

# Mission in Two Directions: Missiological Implications of Religious Identity in Czechia and in Former Yugoslavia Countries

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the historical sociologist Anthony Smith, ethno-religious identity<sup>1</sup> occurs when religious communities are closely related to ethnic identities (Smith 1991: 7). While in certain CEE<sup>2</sup> contexts this precisely is the prevailing form identity, with other nations there seems to be a weaker linkage to this understanding. This paper briefly engages the issue of religious identity in two differing contexts, in the Czech Republic, or Czechia<sup>3</sup>, and former Yugoslavia countries, and the negotiation<sup>4</sup> of ethno-religious identity in mission.

The paper is derived from a larger research project, based on in-depth interviews with thirty-one respondents, preliminarily Czech missionaries<sup>5</sup> to former Yugoslavia countries, and complementary<sup>6</sup> sources, performed during 2018 and 2019. The focus is on Czech<sup>7</sup> long-term<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Identity” is understood here in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 2004). This, in contrast to personal identity or role identity, is based on the outgroup comparison (Burke & Stets 2009: 129).

<sup>2</sup> Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>3</sup> In the Czech milieu, there is a certain terminological ambivalence between usage of “the Czech Republic”, with the connection to the republican constitutional arrangement, or the shorter and more recently officially recognized version “Czechia” (Cf. Čížmárová 2015, Drbohlav 2009.) I employ both interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> This social identity changes together with the social realities out of which it is created (Tajfel 1981: 226) and never is a settled matter (Jenkins 2014: 4). Therefore, instead of “identity construction”, I prefer to maintain that identity is being constantly “negotiated” (Cf. Holmberg 2008: 29).

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge that international mission as not something theologically separate from the mission in the home country (Bosch 1991: 10) and that all Christians, not just a group of professionals are characterized by mission (Tennent 2010: 126). Nevertheless, due to the focus and limitation of this study, the Christian intercultural workers are referred to as missionaries (Cf. Wright 2006: 23) and my overall starting position is that such mission work is legitimate (Winter 2009: 350-353).

<sup>6</sup> These were either members of missionaries’ Czech society (senders, friends and supporters), members of former Yugoslavia society (local leaders and co-workers), or members of mission organisations (international teammates).

Protestant mission workers with Slavs in former Yugoslavia countries since 1989<sup>9</sup>. I approach the study as an Evangelical/Pentecostal Christian, as a Czech and as someone who has been involved in cross-cultural missions<sup>10</sup> since 2002 and lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina for eight years. The personal involvement is certainly beneficial, yet admittedly constitutes certain research bias.

Based on the material from primary sources, this study aims to investigate how could certain elements of ethno-religious identity inform mission reflection and practice. Furthermore, I would like to explore an option of a twofold mission, or mission in two directions, for Czechs and for former Yugoslavs<sup>11</sup>. The structure of this study is quite straightforward: after a brief introduction of the two contexts with regards to religious identity, I proceed to the analysis of the interviewees' responses on both the detrimental and beneficial factors of ethno-religious identity, and conclude by suggesting a dialogue between the two.

## **2. INTRODUCING CZECH AND FORMER YUGOSLAV CONTEXT**

### **2.1 Religious identity in the Czech Republic**

In the 2011 census 10.4 per cent of Czechia population were Catholic, 1.1 per cent Protestant, 54 per cent other or unspecified and 34.5 without confession (Škrabal 2014: 5). Less than 15 per cent of the population is Christian, both practising and nominal, and Czechs are popularly proclaimed as one of the most atheist nations in the world. Atheism is, nevertheless, a

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<sup>7</sup> Due to the scope, Czechs are in focus, even though Slovaks, as the closest nation (Vlachová 2017), or others, could have been included as well and results might partially correlate.

<sup>8</sup> In my definition, it is one year or longer, and it includes also returning missionaries – those who travel to a former Yugoslav country regularly.

<sup>9</sup> The year Communism fell in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>10</sup> I employ the terms in this study, based in missiology, in compliance with scholars who consider “missions” in plural as multitude of activities that God’s people can engage in order to participate in the total biblical assignment in of the “mission” of God (Wright 2010: 25, Peters 1972: 11).

