

Pavel Hošek.

It Is Our Story: A Theological Essay on Patriotism and Christian Values in Czech Culture. Brno, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2018. Pp 204. \$8.50.

The national sentiment within the political situation in the Czech Republic, as well as in other European countries, has intensified in the last three years, especially due to the recent migration. The conversation on the Christian roots of Czech culture originated from an unexpected place – from secular politicians in what is considered one of the world’s most atheist countries. Pavel Hošek, the leading Czech Protestant scholar of religion, recognized the public discourse on Christian values in connection to patriotism and nationalism and took a theological approach to the topic.

The author starts with plurality in Czech culture and includes examples of his own family background of different nationalities and confessions. Hošek’s central problem is the diverse perception on what is to be considered the Czech Christian culture – in this cross-roads of Europe, there exists a duality of Czech Catholicism and Czech Protestantism, and there are multiple competing traditions. He successively analyses seven such traditions: five are specifically linked to Christianity – the traditions of Cyril and Method, of Saint Wenceslas, of Jan Hus and the Brethren, of Saint John of Nepomuk (Czech baroque), of the National Revival and Masaryk – and he adds the traditions of the relationship to paganism and to Judaism, both complementary to the development of Christian faith in the specific Czech context. Hošek’s response to the Catholic and Protestant division and claims to the genuine Czech Christian roots is to argue that ‘it is our story.’ In his perception, all the traditions can be embraced and incorporated in forming a contemporary Czech national identity based on Christian values of the past. He goes a step further and suggests returning to Jesus, the common denominator of all Czech cultural traditions.

The reflection on Christian and national identity has increased, especially on the occasion of the 100-year anniversary of the founding Czechoslovakia in 1918. Hošek’s sound description, analysis and conclusions in the book contribute to the discussion in the following ways:

- To reconcile the Catholic and Protestant narratives and the members of both communities – they are not necessarily called to agree, but to understand each other.
- To help the majority of unbelievers in Czech society to recognize their Christian roots and to adequately utilize patriotism in connection with Christian values, and perhaps to re-evaluate their own spiritual journey.
- To appeal to those who present themselves as Christians to live accordingly, loving God and others, i.e. as Hošek suggests, loving minorities or engaging in humanitarian work.

The book “This is Our Story” has aimed to balance the two main competing narratives and to encourage Czechs to consider the gift and task of “Czechness” – to build up a positive patriotism that is not self-centred, but is instead giving. Possible shortcomings of this book might be several passages where author returns to the same issues, sometimes in unnecessary detail. On the contrary, for an English-speaking reader certain passages on Czech specifics would require more attention. In my perspective, owing to its relevance in contemporary Europe, the book is highly recommendable for translating – either in the current version with modifications or in a shorter variant.

Yes, it is the Czechs’ story. Nevertheless, this refreshing publication of Pavel Hošek could contribute to other similar European contexts which inquire about a healthy way of relating the newly arisen patriotism and the “old” yet not extinct Christian values, including the continuous story of Jesus in peoples’ lives.

David Symon

Oxford Centre of Mission Studies

d.symon@ocms.ac.uk