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# Perceptions of the Evangelical Movement in the Post-Communist Czech Republic

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## I The Shape of the Czech Evangelical Movement

When in 1989 the 'Velvet Revolution' brought about the end of the Communist regime in the Czech Republic, there were only about twenty thousand evangelicals in the country.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, the evangelical movement has grown and today there are some thirty five to forty thousand, gathered in several denominations.

Since the early 1990s, three umbrella organisations for Czech evangelicals have been established, the Czech Evangelical Alliance,<sup>2</sup> the Evangelical Theo-

logical Seminary,<sup>3</sup> and the Association of Evangelical Theologians.<sup>4</sup> Besides these three organisations, which affirm their adherence to the evangelical movement explicitly (including the word 'evangelical' in their title), there are a number of other institutions active as part of the evangelical movement, such as denominational publishing houses and church periodicals.

The evangelical movement in the Czech Republic is relatively dynamic and vigorous.<sup>5</sup> Czech evangelicals have

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provides a link with the European and worldwide evangelical movement (it is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance and the European Evangelical Alliance), cf. [www.ea.cz](http://www.ea.cz).

<sup>3</sup> This seminary was founded in 1990. It prepares students coming mainly from evangelical churches for ministry. Cf. [www.etspraha.cz](http://www.etspraha.cz).

<sup>4</sup> This association holds several specialist colloquia every year and the Evangelical Theological Conference (held once every year, since 1990). Cf. [www.evangelikalni-teologie.cz](http://www.evangelikalni-teologie.cz).

<sup>5</sup> David Novák, 'Czech Evangelicals and Evangelism', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 13 (Winter 2005), 8-10.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the publication of the Czech Evangelical Alliance 2002. *Základní informace o evangelikálních církvích a sborech v České republice v letech 1990-2000*, Albrechtice: Krěst'anský život. The entire population of the Czech Republic was 10 million people.

<sup>2</sup> This organisation was founded in 1990. It

numerous contacts with the evangelical movement on the European and world levels, especially in the English-speaking countries. These contacts bring with them financial support for missionary, educational, building, and other projects, the opportunity for education of Czech church leaders in countries with longstanding evangelical traditions, the presence of missionaries from abroad in Czech evangelical congregations, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Most adherents of the evangelical movement are actively involved in church life. Because of the relatively high degree of involvement by individual lay members (there are virtually no 'nominal' evangelicals), the importance of the evangelical movement to the Czech ecumenical scene is greater than its small membership base would suggest. In view of the age range of its members and an increase in numbers, this proportional influence will probably grow in the next decades.

## II Evangelical and Non-Evangelical Views of Witness

In Communist times, all Czech Christians were persecuted and suffered discrimination by the state because of its atheist ideology.<sup>7</sup> After the fall of the Communist regime full religious

freedom was reintroduced and all the restrictions and limitations of religious expression were removed.<sup>8</sup> Christian denominations were allowed to publicly proclaim the gospel (which was forbidden during the Communist regime) and to communicate freely and openly with secular society.

This re-establishment of religious freedom brought about many previously unimaginable opportunities for Christian public ministry and outreach. At the same time, it also caused some serious tensions among Christian denominations. One of the reasons for these tensions was the fact that different denominations had very different views concerning the appropriate methods of public ministry and concerning the broader cultural and social role of the church.

In most cases, the representatives of the three largest denominations in the Czech Republic<sup>9</sup> understood the task of the church to consist primarily of diligent and patient work in the area of education, academia, culture, media, health care, social care etc. They emphasized the fact that since Czech society is extremely secular,<sup>10</sup> the church,

<sup>6</sup> See for example Daniel Fajfr, 'Expatriate Christian Workers and Czech Evangelicals', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 14 (Summer 2006), 11ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Petr Jäger 2009. Svoboda vyznání a právní poměry církví a náboženských společností let 1948-1989, in *Komunistické právo v Československu—kapitoly z dějin bezpráví*, Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 769-810.

<sup>8</sup> The constitutional basis for religious freedom in the Czech Republic is to be found in the charter of basic rights and freedoms, articles 15 and 16, as elaborated in law number 3/2003 about 'freedom of religion and status of churches and religious societies', paragraph 2. Cf. Antonín Ignác Hrdina 2004, *Náboženská svoboda v právu České republiky*. Praha: Eurolex Bohemia, and also Petr Jäger 2006, *Církev a náboženské společnosti v České republice a jejich právní postavení*, Brno: CDK.