<sup>11</sup> The term “ex-Yugoslavs” or “former Yugoslavs” in a non-national sense has been widely used in the academy (Greenberg 2004, Todorova 2009) and it proves to be both sufficiently exact and economic. It refers to those whose heritage is rooted in one of the legacy countries of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which broke apart in 1991 (Slovenia, Croatia), and subsequently in 1992 (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia), in 2006 (Montenegro, Serbia) and in 2008 (Kosovo). Notwithstanding the collective reference, I am fully aware that the former Yugoslav context is far from being monolithic.

minority worldview: the census statistics<sup>12</sup> and prominent sociologists of religion are in accord that Czech society is not majority atheist.<sup>13</sup> ‘We could locate most of today’s inhabitants of the Czech Republic in the “grey zone” between a distinctive, reflected, practised religious faith and explicit atheism.’<sup>14</sup> They would label themselves as “without confession” (Václavík 2010: 213). Czechs, lacking an orienting focus (Hošek 2015a: 29), can be labelled as “something-ists”<sup>15</sup>. The majority society holds an anti-religious<sup>16</sup> sentiment or is lukewarm in its relationship with any institutionalized faith. Both the Catholic church and mainline Protestant churches struggle with decrease in membership, only several smaller Protestant denominations and other minority religious bodies are experiencing growth (Škrabal 2014: 5-6). Significant rise of interest and growth is present with alternative religious movements.<sup>17</sup>

The Czech religious situation differs from other neighbouring countries that also experienced a Communist regime – Eastern Germany, Slovakia and Poland – where statistics show a more positive attitude to religion (Hošek 2015b: 2). The religious situation in the Czech Republic resembles, rather than its immediate geographical neighbours, countries such as France.<sup>18</sup> Czechs are generally resistant or suspicious to institutionalized faith, they perceive dogmas and firm beliefs as a harmful form of fanaticism and often are ready to fight against it. Yet, Czechs ‘have strong religious “memory chains” maintained by socialization

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<sup>12</sup> The data on religion situation based on census in 2011 are available at the Czech Statistical Office: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/nabozenska-vira-obyvatel-podle-vysledku-scitani-lidu-2011-61wegp46fl> [Accessed 13 Oct 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Zdeněk Nešpor admits that Czechs are among the least religious in Europe and in the world (Nešpor 2010: 187), yet he concludes: ‘Czechs refuse the Christian God. But they do not cease to believe in something’ (Ibid: 188). His colleague David Václavík notices that the non-religious Czechs actually identify themselves with a religious interpretation of the world (Václavík 2010: 215). Czechs are believers in their own way (Cf. Hamplová & Nešpor 2009: 586, Rattay 2013: 22).

<sup>14</sup> Halík 2000: 145. My translation; original: ‘*Většinu dnešních obyvatel České republiky bychom nejspíše mohli zařadit do určité “šedé zóny” mezi vyhraněnou, reflektovanou a praktikovanou náboženskou vírou a výslovným ateismem.*’

<sup>15</sup> “Something-ists” can be described as ‘adherents of the more or less clearly articulated conviction that there most probably is “something” above us’ (Hošek 2015a: 26).

<sup>16</sup> Rather than “anti-religious” Czech scholars prefer to use the more exact term “anti-clerical” (Hošek 2015b, Václavík 2010) to stress the deep-rooted distrust to any institution (Hošek 2012: 95, Nešpor 2010: 188). The person in authority can either be a secular clerk or a clergyman.

<sup>17</sup> These alternative spiritualities are e.g. Hare Krishna, esotericism, eastern philosophy, new paganism (Nešpor 2010: 118), for the reason that ‘Czech people are generally quite interested in non-materialist interpretations of reality’ (Hošek 2015b: 1).

<sup>18</sup> ‘In both the Czech Republic and France, modernistic and nationalistic ideologies led to conflict with the dominant Catholic confession, ideologies which were only strengthened as the result of strong socialist movements (.....) Moreover, both countries have witnessed the forced suppression of certain Protestant minorities.’ (Hamplová and Nešpor 2009: 593, Cf. Halík 2000: 144)

and education'<sup>19</sup> – and Christianity is their carrier, as the largest official religion which is historically linked to the country. The Czech society is nevertheless split: if Christianity, then which one? The scholar of religion Pavel Hošek in his theological essay on Christian values in Czech culture analyses traditions<sup>20</sup> linked to Czech Catholicism and Czech Protestantism and responds to the claims for the genuine Czech Christian roots by arguing against the division by calling the historical narrative as “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 (Hošek 2018: 174-177).

Based on the material above, noting that Czechs are in their majority neither strong Catholics nor Protestants, it can be concluded that Czech national identity, including the identity of Czech missionaries, is not ethno-religious.

## 2.2 Religious identity in former Yugoslavia countries

While in the Czech case, religious identity seems to occur as relatively unimportant, Smith points out that most religious communities coincide with ethnic groups and in his list he includes examples of Serbs and Croats.<sup>21</sup> Even though the religious identity of individuals might significantly vary<sup>22</sup>, in agreement with the scholars' consensus<sup>23</sup>, it can be asserted that identity of nations of former Yugoslavia is of an ethno-religious nature, due to its geopolitical location<sup>24</sup> and historical development<sup>25</sup>. American scholar of religion with roots in

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<sup>19</sup> Vlachová 2017: 11. These are: celebrating Easter and Christmas, familiarity with biblical stories and major characters of Christian faith and numerous, wide usage of popular sayings in Czech which originate from the Bible.

