority religion. It is no doubt that certain waves of secularization have taken place and their impact has not been thoroughly negative. On the other hand it must be said that in a global scale the process of secularization is not as successful as it seemed to be in a few past decades. Be it the effect of migration of population or spreading of the postmodern paradigm of spirituality and desire for transcendence, we can speak about the "return of God" in Europe. A thorough sociological analysis of secularization trends and its opposites is offered in the recently published book by Zdeněk R. Nešpor *Too Weak in Faith : The Czech (Non)Religiosity in the European Context*.¹² The publication gathers material, which strongly shakes the stereotypes of our understanding of secularization. For a long time many have thought that the whole world would develop according to the Western secularization model. However, the idea of science and technology replacing and destroying the religious realm faded away. Nešpor does not hesitate to talk about the

¹¹ Cf. FILIPI, P. *Církev a církve: Kapitoly z ekumenické eklesiologie*. Brno: CDK, 2000. p. 21.

¹² NEŠPOR, Z. R. *Příliš slábi ve víře: Česká ne/religiozita v evropském kontextu*. Prague: Kalich, 2010.

"secularist ideology", which represented a fundamental misunderstanding of religion and its function.¹³ In our current condition it is more than important to push the "secularist ideology" out of our society, which relied on the wrong presumption of a decline of religiosity.

Nešpor concludes: "The contemporary Czech society is still not as atheist as it might like to 'proudly' think and claim about itself. It is rather anti-clerical, as it transformed the content of the actual religious needs and ideas into declaratively different types of symbolic realms. Generally speaking, the Czechs refuse the Christian God. But they do not cease to believe in something, identifying it occasionally with the structures of the fragmentary Christian memory tucked in the social consciousness."¹⁴ He adds: "The Czechs have chosen the path of progressive de-religionization, which they have not managed to pursue properly yet, and the effects of their ambiguous relation to religion have been apparent until today."¹⁵

Another problem is that missionary work of congregations, parishes and churches is often still attached to the secularization trends. The current missionary condition is actually much more similar to that of the 1st century AD than to the one we had here four or five decades ago. Today we also encounter polytheism, myriads of mystery cults and various forms of old and new religions. It is quite obvious that the Communist totalitarian ideology also had its religious content and character. From this point of view it is quite surprising that the emphasis on the rational aspect of the Revelation still prevails over religious experience in many Protestant churches.

It remains questionable whether Barthian dialectic theology and neo-orthodoxy had not somehow contributed to the communication barrier of the current church mission. In contrast, narrative theology and symbolic language seem to rise in popularity and prove to be very vital mediators in modern preaching. Subjective experience of faith, which has been overlooked and neglected in European Protestant theology for a long time, is also experiencing a massive revival. American sociologist Peter L. Berger notes: "...hope that explosive pluralism of our times can lead to the rebirth of a new theological synthesis does not seem in any way exaggerated."¹⁶

Dialogue and cooperation with churches of other languages

Last year, the ecumenical circles were surprised by the discovery that people of a different origin than English prevailed among the participants of Sunday worships in London, i.e. the immigrants of various nationalities. This is an example of the fact that some of the European cities are experiencing an increase of influence of church communities consisting of immigrants. Our dialogue with theology and mission practice of these churches seems, thus, inevitable.

In the Czech Republic, there are still not so many immigrants as, e.g., in Western Europe. However, Korean, Russian, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, Japanese or multinational

¹³ Cf. *ibid.* pp. 34-35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 190.

¹⁶ BERGER, P. L. *Vzdálená sláva: Hledání víry ve věku lehkověrnosti*. Prague: Barrister and Principal, 1997. p. 69.

congregations emerged on the Czech territory. Some of them are parts of traditional denominations; some of them are already independent. I suppose this is a great chance for theological dialogue and mutual enrichment in the field of mission. At the time when the European concept of multiculturalism is in decay or even in ruins, Christian churches should be able to manifest their ability to overcome ethnocentrism and cultural differences, developing intercultural hermeneutics. While systematic theology remains almost untouched by the phenomenon of migration, the value of intercultural hermeneutics of Biblical texts increases undoubtedly.¹⁷

New churches begin to evangelize among Czech citizens and spread their faith in a country which, to them, is foreign. Will Czech Christians be able to create a favourable environment for newly contextualized missionary church models? Will they be open to dialogue which can positively influence missionary work of existing churches? This still remains an open question.