<sup>9</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, the Czech Brethren Protestant Church, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church.

<sup>10</sup> In fact one of the most secular societies

since it is a tiny minority, has to be very careful and culturally sensitive in presenting its message to Czech people. In other words, the way Christians express and share their faith has to be very carefully considered, cultivated and often 'indirect' or implicit.

For this reason, after the fall of the Communist regime and re-establishment of religious freedom, the representatives of mainstream churches strived to build the image of Christianity as a rich resource of cultural and spiritual values and inspiration and as a respectable tradition with an impressive historical heritage.

Evangelical Christians, on the other hand, held a very different view of the appropriate methods of evangelistic outreach. Their approach to sharing the gospel was rather direct. The ways evangelicals chose to proclaim the gospel were sometimes quite simple (or even simplistic) and sometimes betrayed a serious lack of experience. There were also numerous cases of not very successful evangelistic crusades organized by missionaries from other countries with very little understanding of the complexities of Czech post-Communist culture.<sup>11</sup>

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in the world, cf. Olga Nešporová, Zdeněk Nešpor, 'Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation', *Czech Sociological Review* 45/2009, 1215ff., see also Dana Hamplová, Zdeněk Nešpor, 'Invisible Religion in a Non-believing Country. The Case of the Czech Republic', *Social Compass* 56/2009, 581ff., and also Jim and Laurie Barnes, 'The Czech Spiritual Landscape in the Post-Communist Era', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 6 (Spring 1998), 6ff. and Petr Činčala, 'Reaching Irreligious Czechs', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 14 (Summer 2006), 15f.

11 Dan Drápal, 'Will We Survive Western

### III Public Perception of Evangelicals

As a result of this situation the relationship between Czech evangelicals and other Christians grew worse. Some representatives of mainstream churches became very concerned and unhappy, because they gradually came to the conclusion that evangelicals were seriously damaging the image of Christianity in Czech society, i.e. that they were in fact destroying exactly what mainstream churches had been patiently trying to build. Some of the representatives of mainstream churches came to the conclusion that they had to publicly distance themselves from evangelical forms of Christianity, that they had to explain to the secular public that evangelical Christianity is deviant, primitive, sectarian and wrong and that what the respectable mainstream churches wanted to offer had nothing to do with evangelicalism.

For example, one of the most respected Czech Islamic scholars, a Roman Catholic professor, L. Kropáček says in his book, *Islám a Západ* (Islam and the West), that evangelicals are by and large enemies of inter-faith dialogue.<sup>12</sup> Another example is the statement of an influential Czech Protestant minister, M. Vymětal, who said in a very widely-read interview that evangelicals approach the Israeli Palestinian conflict with the same fanaticism as Hamas, Islamic Jihad or Hizballah.<sup>13</sup>

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Missionaries?' *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 5 (Fall 1997), 7f. and *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 6 (Spring 1998), 8ff.

12 Luboš Kropáček 2002, *Islám a Západ* (Praha: Vyšehrad), 166.

13 Mikuláš Vymětal, *Zpravodaj Společnosti křesťanů a Židů* 44/2001, 10.

In another text, M. Vymětal presents the evangelical movement as a serious threat for the church, whose alleged goal is to impose its rigid views upon all others. In the same article he suggests that the evangelistic activities of fundamentalist evangelicals in relation to Jews are actually aiming at exterminating the Jewish nation and 'cleansing the society of Jewish influence' just as Hitler did in Nazi Germany.<sup>14</sup>

The most significant example is the attitude of the most influential Christian intellectual in the Czech Republic, the Roman Catholic priest and university professor Tomáš Halík. In most of his books he expresses his negative feelings towards evangelicals. For example, in his autobiography he speaks about intrusive American methods of evangelism and about the annoying proselytism of evangelical groups and their aggressive evangelists.<sup>15</sup> In other books he speaks about childish and adolescent hyper-emotional religiosity of evangelicals with a simplistic view of reality and also about cheap and 'theatrical' self-righteous attitudes of the evangelicals.