<sup>20</sup> Specifically, these are the traditions of Saint Wenceslas (Catholic), of Jan Hus and the Brethren (Protestant), of Saint John of Nepomuk in Baroque (Catholic), and of the National Revival and Masaryk (Protestant). He involves the tradition of Cyril and Methodius, and traditions of the relationship to paganism and to Judaism, both complementary to the development of Christian faith in the specific Czech context.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Armenians, Jews, Monohysite Amharra offer classic instances of this coincidence (.....) Poles, Serbs and Croats, Maronites, Sikhs, Sinhalese, Karen and Shi’i Persians are among the many ethnic communities whose identity is based on religious criteria of differentiation.’ (Smith 1991: 7)

<sup>22</sup> ‘Rather than approaching religious identity as constant across groups, consideration of varying religious ideologies could reveal important differences concerning both individual and intergroup processes.’ (Ysseldyk 2010: 65)

<sup>23</sup> Authors writing on the former Yugoslavia religious situation tackle sooner or later in their work the religious aspect connected to the nation. E.g. Goodwin 2006: 24 (on national identity of the three nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Bellamy 2004: 74 (on the relation of the Catholic church to the party HDZ in Croatia), Parushev 2013: 70 (on the role of the Orthodox church in the societies in Eastern Europe).

<sup>24</sup> In this territory, the Western and Eastern Christian traditions meet, together with Islam having come from the south-east.

<sup>25</sup> Ottoman Turks, particularly, impacted the region with their ‘completely different concept of nation. The Turkish word for nation was *millet*, which denoted religious affiliation’ (Foteva 2014: 12).

contemporary Croatia and Serbia Paul Mojzes noticed that this connection of nation and religion is perceived as unchanging, and anything that challenges the homogeneity of the ethno-religious identity is perceived as a threat to group survival (Mojzes 1999: 232). Peter Kuzmič, prominent scholar from the region, commented that national ideologies replaced Communism (Kuzmič 1992: 23) and he considered this rediscovering of national religious identity to be harmful: ‘This powerful synthesis of ethnicity, religion and culture became one of the most dangerous enemies of the progress and peaceful transformation of Post-Communist nations’ (Kuzmič 2013: 225). Sociologist of religion Siniša Zrinščak stated that ‘higher religiosity is provoked by social processes but does not mean any real changes in religious orientation’ (Zrinščak 2006: 77).

Kuzmič argued that Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches of Europe are themselves a complex mission field where nominal Christians need to be awakened – those who are indifferent to their faith and those ‘who have found false security in a superficially sacramentalistic, cultural and/or nationalistic (.....) Christianity’ (Kuzmič 1992: 22). Miroslav Volf, Kuzmič’s countryman and distinguished colleague<sup>26</sup>, agreed with it and to underline the approach in this European context, he used the metaphorical phrase, “washing the face of Jesus” (Volf 1996a: 28). Therefore, in the Protestant view, mission means to reach out to all nations<sup>27</sup>. Nonetheless, the genuine effort of evangelism is often considered an unwelcomed proselytism. There is a disagreement between the older and newer churches on what it means to be a Christian:

The historic Christian churches throughout the former Yugoslavia tend to maintain that baptism and membership in their churches is the mark of being a Christian (.....) The evangelical churches in the successor states of former Yugoslavia tend to ask whether persons believe they have an active relationship with Jesus Christ, whether they regard the Bible as the word of God, and whether they are filled with the Holy Spirit. If they are not, such persons are to be evangelized.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This scholar from the Balkans with Croatian, Czech and German ancestors authored a significant book on identity, “Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation” (Volf 1996b) where he argues that we need each other’s culture in order to shape us and help us focus on God (Volf 1996b: 52-53) who can teach us that ‘the only alternative to violence is self-giving love, willingness to absorb violence in order to embrace’ (Volf 1996b: 295).

<sup>27</sup> Yet, proclaiming the Gospel message to all, regardless of the jurisdiction, can make the relationship of Evangelical Protestants with traditional ecclesial bodies difficult (Mojzes 1999: 236).

<sup>28</sup> Mojzes 1999: 236

Macedonian theologian Kosta Milkov considers the problem of proselytism as a problem of mutual ecclesial exclusivity<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the former Yugoslavs share aversion to proselytism for the reason it reminds them the past pressures and fear that it might weaken ‘the fabric of society, which is held together by ethno-religious glue’<sup>30</sup>. And it is especially in this vulnerable time of reasserting the political autonomy, religious identity plays a stronger role (Schreiter 1996: 230). For most former Yugoslavs national and religious identity are interconnected and as such unchangeable. This, on the other hand, entails a challenge and has serious implications for the work of Protestant missionaries, including those coming from the Czech Republic.

