

death; the one office of the Church is to guard 'that noble deposit' of trust, as St. Paul speaks to Timothy, which the Apostles bequeathed to her, in its fullness and integrity."

7 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p. 469.

8 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p. 30.

9 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p. 42.

10 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p.405.

11 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p. xl.

12 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), p. 465.

13 Paul Shrimpton, *The 'Making of Men,' Newman's university in Oxford and Dublin* (Gracewing: UK 2014), pp. 470-471.

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*In the Maelstrom of  
Secularisation, Collabouration  
and Persecution: Roman  
Catholicism in Modern Czech  
Society and the State*

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In his 1954 inaugural lecture for his Cambridge professorship, "*De Descriptione Temporum*," C. S. Lewis remarked,

The christening of Europe seemed to all our ancestors, whether they welcomed it themselves as Christians, or, like Gibbon, deplored it as humanistic unbelievers, a unique, irreversible event. But we have seen the opposite process. Of course, the un-christening of Europe in our time is not quite complete; neither was her christening in the Dark Ages. But roughly speaking we may say that whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three—the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian.

Already in the nineteenth century the progress of this un-christening, or secularisation as it is more commonly called, was perceived, and Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach" wrote of "The Sea of Faith," that "now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar..." When Chesterton and Belloc were alive, though, it appeared to many as if the Catholic Church had begun to reverse the trend toward de-christianisation that had been going on since at least the end of the seventeenth century. But for some time now this brief turn toward a revival of Catholic faith and life has vanished, and since the 1960s religious faith throughout the Western world has declined even more. There is a considerable literature about the causes and trajectory of this secularisation, both with regard to Europe or the West as a whole, and about specific countries. Although many valid generalisations can be made about secularisation throughout what were once countries of Christian culture, nevertheless each nation's trajectory is unique. In this volume Tomáš Petráček, a Czech priest and historian who teaches at Hradec Králové University, has written a very interesting account of the secularisation of the Bohemian Lands, that is, Bohemia, Moravia and Austrian Silesia, all

of which now comprise the Czech Republic, "a country where the processes of secularisation and de-Christianisation have gone the farthest, so that the country is widely considered the most atheistic in the world." (9) One of the most interesting features of this book is its discussion of how competing historical narratives that shaped Czech self-understanding either toward or away from the Catholic faith have contributed to these "processes of secularisation and de-Christianisation." This motif appears repeatedly, and I will bring up this point again more than once.

Fr. Petráček's aim "is to offer several general reflections on the possible roots and causes of secularisation in the Bohemian Lands, in particular why there occurred such a mass departure from religious practice in organised churches in this country compared to all its central European neighbours." (7) This negative attitude toward organised Christianity, and especially toward the Catholic Church, has revealed itself not just in answers to questions on opinion polls or in the activities of atheistic organisations, but in the "debates about the Czech legislation on the partial restitution of Church property and the funding of Churches and religious

societies between 2008 and 2013.” (7) In fact, “According to some sociologists and social anthropologists, extreme anticlericalism and the generally shared conviction about the harmfulness of Christianity—particularly of the Roman Catholic Church—to society and about its negative role in society are among the few remaining elements uniting mainstream Czech society and Czech identity.” (7-8)

The Catholic faith was first introduced into the Bohemian Lands by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century, who brought with them a vernacular liturgy. But subsequently Bohemia was included in the liturgical and cultural orbit of Latin Europe. Bočivoj, the grandfather of Duke Wenceslas—the “Good King Wenceslas” of our carol—was the first Christian ruler of Bohemia, and in the later Middle Ages Bohemia and Moravia experienced a significant cultural flowering. The era of Charles IV, king of Bohemia and later Holy Roman Emperor (1346-78),

is generally considered the high point of Bohemian history.... The establishment of the University of Prague and a network of schools, a numerous, rich, and demanding stratum of educated lay

elites, the arrival...of the Franciscans and Dominicans and their development, the founding of new monasteries and chapters, all testified to the thorough, well-executed Christianisation of the country and the inculturation of Christianity amongst the peoples of the Bohemian Lands. (12)