He also points to a typically evangelical hyper-emotional presentation of the Passion narrative, which he finds expressed in 'a horrible sermon of Billy Graham'.<sup>16</sup> In other publications he speaks about cheap and manipulative proselytism of evangelical groups,<sup>17</sup>

about 'mega-shows' of evangelical preaching 'entertainers'<sup>18</sup> and about bombastic evangelical public happenings with a manipulated emotional atmosphere,<sup>19</sup> about 'healing theatres' of evangelical preachers<sup>20</sup> or about American evangelicals and their 'sectarian' forms of Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

It is quite obvious that evangelicals have been a very important theme for Halík. He has been honestly concerned about the damage evangelicals cause to the church (in his understanding). He in fact often refers to evangelicals in order to 'make a point', i.e. to assure his readers that what he has to offer has nothing to do with evangelical forms of Christianity. The most significant and interesting aspect of this situation is the fact that Tomáš Halík is beyond any doubt a sincere and well-meaning Christian, a convert coming from a secular family background, a person of integrity with a genuine concern for reaching the secular Czechs with the gospel. In other words, he is absolutely honest in what he says.

The consequences which evangelicals had to face have been quite disastrous. Tomáš Halík and some other mainstream Christians became highly respected public intellectuals, often invited to appear in the national media to comment on religion, culture and related issues. Their views became one of the decisive factors in shaping the pub-

14 Mikuláš Vymětal, *Židé a evangelici. Zpravodaj Společnosti křesťanů a Židů*, 44/2001, 12.

15 Tomáš Halík 1997, *Ptal jsem se cest* (Praha: Portál), 124 and 186f.

16 Halík, 2005, *Noc zpovědníka* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 143 and 154 and 180.

17 Halík, 1995, *Víra a kultura* (Praha: Zvon), 138.

18 Halík, 2007, *Vzdáleným nablízku* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 30.

19 Halík, 2011, *Smířená různost* (Praha: Portál), 133.

20 Halík, 2003, *Oslovit Zachea* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 383.

21 Halík, 2004, *Vzýván i nevzýván* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 70.

lic opinion concerning Christianity, the appropriate and deviant expressions of faith etc., and therefore, also the public opinion concerning evangelicals. In fact, many secular Czechs, typically rather ignorant in religious questions (because of the atheist propaganda of the Communist regime), came to know what the word 'evangelical' meant only after hearing it defined by these public intellectuals from mainstream churches such as Halík, who typically had a very negative opinion.<sup>22</sup>

So, even though politically and legally the evangelical denominations have (since 1989) enjoyed full religious freedom and were considered equal with traditional churches, they had to face some considerable prejudices and sometimes even discrimination, because both secular media and some very influential representatives of mainstream denominations often publicly presented evangelicals in a negative light. The general public opinion concerning evangelicals, created by these negative portrayals, consisted of several dismissive stereotypes, which defined the movement as, by and large, fundamentalist, primitive and aggressive. These negative judgments were in fact very close to 'public defamation', i.e. acting against the valid Czech law protecting religious freedom in the country.<sup>23</sup> The word 'evangelical' was

identified with an almost exclusively negative meaning, to the extent that it has become a sort of disparaging 'label'.

It is well known that evangelicals had to face all sorts of defamation many times in history, but the situation of evangelicals in the Czech Republic is quite unique, even among the Post-Communist countries. In most Post-Communist countries, there is one large majority church, often enjoying a privileged political and social status and sometimes using its position to suppress evangelicals or to encourage state authorities to use 'anti-cult legislation' against them.<sup>24</sup> This would not work in the Czech Republic. There is no majority church in that country. The membership of the largest one (Roman Catholic) is only ten per cent of the population, and less than half of that number may be considered practising believers.<sup>25</sup> So the majority group in the Czech Republic is the secular society, which is the 'audience' watching what the churches and denominations

<sup>22</sup> Cf. David Novák, 'Evangelikálové podle Halíka', *Život víry* 7-8/2011. Cf. also Pavel Hošek 2008, 'Kóan jménem Tomáš Halík', in *Máš před sebou všechny mé cesty* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Law 140/1961, Codex of penal law, par. 198/1, b), Defamation of race, national-ity and conviction (Hanobení rasy, národa a přesvědčení).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example Juraj Kušnierik, 'Post-Modern Culture in Post-Communist Countries', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 2 (Winter 1994), 1f. Stuart McAllister, 'New Nations, Old Problems', *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 2 (Fall 1994), 4f. Adam Michnik, 'Postcommunist Poland: Religious Liberty For All?' *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 3 (Summer 1995), 7f. and also Henry Huttenbach, 'Religious Freedom After Communism: Will the Suppressed Become the Suppressor?' *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 7 (Winter 1999), 16.