### **3. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY FACET AND ITS MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

#### **3.1 Challenges of ethno-religious identity for Czech Protestant missionaries**

Interviewer: Do you recall any negative situations? When because you were Czechs, they were laughing, or?

Tomáš: Yes, they were, not because of “Czechness”, but because of Christianity. For example, when we were renting a space in a hotel and after a month and half they wrote us we are not allowed to go there, threatening us with a court appeal.

Tomáš, m, 2-10 years in SRB

I think that in general they were confused to meet a missionary from any other church than Orthodox church. In that area, “Christian” and “Orthodox” merge and if it’s not an Orthodox, then it will logically be a Catholic – and they will look down on them. Yet all of sudden they find out that it’s something else and they will merge it with Mormons, Jehovah witnesses, Adventists, simply it will be something from these.

Jaroslav 2, m, sending parish priest (Eliška 1 BIH)

In Croatia, a part of national identity is Catholicism, so a Christian who is not Catholic is strange, a member of a strange sect. So, Jiří 1 said that when they got to know the locals, when they started to

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<sup>29</sup> Milkov makes the point by asking: ‘Should (the Evangelicals) consider the infant baptism of the Orthodox converts valid when the official view of the Orthodox is that they are not really a Church?’ (Milkov 2015: 102)

<sup>30</sup> Mojzes 1999: 242. Mojzes outlines the specific bad experiences with proselytism the former Yugoslavs have had in the past: 1. one former Yugoslav nation attempting to rebaptize the other during World War Two and the war in 1990s, 2. proselytism of Communists towards Marxism-Leninism, 3. recommitment to national religious institutions of its own people (Mojzes 1999: 222). Cf. the understanding of proper evangelism and proselytism in Cape Town Commitment (CTC 2011: 71).

accept them or when they helped them with something, then they were saying: ‘Yes, they are from a sect, but from the good one (laugh).’

Michal, m, leader of sending mission agency (Jiří 1 HRV)

The responses lay out the evidence, which will be widened and elaborated further below, of what Czech and other missionaries face as Protestants: (a.) unfamiliarity (Jaroslav 2), rejection (Tomáš), toleration, yet labelled a “sect” (Michal).

Protestants’ status in society of former Yugoslavia countries differs from the one in Czech context where it is widely accepted form of Christianity and where a more diverse views on religion prevails, given by history of the Catholic-Protestant conflict (Hošek 2018) and a substantial atheist or non-religious matrix (Nešpor 2010). Kuzmič claims that in the former Yugoslavia countries, Protestant minorities are looked upon with suspicion as a radical movement which in past divided Christendom and currently in its fragmented forms threatens national and religious identity and people’s unity (Kuzmič 2017: 27). Muslim or Catholic and Orthodox Christian bodies are thus often unwilling to be open for alternative expressions of faith in their “canonical territory” due to the equation of religious and national identity, introduced in the preceding passage.

Here, Orthodoxy is a national religion that everybody believes, even though it is Orthodoxy mixed with traditions, it is not only religion, but Serbian tradition. In Serbia, without the tradition, a person does not get born, does not get married, does not die, so it is in all spheres.

Karolína, f, 20-30 years in SRB

Karolína’s statement underlines the connection of the two identity facets which seems as not something only older generations holds onto. A recent survey among youth in the Western Balkans confirmed that ‘ethnic and religious identities are almost completely overlapping’ (Žeželj & Pratto 2017: 167). Viewed in this clue, Bosniaks are therefore Muslims, Croats are Catholic Christians, Macedonians are Orthodox Christians, Montenegrins are Orthodox Christians, Serbs are Orthodox Christians, and Slovenes are Catholic Christians.

Former Yugoslavia countries are very religiously oriented. (.....) Czech culture does not count on God. The Croatian does count on God, but not in the biblical sense, but in the sense of a traditional religion.

Jiří 2, m, 10-20 years in HRV

As Jiří 2 noticed, religious identities, in case of Christian identity, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant<sup>31</sup>, in individual contexts usually seem to signify ethnic, cultural and political

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<sup>31</sup> This could apply to national minorities: ‘If you are not Lutheran, you are a sect. There is a strong Lutheran church where many people are, seventy percent is not born-again, thirty percent are. The priest is born-again

orientations rather than being linked to the Christian gospel as such (Tennent 2010: 39). To critically note on Jiří's statement, Protestant Christians are often the ones who readily use the expression "biblical", in order to point out they are right, while others are not. Surely, they are known for their emphasis on the Scriptures, yet this definitely does not imply the Bible is not in high esteem and usage in the Catholic and Orthodox circles in former Yugoslavia countries.