Culture

Theologian Jonathan J. Bonk recently wrote: "Apparently, theology can be liberated from cultural bounds only through mission."¹⁸ This piece of knowledge is hardly new; we can verify its validity on the pages of the Scripture itself, depicting the development of the early church. The Apostle Paul is an archetypical bearer of missionary quest, who preaches the Gospel connecting the Jewish and the Greek thought. His theology is shaped by his mission and it shows apparent traces of a spiritual struggle to contextualize the Gospel in a foreign cultural environment.

In a recent issue of the journal *Universum* Jan Regner reports on a European Jesuit conference, which tried to interpret secular culture as a challenge for new evangelization.¹⁹ Since modernity stood on two pillars – the development of science and the new self-understanding of an individual, the postmodern era brings religion back on the stage, even though it has the shape of a wide pluralism. Irish Jesuit Gallagher describes postmodernity as "cultural hopelessness and inconsolability", but on the other hand it also means "new openness to faith".²⁰ The conference also took account of Cardinal J. H. Newman's opinion, who was convinced that "departure from Christianity is not the matter of intellect, but of the heart."²¹ Thus, Christianity is not a "theorem" to which evangelization should bring a proof. Rather, as also the Pope Benedict XVI says, it is an experience, which a Christian must go through authentically and, then, testify it and share it with others.

The World Council of Churches, a heavy-footed organization burdened with many problems, has been publishing a remarkable journal *International Review of Mission* for many years. Its issues not only inform the world about new developments of the concept

¹⁷ Cf. NOORT, G. "Emerging Migrant Churches in the Netherlands: Missiological Challenges and mission frontiers." *International Revue of Mission*, Vol. 392, April 2011, p. 13.

¹⁸ BONK, J. J. "Missions and the Liberation of Theology." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 34, 4/2010, p. 194.

¹⁹ REGNER, J. "Evangelizace v sekularizovaném světě." *Universum* 1/XXI, pp. 30-31.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 31.

²¹ Ibid. p. 31

of mission, but also drag us directly into missionary dialogue between Protestants, Evangelicals, Orthodox and Catholics. We can only regret that such ecumenical scholarly debate on mission does not take place also in our country.

The hermeneutics of mission seems to be one of the most important prerequisites of a proper understanding and application of the biblical text. Missionary reasons shine through writings of the New Testament and the Old Testament authors very often. To approach the biblical text without any knowledge of the missionary quest of Israel and that of the early church means giving too much space to modern culture, which may result in a lack of authentic pre-understanding and thus in missing a precise interpretation.²²

Conclusion

Current missionary conditions lead us to re-evaluate many beaten tracks of church paradigms. Europeans used to play a leading role at theological conferences for many years; now it is their time to show humility and accept that newly contextualized missionary shapes of non-European churches are coming into existence. It is not easy to learn from those, whose Christianity is still of a young history. We should pay attention to cultural study of the epoch we live in. Culture determines an individual a way more than we are willing to admit. Theological schools should make a sort of a missionary "audit" of their curriculums and ethos to improve their service to the missionary quest of churches and answer the challenges of today.²³ A theological synthesis, which does not take account of the missionary quest of the church, is endangered with "escapism" from the current ecumenical research and struggle of Christian churches. It can lose its relevance and miss its quest to serve as a helper and guardian to the current process of evangelization and social mission of the church. The materially saturated Europe has been manifesting a spiritual hunger in recent years. Just try to "Google" the words "Europe" and "spirituality". Four million links will appear. Despite the fact that many of them are linked to occultism or paranormal phenomena, we can recognize in this phenomenon a certain sign of our epoch—people in Europe are experiencing the feeling that there might be something more than material life. People seek answers to their difficult questions; they are craving for spiritual experience and search for the meaning of life. What will be the answer of theology—and practical theology in particular—to this spiritual need?

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²² ČERNÝ, P. "The Relationship between Theology and Missiology: The Missiological Hermeneutics." *European Journal of Theology*. Vol. IXI, 2/2010, pp. 104-109.

²³ ČERNÝ, P. "The Relationship between Theology and Missiology: The Missiological Hermeneutics" In: *Do we need missiology? And if so, why do we not teach it and develop it systematically? The conference proceedings from the 1st conference of the CECMS*. Issued in the Czech-Slovak and English version by the CECMS, Prague, 2007