<sup>25</sup> According to repeated specialized research the number of practising Christians in the Czech Republic is between 400 and 500 thousand, which is 4-5 per cent of the entire population, cf. [www.demografie.info](http://www.demografie.info).

have to offer. Since the mainstream churches want to offer what they consider to be a trustworthy, respectable, moderate and cultivated form of Christianity, they use the reference to evangelicals 'to make a point', i.e. to identify *what they are not* and what they themselves consider as primitive, intrusive and fundamentalist.

For this reason, there is an obvious disproportion between the actual size of the Czech evangelical movement and the amount of criticism against its 'pathologies'. Whereas in countries such as the United States, evangelicals form a very influential religious, cultural, social and even political movement, in the Czech Republic they are a small marginal group, less than half per cent of the entire population.

In United States, a certain aversion towards evangelicals among non-Christian or non-evangelical Americans is perhaps understandable due to their influence. In the Czech Republic, where the number of evangelicals is tiny, nobody can seriously criticize evangelicals for their political influence. Yet some of the rhetoric of American anti-evangelicals has been adopted by Czech journalists. As a matter of fact, evangelicals have been treated—by journalists, but also by some influential Christian intellectuals and some state officials—as if the Czech laws protecting religious freedom including the law forbidding defamation of a person for his or her religious convictions does not apply to them.<sup>26</sup>

26 Cf., for example, a case of discrimination by the Czech ministry of education: Tomáš Dittrich, Brno: ministerstvo diskriminuje evangelikály, *Život víry*, October 2006.

#### IV 'What is so Wrong with Czech Evangelicals?'

Of course, Czech evangelicals may display, and indeed occasionally do, some of the 'pathologies' that others accuse them of—their evangelizing activities may sometimes be intrusive, their views about cultural trends and events may sometimes be simplistic, their doctrinal teaching may occasionally tend towards ideological oversimplification, their forms of outreach, ministry and church leadership may at times betray 'sectarian' features. In particular, some radical Pentecostal and charismatic groups, which have often been very explicit about their evangelical identity, have caused some serious problems and divisions even within the evangelical movement<sup>27</sup> and unfortunately some of these occurrences were commented on (and caricatured) even in the secular media.

The situation is to some extent complicated by the fact that the worldwide growth in the evangelical movement<sup>28</sup> arouses a sort of concern among mainstream Christians and sometimes a sort of fear of the supposed cultural

27 Cf., for example, Zdeněk Vojtíšek, 'Rozdělení dokonáno', *Dingir* 3/2000.

28 See, for example, Grace Davie 2002, *Europe: an Exceptional Case* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd), David Martin, 1990, *Tongues of Fire. The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell), David Martin, 2001, *Global Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Blackwell), Jose Casanova, 1994, *Public Religions in Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), Peter Berger (ed.) 1999, *Desecularisation of World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). See also Pavel Černý, 'Evangelikální hnutí: kořeny, vývoj a současná reflexe', *Universum* 2/2009, 26ff.



and political aspirations of 'evangelical fundamentalism'. Of course, in some countries in the former Soviet bloc (such as Ukraine or Romania) a genuine 'evangelical boom' has taken place in the last few decades—the evangelical movement is now a significant religious and social factor in these countries, with hundreds of thousands of adherents.

However, no comparable boom took place in the Czech Republic. On the one hand it is true that, unlike the mainstream churches, evangelical congregations and denominations have not registered a drop in members; on the contrary, there has generally been a slight increase or in some cases, a significant increase.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand (in contrast to Ukraine and Romania), the much desired 'awakening' and evangelical boom has not happened in the Czech Republic since the fall of Communism.<sup>30</sup> The fear of 'evangelical fundamentalism' thus seems without foundation in the Czech Republic—or to be more precise, the evangelical movement here does not really represent a significant political and cultural force.