The two final extracts conclude this section on how the ethno-religious identity presents a genuine challenge for the work of Protestant, Czech and other, missionaries in former Yugoslavia countries:

Normal educated people, middle class, say: 'This is in America, this is not in Europe, we have seen it in a film. The first contact was often a general misunderstanding: Slovenes associated us with religious freaks, Jehovah witnesses, an American thing they know from films or something from *Prekmurje*. These are local specifics, I don't know how it is in other Balkan countries, it is complicated by national "slash" [in English] religious identity. When you are a Croat you have to be Catholic and so on, and here also: 'We are all Christians'.

Petr, m, 20-30 years in SVN

An article appeared in the local leading newspaper heading: "Jehovah's witnesses are again knocking on the door". One third of the article focused on our local Evangelical student movement, local branch of International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Later in July, a state TV made an interview with myself and my colleagues about "various student movements in the town", I learnt the day it was broadcasted it meant "the cults in the town".

David, m, 2-10 years in BIH

Following the war in the 1990s, former Yugoslavia countries experienced two trends: growth of conversions to Protestantism and an influx of foreign missionaries.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the newer churches, who make up a small minority, have often been looked upon with suspicion as a foreign intrusion or are labelled "sects" (Mojzes 1999: 234). This explains the response above documenting the widespread generalizations in Bosnian Serb society, which is present across former Yugoslavia countries. Peter, in his response, referred to the only Slovenian region influenced by the Reformation, which otherwise had a little historical impact in the whole region (Ibid: 225).

Contemporary Protestant missionaries, therefore, consider themselves to be entitled to

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and (.....) he is deep in tradition, because he is paid by the members who would revolt' (Richard, m, returning to SRB). Richard commented on the something slightly different, which could be further explored and critiqued, yet the point here is that Vojvodina Slovaks tend to delineate themselves from the majority Serb population, similarly based on the religious-national identity.

<sup>32</sup> Compare with Milkov 2015: 99 and Magda & Wachsmuth 2014: 32.



carry on the mission, which for the Evangelicals means proclaiming the gospel to all nations regardless of the jurisdiction. While on the other side, for the traditional ecclesial bodies, mission is rather focused on believers in diaspora and on preserving the national identity (Parushev 2013: 72). In former Yugoslavia, ‘Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy all consider this an auspicious time for the reactivating and re-education of the people traditionally in their spheres’ (Mojzes 1999: 236). In this way, the institutionalized religion, like nationalism, has ambitions to supply ‘existential answers to individuals’ quests for security, providing a picture of totality, unity and wholeness’ (Kinnvall 2004: 759).

Therefore, the clash often occurs, which from the perspective of Protestant missionaries, as evidenced in the sample with Czech interviewees, represents certain challenges. Furthermore, it would be more precise to say that instead of speaking of challenges to be overcome, unacquaintance and ignorance (Petr), or antagonism (David), this in reality presents the major obstacle with serious consequences for the mission work. Petr, who pastors a “megachurch” in the Slovenian context (fifty members) where the closest other Protestant church is one hundred kilometres away, kept returning to this theme thorough the interview. He underlined the aforesaid:

They are those who are the good ones, they have all the sacraments, they have done nothing wrong. (.....)  
You are Christian because you got born here. So, this has been the biggest challenge for Protestant church planting and discipleship.

Petr, m, 20-30 years in SVN

Still, the Protestants might have created other obstacles themselves, which is the subject matter of the subsequent passage.

### **3.2 Protestant believers’ challenge of contextualization**

It is one big problem of Serbian churches and churches around us that all of our training and philosophy of work, philosophy of church and approach to theology is Western, all Western, and that’s a big reason why our churches are not big. And simply we don’t know how to approach that our people here understand it and we don’t speak the language that they would understand.

Vladimir, m, pastor and team leader (Karolina SRB)

I was attracted to see the situation similarly as in Ukraine, but the church functions on a very different foundations than the church in Ukraine. The Ukrainian church comes from the roots, so it’s very traditional, but here they sang the American worship songs and the American style, so I think that the influence of Christians from abroad and especially from the West was apparent there, so I felt a bit better

in Ukraine, it was more genuine. Here it was excessively modern, but in the culture, where they lived it, it stood out like a sore thumb.

