



ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016



"The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts"

PLENARY SESSIONS

PLENARY SESSION C:

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY - DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

International Perspectives on Religious Pluralism: Challenges, Limits, and Possibilities – A Czech Case

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I would like to bring a perspective on the topic of this plenary from the context of the Czech Republic. Even though a Slovak citizen (born in what was then Czechoslovakia), I have been living in the Czech Republic for some eight years now. The Czech Republic was established in 1993 as one of the successor countries of the former Czechoslovakia (with Slovakia being the other country). It is a Central European country and borders Slovakia, Poland, Germany, and Austria. It is also a post-communist country which means that it used to be part of the so-called Soviet or Eastern bloc with the communist party of Czechoslovakia as the sole ruling party. Although the communist government fell in 1989, this totalitarian past still has implications for various spheres of life as the mentality of many people has been affected by the totalitarian regime.

In this short presentation I would like to briefly outline three issues which are, to my mind, important for our theme. First, the Czech context is quite **homogeneous** in many respects, including religious, ethnic, cultural and other dimensions. For instance, out of about 10 million people living in the Czech Republic, over 90% are of Czech nationality with the largest national minorities, Slovaks and Ukrainians, representing only about 2% of the population each. The most significant ethnic minority is the Roma, representing about 3-5% of the population. More on religiosity will be said below, here let it just be mentioned that according to the last census there are only some 1,500 Jews and 2,000 Muslims living in the Czech Republic.

There are various reasons for this development. Of course, forty years of isolation during communism is one of the major ones. However, it is also important that the Czech Republic is an inland country with no colonial past. Furthermore, it is not so economically and/or culturally attractive for migrants as are some other western or northern European countries. This is most likely not going to change dramatically in the near future.

This homogeneity of the Czech context and a lack of encounter and experience with a (religious, cultural, ethnic) "other" results in an intriguing, yet dangerous phenomenon. On the one hand, there is a relatively high extent of xenophobia and hatred towards an unknown other. For instance, the Czech Republic shows one of the highest rates of Islamophobia in Europe, despite (or, perhaps, exactly because of) hardly any Muslims living there. On the other hand,



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many people are fascinated by a kind of romantic mysticism connected with an unknown other. This would, for example, include an interest in Judaism and the Kabbalah. Especially in the 1990s a significant number of Czechs were “obsessed” with searching for their imaginary “Jewish roots” and learning Hebrew letters as a channel to some perceived *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Second, the Czech context can be aptly characterized by what has been dubbed the “**timid spirituality/religiosity**” of its citizens. The Czech Republic has often famously (or infamously) been referred to as one of the most atheistic countries in the world. Some recent sociological researches and surveys indicate that this might not actually be the case. The 2011 census showed that only about 1,000 people self-identified as atheists. Nevertheless, it is true that a major section of the population is indifferent towards religion. Alternatively, many people claim that they do not need organized religion in order to pursue and practice their spirituality. Indeed, only about 12-15 % of the population identify themselves as active members of faith communities, with the Roman Catholic Church being the single largest group (ca. 10%). Another very intriguing thing which became apparent from the 2011 census was that some 40% of the people living in the Czech Republic refused to answer the “religion question” altogether, with at least some of them arguing that “it is none of the business of the state to know these things”.

There are two important issues that ought to be mentioned when discussing religion in the Czech Republic. On the one hand, there is a great measure of distrust towards organized religion. Christian churches have for a long time been some of the institutions least trusted by the Czechs. And yet, on the other hand, there is enormous thirst for alternative kinds of spirituality. Sociological researches show that the Czechs are high above the European average when it comes to phenomena such as horoscopes, amulets, fortune-telling, esoteric literature and items, etc. In addition, and interestingly enough, even traditional religious literature is well-sought after. For example, the Bible remains one of the best-selling books in all categories (outnumbered only by the likes of *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*). Also, there are now about twenty different editions and translations of the Bible.

Finally, third, it is important to note that there is **no established or state religion** in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, there are a number of officially recognized faith communities, which also receive governmental funding. The current *modus vivendi* still follows the law adopted by the communists in 1948 when the state wanted to control the churches, and therefore offered to pay the salaries of their ministers. The present situation has been deemed by many as discriminatory as it favors certain faith communities over others, and it is not exactly easy for many groups to get officially recognized. Nevertheless, the situation is most likely going to change as state support is about to come to an end within next 14 or so years. The moment is nervously awaited by many faith communities as they are unsure about their ability to self-finance.

To conclude, I would like to relate what has been said above to our topic of challenges, limits, and possibilities. A major challenge in the Czech context is a lack of experience on the part of many people with the other. This can then lead to xenophobia and hatred towards people “different from us” in large segments of the population. That is, indeed, one of the main limitations of the Czech society: an increasing polarization of the society when groups with



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opposing views find it extremely difficult to even have a meaningful conversation on certain topics (such as religious plurality, migration, Islam, or even religion and faith). However, one can also see some “rays of hope” as there are possibilities for constructive engagement and cooperation. To my mind, it could be a great advantage of the Czech context that virtually all faith communities are in a minority position. They can thus become creative and in certain respects counter-cultural alternative voices and ways of living. One can already see some effective interfaith initiatives supporting the cause of refugees and various marginalized groups.

It is difficult to predict what the future will bring to the Czech Republic in terms of religious pluralism, but it will undoubtedly be very interesting to watch and participate in.