It has to be said that some of the negative attitudes of mainstream churches towards evangelicals have a number of different reasons, not only

those already mentioned. One of the obvious reasons for those attitudes is the historical fact that some of the evangelical denominations were established at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century by former members of mainstream churches. These people left their churches because they felt they did not satisfy their spiritual needs or because they were frustrated with their denomination's spiritual condition.<sup>31</sup> The fact that some evangelical denominations rose as movements of protest against the general spiritual condition in established churches caused much harm and pain and not all the hurts have healed yet.

Another reason for some of the negative attitudes of mainstream Christians to evangelicals is probably the above mentioned fact that whereas the evangelical denominations are growing in size (even though relatively slowly), the mainstream churches in the Czech Republic are shrinking rapidly.<sup>32</sup> All three mainstream churches, namely the Roman Catholic Church, the Czech Brethren Protestant Church and the Hussite Church have lost 75 per cent of their adherents over the last twenty years.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the number

29 Cf. the publication of the Czech Evangelical Alliance 2002 *Základní informace o evangelikálních církvích a sborech v České republice v letech 1990-2000*, Albrechtice: Křesťanský život, for details see also the results of the census in 1991, 2001 and 2011, available (in English) at the official website of Czech statistical office [www.czso.cz](http://www.czso.cz).

30 Cf. Dan Drápal, 'Neslavná léta. Sociologicko-kulturní bilance posledních dvaceti let', *Život víry* 11/2009.

31 See as a typical example of this dynamics the early history of the now largest Evangelical denomination 'Církev bratrská, Alois Adlof 1905', *Nástin dějin svobodných církví reformovaných* (Praha: KSM), 51ff.

32 Cf. Petr Činčala, 'Czech Church Life: Mainline Decline and Neo-Apostolic Growth', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 15 (Winter 2007), 12f.

33 See the website of the Czech statistical office ([www.czso.cz](http://www.czso.cz)) and also Zdeněk Nešpor, 'Der Wandel der tschechischen (Nicht-)Religiosität im 20. Jahrhundert im Lichte soziologis-



of people who identified themselves with these three churches in the census of 1991 (4 million Catholics, over 200 thousand Czech Brethren, almost 200 thousand Hussites) decreased to roughly 25 per cent in 2011 (1 million Catholics, 52 thousand Czech Brethren, 39 thousand Hussites).<sup>34</sup> And fewer than one half of these may be considered practising Christians.

Another reason why Czech evangelicals are viewed with some suspicions is the significant influence of several important monographs written by world-famous academicians which have been translated and published in the Czech Republic. For example, the famous book by G. Kepel, *Revenge of God*, ridicules and caricatures the evangelical movement in the United States.<sup>35</sup> Kepel's sarcastic and caricaturing portrayal of American evangelicals<sup>36</sup> has become a very influential image of the 'essence' of evangelical movement in the Czech Republic.

Another example is a book on sects and cults written by the Austrian writer and journalist B. Buechner, which dedicates one whole chapter to the dangers and pathologies of evangelicalism. This chapter presents evangelicals as

elitist sectarians and fanatics<sup>37</sup> who use manipulative methods of evangelism and build authoritarian leadership structures. Another important example is the influential standard introduction to biblical hermeneutics written by the German Protestant theologian M. Oeming. This book presents evangelicals as obscurantist, dishonest and primitive in their approach to the Bible.<sup>38</sup>

The above mentioned stereotypes and caricatures, based on a surprising degree of ignorance and often reflecting a very different cultural situation (such as the American society in the time of G. W. Bush, or the role of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority or New Christian Right in America), have been taken over by Czech mainstream Christian intellectuals, perpetuated and understood as adequate descriptions of all evangelicals.<sup>39</sup> Because these caricatures became part of the widely accepted meaning of the word 'evangelical' in the Czech public space, many Czech evangelicals in fact stopped using the word evangelical as their self-designation, simply because they want to avoid discrimination and defamation.

cher Forschungen', *Historisches Jahrbuch* 129 (2009), 501ff.