Jiří 3, m, returning to BIH

I have had the opportunity to talk to many pastors in former Yugoslavia countries and it is rare to find a local Protestant pastor who would employ such self-critique, as Vladimir, addressing the matter of a relatively poor embodiment of Protestant churches in an indigenous form. Many churches were established by the missionaries, missionaries from abroad still comprise a substantial percentage of their membership, and in Kuzmič's words, they are frequently considered as 'a modernized Western faith, and thus a foreign intrusion' (Kuzmič 2017: 27). As the result of that, as Jiří 3 noticed, these churches sometimes tend to get, under missionaries' influence, globalized, i.e. westernized, and indeed, 'both missionaries and national church leaders often find their primary identity within the biculture' (Hiebert 1985: 239). Newer Protestant churches in the Balkans are often a unique meeting points of multiple cultures, when the feature of not being burdened by nationality is perceived as a positive contribution towards reciprocal reconciliation (Milkov 2015: 101). This diversity, as expressed by Schirmacher, who says that Jesus' church 'transcends all cultural and language barriers' (Schirmacher 2018: 43), might, on the other hand, appear to the local religious bodies as a treacherous "transnational faith"<sup>33</sup>, a threat to the security of ethno-religious identity.

Another challenge the respondents faced was connected to their emphasis in soteriological and ecclesiological approach:

Because here in the Orthodox churches, there is no God's word, there is liturgy in old Slavonic which is sang, smoke of the frankincense and the priest is turned by back to people, so that he would not be turned by his back to the altar and not be cursed by God. But the right perception is facing the people and telling them God's word.

Tomáš, m, 2-10 years in SRB

I never can tell who is saved, including our own local church, it is a relationship with God, if I find in Orthodox church someone and we start: 'Do you believe in Father, Son – ' we go from there, but it is not the case that that you say at the beginning: 'You don't believe, you are not a Christian.'

Karolína, f, 20-30 years in SRB

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<sup>33</sup> The expression "transnational faith" is used in the case study from post-Communist Lithuania where traditional Catholic parents drink vodka at their children's wedding, who as converted Protestants consume Coca-Cola (Lankauskas 2002). The study's generalization are limited, yet it provides a point of documenting certain pro-Western orientations of Protestant churches in post-Communist European countries.

The context of the two missionaries, who both see the need of evangelism in formally Christian areas, is the same. Still, a more confrontation style of Tomáš, whose claims could certainly be challenged, does not leave much space for staying in one's church. On the other hand, Karolína's response on her way of missions, in pointing to the relationship with God, does not necessarily entail converting from church to church.

In sum, multiple pressures, both external and internal, as viewed from these Protestant missionaries' perspective, emerge in their mission work. In the next passage, the debate on ethno-religious identity arrives at missiological conclusions for Czech Protestant missionaries and more generally for the two cultural contexts – former Yugoslav and Czech.

### **3.3 Towards a dialogue concerning ethno-religious identity**

Everyone is proud about their nation, they look after their own, defend it and keep it, not willing to let, it is hard to persuade about anything else. And faith, we are Catholics, so what will you tell me here.

Denis, m, returning to SVN

When you are Serb, you are Orthodox, when you are Croat, you are Catholic, when you are Bosniak, you are Muslim. We don't have this mindset at all. And for evangelism it means that the treason of the ethnic religion is the treason of the whole ethnic group, which is a thing we don't have at all.

Jiří 3, m, returning to BIH

At the first glance, as the responses of these returning missionaries point to, the lines seem to be drawn. To choose for oneself and to embrace something different than the national mainstream religious belief is often considered as a foreign concept, not compatible with the national historical pride (response of Denis). Moreover, there is a mentality of: 'Why would we convert now in peace when we did not convert under the pressure of war?' and conversion to anything else can indeed be regarded a treason to the nation itself (response of Jiří 3). This observed inclination seems to be, nonetheless, not a permanent state of affairs, as the statement from the south of Serbia, where only Orthodox Christianity and Islam have been widespread, documents:

Until about five years ago, people thought: "cult", "West", "they take our Serbian ancestors from us". Traditions, simply nationalism. And all of sudden it has changed, people recognized we want good for people, for society, whether it is children creative workshops, or music we do with youth. Nick Vujičić was in Niš and everyone knows it was through us. So, the environment has changed. Sometimes not on the personal level, but in general we experience a religious freedom.

Karolína, f, 20-30 years in SRB

Nick Vujičić is a world-known Australian motivational speaker and evangelist of Serbian

origin. In places like Karolína's town, one major side-effect of his ministry is a positive public relations for Protestant churches. The way of thinking that, 'If this great Serb can be a Protestant Christian, they are not that a dangerous sect after all,' is unfortunately not shared by everyone. Czechs Protestant missionaries find themselves periodically struggling with ethno-religious identity of former Yugoslavs. On the other side, as the following set of statements evidences, they highly appreciated some of its elements:

I think it is easier to talk about God. On one hand it's a disadvantage that there are all Orthodox here, on the other side there is advantage they have a notion of God, so if a person brings that topic, it is not completely off. They follow on that, we start to talk, and ask, and you are not a completely strange person. In Bohemia, we would be for some people totally off, what are we talking about.