But after this promising high point, things took a turn for the worse. There were a number of extrinsic factors, the black plague, the weak rule of Emperor Charles’ son, Wenceslas IV, but the author speculates that the “perhaps even too rapid” development of a Catholic culture may have contributed to what happened next. For the educated Christian laity, provided with numerous vernacular translations of Holy Scripture, may have had “unrealistically high expectations of the quality of life of the clergy and of the services they were to provide.” Added to this, the “crowds of unemployed clergy,” who became severe critics of the status quo, and the way was paved for the activities of Jan Huss (1374-1415), the proto Protestant, who did much to create a disturbed religious climate in Bohemia and was put to death as a heretic by the Council of Constance. The Hussite movement, however, not only was very popular, but Huss

became a figure who was seen to define Czech national identity and fueled an early kind of nationalism that idolised the nation. “The ideologues of the Hussite revolution created the concept of a nation that best understood the Gospel and was therefore called upon by God to lead other nations and the universal Church.” (13)

Despite this, and despite the devastating Thirty Years War of the early seventeenth century which began in Bohemia, the Catholic Church was able to effect a successful re-evangelisation. Just as the introduction of Franciscans and Dominicans during the Middle Ages had helped to create the flourishing Catholic culture under Charles IV, so “restored Tridentine Catholicism was attracting the elites of the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and Jesuit schools were helping to convert the leading sons of the Bohemian aristocracy.” Thus

the Bohemian Lands were successfully re-integrated into the central European State system under Habsburg rule, systematic efforts began in the mid-sixteenth century to renew the Catholic Church in Bohemia and gradually to make the population Catholic again.... The Catholic historians living in the

Renaissance and Baroque periods were able to create a conception of Bohemian history which was interesting and credible for the Bohemian elites. They endeavoured to demonstrate that the heyday of Bohemian history had been during the reign of Charles IV, when the Bohemian Lands were not divided by religion, but were, instead, fully integrated into Catholic Europe.... They skillfully made use of the cults of the especially attractive Bohemian saints, which, though few in number, are firmly rooted in the history of the Czech nation and land. The beatification of St. John Nepomucene in 1723 and his canonisation in 1729 were followed by triumphal mass celebrations, demonstrating the successful reintegration of the Czech nation into the community of Catholic nations and the inculturation of Catholicism into the Czech national culture and mentality. (14-15)

So much so that, “In the eighteenth century, foreign observers considered the population of the Bohemian Lands to be amongst the most Catholic nations of Europe.” (16) This happy unity between the Catholic faith and national self-understanding largely continued into the early nineteenth

century when, as in many parts of Europe, a renewed interest in the language, folklore and traditions of the nation captured the attention of elites: "the identification of the Czech national cause with Catholicism was just as harmonious and obvious as in local Churches in Slovenia, Ireland, Poland, and Slovakia," (25) and many priests were leaders in the "National Revival," the movement toward gaining or regaining Czech national identity by means of study and promotion of national traditions.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, [priests] constituted the majority of Revivalists. It was mainly they who were the subscribers to, and authors of, the Revivalist periodicals and other publications. It was mainly they who translated the great works of Western literature into Czech and collected oral literature and disseminated it. [Priests] enjoyed considerable respect in local communities. (37)

In fact, "the nineteenth-century liberal journalist and politician, Karel Havlíček Borovský," actually entered a seminary to study for the priesthood "because he considered the vocation of a Catholic priest the best life devoted to service to the nation." (34)

What happened to disturb this apparent deep harmony of national and Catholic self-understanding? Or as Fr. Petráček puts it:

How did the split occur between the sense of belonging to the Czech nation and belonging to the Catholic Church? When did it happen that Catholics remained on the margins of the nation as a tolerated, peripheral, but basically unwanted part? What changed in the mid-nineteenth century? (25)

The author offers two main reasons. In the first place, we must remember that during all this time the Bohemian Lands were under Habsburg rule, until 1806 as Holy Roman emperors, then until 1918 as Austrian emperors. Although many priests were active in efforts to strengthen Bohemian identity, many of the bishops, on the other hand, had close ties with the Austrian Monarchy, and looked with some suspicion on any movement toward democracy or increased local autonomy. In 1849 the bishops issued a condemnatory pastoral letter which was seen as being opposed to Czech national aspirations, and which helped create the perception that the Church was "a supporter and ally of the Austrian State and therefore an enemy of legitimate Czech interests." (40)

The Monarchy valued the Church in large part for political reasons, and saw the Church as one more instrument of social and cultural control to shore up Austrian rule. The Church was an integral part of the establishment and, for example, army officers and civil servants, including school teachers, were required to attend Mass. "It was the duty of the State, hand in hand with the Church, to bring up its citizens as obedient and pious subjects of the Austrian Emperor and to see to it that bureaucrats and army officers performed their religious duties well." (39) But in the increasingly rationalistic European culture of the late nineteenth century, fewer of these civil servants and officers were believing Catholics, and they resented the requirement that they fulfill their religious duties, a resentment that could easily be fixed upon the Church as well as the Austrian state.