<sup>34</sup> For the exact numbers and results of the census in 1991, 2001 and 2011 see [www.czso.cz](http://www.czso.cz).

<sup>35</sup> Gilles Kepel, 1996, *Boží pomsta* (Brno: Atlantis), 89ff.

<sup>36</sup> Emphasizing TV-evangelism, movements such as Moral Majority, Scopes trial debate, Bible Belt fundamentalism, inerrantist debate etc., and containing a surprisingly high number of stereotypes, oversimplifications and unjustified generalizations.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Buechner 1999, *Co máme vědět o sektách* (Praha: Amulet), 30ff.

<sup>38</sup> Manfred Oeming 2001, *Úvod do biblické hermeneutiky* (Praha: Vyšehrad), 174f.

<sup>39</sup> In some denominations (such as the Baptist Union or the Czech Brethren Protestant Church) the debate about whether members of a particular denomination should or should not see themselves as part of the Evangelical movement and whether the influence of American Evangelicals is desirable or the opposite has actually even supported and strengthened some of the anti-Evangelical stereotypes, cf. for example Jáchym Gondáš, 'Evangelikální fundamentalismus po americku', *Protestant* 3/2006.

## V Yet, Times are Changing

However, in the last several years the situation appears to be changing gradually. Some of those who used to publicly ridicule evangelicals seem to have considerably changed their mind. In their publications from the last several years, a much more moderate and balanced attitude towards evangelicals appears. A very significant example is the following statement by Tomáš Halík, by all standards the most influential Christian intellectual in the Czech Republic, who used to be one of the most outspoken enemies of evangelical forms of Christianity:

I had to revise in many respects my former attitude to evangelical Christianity. Whereas in my previous books I repeatedly made sarcastic comments especially upon vulgar crusades of fundamentalist TV-evangelists and stadium divine healers ... now I am taking seriously the fact, brought to my attention by my Protestant friends, that in the world-wide (and especially American) evangelical movement a radical change is taking place: many evangelical theologians of younger generation clearly distance themselves from fundamentalism and charismatic excesses and develop a theology which is surprisingly close to my own attitudes and way of thinking and understanding faith.<sup>40</sup>

Another very important example can be found in a recent book by another influential Christian intellectual,

the Roman Catholic academician M. C. Putna, who has been known for his harsh criticism of conservative forms of faith.<sup>41</sup> His book focuses on different forms of religion in the United States. The chapters on evangelicals on the one hand repeat some of the stereotypes Czech intellectuals use when speaking about evangelicals: he says that evangelical Christians do not see any value in cultural tradition, that they reduce reality to 'Bible, Jesus and the individual', that they are elitist, anti-intellectual, and hostile towards homosexuals.

Yet in the concluding chapter of his book, Putna comments on the contemporary trends within the evangelical movement and speaks about an emerging 'non-fundamentalist evangelicalism', which on the one hand sounds to him like a contradiction in terms,<sup>42</sup> but which, as he says, seems to be a very promising emerging form of American Christianity, towards which he shows a sympathetic and actually quite appreciative attitude.

In the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches, evangelical denominations have been received well.<sup>43</sup> Over the

<sup>41</sup> Martin C. Putna 2010, *Obrazy z kulturních dějin americké religiozity* (Praha: Vyšehrad), 89ff, 271ff.

<sup>42</sup> Putna, *Obrazy z kulturních dějin americké religiozity*, 296. The fact that this prominent scholar considers 'non-fundamentalist Evangelicalism' a contradiction of terms deserves attention: it betrays a surprising level of ignorance even among the best Czech academicians (since the debate among Evangelicals differentiating the Evangelical movement from fundamentalism has been going on since the nineteen forties)

<sup>43</sup> In fact the superintendent of the largest Evangelical denomination Pavel Černý has

<sup>40</sup> Tomáš Halík 2009, *Stromu zbývá naděje* (Praha: Lidové noviny), 12. Cf. also the short editorial report 'Halík ocenil posun u evangeliků', *Brána* 2/2010, 21.

last years, their relationships with the Roman Catholic Church and both mainstream Protestant churches have by and large developed in a positive direction of mutual respect.