Eva 2, f, 2-10 years in SRB

The kind of general awe of God, that's what we have recognized here. In Bohemia people boast about doing some fraud or immorality, not here.

Petr, m, 20-30 years in SVN

What was positive, in Bohemia<sup>34</sup> people lie, speak with vulgar words. The culture of religiousness influences fear, you can leave here unlocked cars, nothing gets lost. Not only the car, but things inside. And people, at least the older generations, lie less. The religiousness joins people together and they try to live up to the rules. But the fact is that there is more safety of everything here.

Eva 1, f, 20-30 years in SVN

I have seen the respect before God as in Ukraine. We don't experience this kind of respect, we take it for granted, but here with older people, you see this respect. Here in Croatia, it is in between Ukraine and us. And it comes to me that we should learn more, that we miss the respect and the humility, if you do it, then you are the legalist.

Danuše, f, returning to HRV

The widespread cultural Christianity and familiarity of most people with basic beliefs, due to the ethno-religious environment, enables people to converse about God more openly, without the estrangement which is present in Czech society (Eva 2). Another element the respondents found favourable in this matter is the awe of God (Danuše), which, besides other things, influences better level of moral matters, crime and safety (Petr, Eva 1). To add to this, the response of Danuše is certainly conditioned by her limited experience of a Croatian provincial town in Slavonia region (as opposed to more liberal e.g. Istria peninsula or the capital Zagreb). Also, Slovenia opposed to the rest of former Yugoslavia is often considered as a

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<sup>34</sup> Bohemia (*Čechy*) as one of the three historical regions of Czechia (*Česko*) is often incorrectly used in common speech while referring to the country as the whole.

traditionally Catholic country, yet with strong secular humanism and “liberal” anti-Catholic element in the society (Mojzes 1999: 238), so the responses of Petr and Eva 1 are perhaps based also more on the experiences in the region they work, near the Italian border.

Nevertheless, as these interview extracts confirmed, the religious situation in the Czech Republic and in former Yugoslav republics differs significantly. In the European Values Study in 2017, the percentage of people who said religion was very or quite important in their lives was: CZE 21.25, SVN 36.56, HRV 64.29, and the results for other former Yugoslav countries were around eighty per-cent.<sup>35</sup> Only 38 per cent of Czechs claimed they believed in God, while e.g. in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro it was about 96 percent.<sup>36</sup>

Closely looking at the two differing contexts, in the light of the evidence presented so far, two questions suggest themselves:

- (a.) How could former Yugoslavs be helped by Czechs, or by other nationals, to step out of the ethno-religious identity and to believe in what they personally prefer, simultaneously not betraying their national identity while constituting more genuinely national Protestant churches? In other words, can Czechs, who value equality and free choice in the sense ‘You can be Czech and you can be anything – Christian (whichever), Buddhist, or Atheist,’ be of help to former Yugoslavs?
- (b.) Another question is: How could, on the contrary, former Yugoslavs with their ethno-religious identity inform those of majority non-religious background, such as Czechs, in a missional manner? Such engagement with ethno-religious identity, in my understanding, does not by no means imply returning to pre-Christendom patterns in neo-paganism. It concerns Christian mission and I am asking whether, even though my interviewees were Czech missionaries, is not mission rather supposed to be expected from the other direction?

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<sup>35</sup> Available at: <https://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/maptool.html> [Accessed 14 Dec 2020]. This score for Czechs was the lowest in Europe, importance of God and belief in God, only Denmark and Sweden scored lower. Confidence in church was another lowest score Europe-wide (below 18 per cent).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: TWOFOLD MISSION OF CZECHS AND OF FORMER YUGOSLAVS

The focus here is on Czech missionaries in former Yugoslavia countries, yet, based on the material from the in-depth interviews, there are missiological conclusions for missions in both directions – from the Czech Republic to former Yugoslavia countries; and from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, to the Czech Republic. I would like to argue that due to the nature of religious identity in both contexts, a twofold mission is possible. The theologian Timothy Tennent reflects on twenty-first century global developments in mission and advocates for the need of ‘multidirectional missionary movement’ (Tennent 2010: 33). This mission from everywhere to everywhere (Escobar 2003) includes possible contemporary missions from Czechia and from former Yugoslav countries, as a modest contribution to the worldwide mission movement.