The second main reason for this growing anti-Catholic feeling in the second half of the nineteenth century is something I have touched on already in this review: the question of the nation's historical self-understanding. A talented, highly influential but biased and superficial historian, František Palacký (1798-1876), himself hostile to the Church,

offered at this time an "essentially liberal Protestant interpretation" of Czech history and portrayed

the Roman Catholic Church as a vehicle of undemocratic, unpatriotic principles, which at key points in Czech history, stood against the nation and its best representatives, from Huss to Comenius... In the writings of Palacký's continuators and followers, these motifs are further accentuated, presenting membership of the nation and the Church as something like schizophrenia.... There is no place in this conception for a positive perception of Catholicism.... Palacký was successful not because he was the first to write a history of the Czechs, but because he created a story that superbly suited the up-and-coming Czech national elite in their struggle for a greater share in the administration of the Bohemian Lands. (26-7)

Palacký heavily influenced an entire generation of educated Czechs and paved the way for the initial disasters that would follow the collapse of the Monarchy in 1918.

At the end of the First World War, with the creation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, the artificial prop of the Austrian

Monarchy was removed and the Catholic Church in the Bohemian Lands suffered large-scale and carefully orchestrated attacks.

Just six days after the declaration of Czechoslovak independence on 28 October 1918, the Baroque Marian column on the main square in the Old Town of Prague was torn down.... Priests were verbally and physically attacked in the streets, and the slogan 'After Vienna, Rome too must be tried and sentenced!' was heard. (78)

Shortly thereafter, in January 1920, a schismatic body, the Czechoslovak Church, was created by a group of dissident priests, and appeals were made in newspapers, mass meetings and demonstrations, and elsewhere for Catholics to renounce their membership in the Church and join the new sect or to renounce Christianity altogether. Even the president of Czechoslovakia, *Tomáš Masaryk*, joined in the appeal for Catholics to forsake their faith and "hung out the Hussite flag" at the presidential residence, an act which caused the papal nuncio and several bishops to leave the country temporarily in protest. One feature of inter-War Czech society that the author does not bring up, but that would have

been most interesting, is the role of Freemasonry in the campaign against the Church, since a number of important Czech public figures at the time were Masons.

But remarkably, once again, Czech Catholics were able to mount a somewhat successful counter-attack to the anti-Catholic polemics of Palacký and his successors. Several important Czech intellectuals, not all of them practicing Catholics themselves, stood up for the Church and her constructive role in Czech history. They argued persuasively that "Czech Baroque culture, Baroque patriotism, and the veneration of St. John Nepomucene were as much part of Czech culture as the Hussites were...." (64)

This process of reconciliation was symbolically demonstrated, for example, in the celebrations to mark the millennium of the martyrdom of St. Wenceslas in 1929, including the completion of St. Vitus' Cathedral, in Prague. Another important event was the holding of the Catholic Congress in Prague, in 1935, attended by thousands of the faithful, who showed themselves to be an integral part of the nation when Czechoslovakia was increasingly under threat by Nazi Germany. (43)

But the German threat was all too real, and Hitler began his piecemeal dismemberment of the country in 1938. The Nazis imprisoned priests and religious, confiscated ecclesiastical property and closed many Catholic schools. But as a result of this and of Catholic and clerical resistance to the occupation, the Church emerged from World War II with increased prestige. Even here, though, the situation was complex. The Bohemian Lands had always included a large minority of German speakers, and it was this that furnished the initial pretext to Hitler to annex the Sudetenland. After World War II, with very few exceptions,

the whole German-speaking population was included in the forced transfers to Germany and Austria. The first months after the war in particular were accompanied by much violence, including the murder of priests, monks, and nuns whose main language was German.... In [these cases] it is clear that these people did not become the targets of brutal violence only because they were German; rather, they were attacked primarily because they were Christian, members of the Church. The departure of thousands of German priests and nuns, as

well as lay believers...greatly weakened not only the Church but also Christianity in the country. (82)