## VI The Way Forward

Changes have been naturally taking place on both sides. As I indicated above, some of the criticisms of evangelical forms of outreach and church ministry were probably justified. So one of the important reasons for the positive development in relations between evangelicals and other Christians in the last several years have been resolutions of some of the above mentioned problematic features of ministry, outreach and attitudes to general culture on the side of evangelical denominations.

At the same time, a major factor in this positive development has been growing awareness among mainstream church leaders of the complex history, scope, nature and inner diversity of the evangelical movement. Since the country is one of the most secular countries in the world, after some of the above described tensions have been dealt with and some misunderstandings explained, Czech Christians of all backgrounds, evangelical and other, gradually tend to see each other primarily as allies rather than enemies or rivals.

It seems obvious from what has

been said that in the next decades Czech evangelicals must patiently strive to fill the word 'evangelical' with a positive content, i.e. to remove residual misunderstandings, ignorance and prejudices and work towards cultivating friendly and cooperative relations with other Christian churches; they need also to develop a thorough and biblically based theological understanding of the particularities of Czech culture with an appropriate culturally sensitive missiology designed for the extremely secular context of the contemporary Czech Republic.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, reflecting upon some of the justified criticisms of the most immature and problematic features of the Czech evangelicalism has led to some very positive and promising trends within the movement and among its leaders. One of these promising trends is a growing interest in the legacy of Czech reformation among evangelical leaders, i.e. in the writings and concerns of John Hus and his disciples, up to the history of *Unitas Fratrum* culminating in the works of J. A. Comenius. This emerging 'return to the fathers' (i.e. rediscovering of the legacy of Czech reformation) goes hand in hand with a growing interest in the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin, i.e. in the roots of the Czech Protestantism not only in the Hussite movement, but also in the Magisterial reformation of

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served as the vice-chairman (2001-2005) and then as the chairman (2005-2009) of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches, which by itself was a major factor in improving the relations between Evangelicals and other Christians.

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<sup>44</sup> In order to achieve this goal, not only are missiology courses taught intensively at the Evangelical theological seminary in Prague and missiological conferences organized, but also the Central European Centre for Mission Studies was established several years ago, see [www.missioncentre.eu](http://www.missioncentre.eu).

the sixteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Both trends naturally help evangelical leaders to grow in theological depth and stability and bring evangelicals closer to the two mainstream Protestant denominations in the country.

Another growing trend, which helps Czech evangelicals to overcome some of the above mentioned weaknesses, is a gradual rediscovery of a pre-Reformation heritage of the patristic and medieval church, especially in the area of theological reflection, genuine spirituality and liturgy and holistic theological understanding of culture, as it can be found in the writings of the church fathers and medieval Christian authors. This renewed interest in the riches of pre-Reformation church history naturally brings Czech evangelicals closer to Roman Catholic Christians and (just like the return to Reformation) brings more balance and maturity to evangelical theological self-understanding.

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<sup>45</sup> These trends, just like the two following ones, can be evidenced for example when surveying the topics of the annual Evangelical theological conference over the last fifteen years, and also when looking at the recent colloquia of the Society of Evangelical theologians, at the publications of the main Czech Evangelical publishing house Navrat domu [www.navrat.cz](http://www.navrat.cz) in the last decade, at the contemporary curriculum of the Evangelical theological seminary in Prague and its publications etc.

Another promising trend, visible within the Czech evangelical movement and partially inspired by the above described negative feedback from mainstream churches (and also related to the above mentioned deepening reflection on missiology), is the gradual shift from the 'Christ against culture' paradigm towards the more open-minded and dynamic 'Christ transforming culture' paradigm. Due to the influence of several important conferences and books on the topic and because of the impact of several pioneering role models, many Czech evangelicals over the last ten years have started to think theologically about their 'secular' jobs. Moreover, many evangelical leaders have started to see and emphasize broader responsibilities of the church for social, cultural and political conditions of the post-Communist Czech society, and a number of evangelical Christians became established and highly respected academicians in their fields of expertise.

It may be concluded, then, that in a sense, the harsh criticism and occasional unjust defamation described above has served the evangelical movement in the post-Communist Czech Republic as a helpful and transforming feedback. In the long-term perspective, this has inspired and/or catalyzed a number of positive changes within the movement.