In addition to this turmoil, just a few years after escaping from Nazi tyranny, in February 1948 Communists took over the Czechoslovak government. Although at first the government's attitude toward the Church was ambiguous—the new prime minister requested a *Te Deum* be sung when he was sworn into office in June of that year—very soon the regime's hostility toward the Church became clear. The keynote of the forty years of Communist rule that Fr. Petráček emphasises is that the clergy could be divided into three groups depending on their attitude or their cooperation with the government. First were "the so-called 'Progressive' priests, who were ready to collabourate with the regime in official associations," for example, the Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy. These received appointments to the top positions in universities and to the one faculty of theology that was permitted to remain open. Next were those priests, the majority, "who were willing to make the necessary compromises if it meant they could carry out their priestly mission." The motivations of this

second group were various, and it included many who made the sincere choice to make the minimum accommodations with the government so that they could stay in their parishes and minister to their flocks. The third group “comprised clergy who refused to yield to regime pressure”—many of this last group spent the years of Communism in work camps and other prison settings, or were even put to death. (84)

Just as with liberation from Nazi rule, the fall of Communism in 1989 “brought the Church considerable credit amongst the intelligent part of the population.” (107) Although the visit of John Paul II in 1990, and even the later visit of Benedict XVI in 2009, were well received, the latter especially by intellectuals appreciative of Benedict’s defense of “the rationality of knowledge,” in general any favourable attitude toward the Church after the fall of Communism did not last, as many of the old prejudices against the Church revived. “The honeymoon of Czech society and the Catholic Church soon came to an end for several reasons.” (107) The quarrels about restitution of Church property seized by the Communists aroused public hostility, and in addition, the author avers, the Catholic

Church in the Czech Lands was not intellectually prepared to “carry on a competent dialogue with atheist and non-Catholic Czechs.” (107) Although not active in the first years after the fall of Communism, “militantly anticlerical atheists...have come out all the more intensely in the early twenty-first century.” (108) This situation has rather obvious similarities with that immediately after World War I, when anti-Catholic and freethinking elements also mounted a campaign against the Church, as noted above. But one element in the partly successful Catholic revival of the late 1920s and 1930s had been that Czech Catholics “found intellectual inspiration in France and Italy”; (43) in other words, Czech Catholics were able to find intellectual and moral support in the wider Catholic world that was in the midst of a remarkable intellectual revival at the time and in a Church that was secure in her self-understanding and identity. But unfortunately this is no longer the case with the Church for the past fifty years or so—disputes over faith, morals, the liturgy and many other matters have created a Church which is confused, bitterly divided, and unsure of her own identity and of what stance she should take toward the non-Catholic world

around her. Unlike in the 1930s, there are three or four or even more ideas of how the Church should understand and conduct herself in the contemporary era, and no one of these ideas seems to predominate.

There are a few areas the author notes, however, in which Catholic teaching or policies resonate with the otherwise mostly hostile or indifferent Czech public. “For many leading representatives of humanist agnosticism and atheism, John Paul II’s fight for the abolition of the death penalty all over the world was highly inspiring...and references to the pope’s personal initiative played a very important role” (108) in the successful campaign to abolish capital punishment in the then Czechoslovakia immediately after the overthrow of Communism. Similarly, “[t]he criticism of liberal capitalism and of globalisation, which was regularly expressed by the last two popes, and the popes’ ability to stand up for local cultures and traditions against mass culture and its non-values have been appreciated mostly by left-wing groups.” (109) But the Czech bishops have been timid about criticisms of the neo-liberalism and other government policies which followed the fall of Communism.

It is certainly not part of the mission of the Church and its leaders to ride the wave of dissatisfaction with the system. But a bit more courage in criticising the government and the way State power is executed would perhaps be helpful. In this context, it seems that the letter of the Czech bishops in reaction to the wave of public dissatisfaction, expressed, for example, in strikes in April 2012, was too much in the Austro-Hungarian tradition of the Church as a source of support for the ruling establishment. The letter urges the public to be patient and put up with government reform as the only possible policy. (109)

In addition, the Church in the Bohemian Lands is faced with the same criticisms that are current everywhere today within Western culture.

Atheist and agnostic critics of religion and the social role of the Churches in the formation of an ethical framework for Czech society find it quite easy to present religion as socially harmful... Today’s dominant thinking does not include the basic concept in Catholic moral theology—namely, the existence of human nature.... Man, in the popular view, is whatever he or she