Viewed in the lens of the Protestant Evangelical perspective, there seems to be a genuine need for the Gospel message in “unreached nations” (Moreau et al., 2004: 154). It is striking that these European nations may with some aspects rate among those. The definition of “unreached” differs, yet it is acknowledged that there needs to be at least 5 per cent Christians and at least 2 per cent Evangelicals, with a viable church, in order for a people group to be considered “reached”.<sup>37</sup> Tennent exhorts, ‘missionary mobilization should focus on sending missionaries either to where there are no Christians or to where the church is not yet viable’ (Tennent 2010: 372). Viewed comparatively<sup>38</sup>, in former Yugoslavia countries, the Evangelical church surely is less viable than in the Czech Republic. There are areas with no Christians altogether and all Protestant churches are indeed tiny, perhaps with the Vojvodina province exception. From the Czech missionaries’ point of view, they come from a better-off place with the potential to give. Nevertheless, it is the Czech Republic which usually is the number one country in prayer booklets on reaching the irreligious, representing an “Atheist world” (Škrabal 2014: 5).

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<sup>37</sup> Two major statistics providers are Joshua Project and International Missions Board (IMB). For both, there needs to be at least 2 per cent Evangelicals in the population (Tennent 2010: 364-368). Taken literally, this would mean both the Czech Republic and any former Yugoslav country are unreached. The statistics are precarious as they make strict differences between reached and unreached.

<sup>38</sup> On the IMB scale of 0-7, when 0 means more unreached and seven more reached, the Czech Republic would score as three, while e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina would score one and two. Available at: <https://grd.imb.org/research-data/> [Accessed 15 Dec 2020].

In this viewpoint, apart from that Protestant Evangelical missiologists would agree that Muslims of former Yugoslavia need a chance to be presented to the Jesus in the Gospels, non-religious Czechs, with a distant conception of Christianity, need to be evangelized, and formally Christian southern Slavs, need to be evangelized, or re-evangelized, since the ethno-religious identity often prevents them to clearly distinguish what is Christian and what is part of their national tradition.

It is not the aim of this work to argue for the legitimacy of mission to nominal Christians<sup>39</sup> in this part of Europe, or to address the fragile issue whether Protestants should evangelize other Christians. Instead, it supposes that mission field is everywhere, ‘wherever there is ignorance or rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.’ (Wright 2010: 27) This includes, among others, former Yugoslavs – and Czechs who could well be re-evangelized with the help of missionaries from either Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox circles. Based on the evidence of the research, and particularly on the nature of religious identity in both contexts, I argue for a twofold mission:

(a.)Czechs can evangelize and inform the former Yugoslav ethno-religious identity.

Freedom to change confession can be precarious in any culture, for family reasons, yet it seems that in the Czech Republic, it is more widespread. It not merely is connected to a more individualistic way of life, yet as Newbigin accentuates, it in essence represents the Christian doctrine of freedom which ‘includes both the ability to hold vital convictions that lead to action and also the capacity to preserve for others the freedom to dissent’ (Newbigin 1986: 118). In addition to that, the Protestant church, unlike in the Czech Republic, tends to be viewed as a Western import. As a response to that, a healthy self-identification process can be deepened as former Yugoslavs ask what it means to be e.g. a Serb Protestant.

(b.)Former Yugoslavs with their ethno-religious identity can evangelize Czechs and inform Czech believers on their Christian identity. This can happen on multiple levels.

The general awe of God, prompting to lower criminality<sup>40</sup> and chastity<sup>41</sup>, does not imply that immoralities do not occur in that degree in former Yugoslavia countries,

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Kuzmič points to nominal Christians as he sums up the discussion, “Nominalism Today” at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation in Manila, which estimated 75 to 80 per cent of professing Christians as nominal, falling into the following categories: “ethnic-religious identity” nominal, second-generation nominal, ritualistic nominal, and syncretistic nominal (Kuzmič 1992: 22).

<sup>40</sup> More data would be needed to support this claim more precisely, I mean here specifically minor crime on the street level.

<sup>41</sup> This is one of the former Yugoslavs’ general stereotypes of Czechs that they are more sexually immoral, these conclusions are grounded in the responses in the preceding section.

they might only be more hidden under the surface. Still, the starting point that there is a God can be a huge step forward and an advantage. Most Czechs do not share it at all, even though they celebrate Christmas and Easter. Czechs could actually be reminded what is the actual meaning of these holidays and to learn to celebrate it. South Slavs are more festive and certain depth is included in the preparation for holidays, e.g. fast, time of mourning before Easter Sunday, esteem for the saints of history, stress on the time family spends together. Very often<sup>42</sup>, Czechs “celebrate” by merely appreciating a free day off work (Vlachová & Řeháková 2009: 258).

This perception of the twofold mission can be underlined by the final statement of Jaroslav I:

I think the most important is, not only there, it is everywhere, to come and to listen, rather than to come and advice. I think that we Christians are guilty by that we come and want to pass on something that no one needs.

Jaroslav I, m, returning to SRB

The authors of, “Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today”, similarly, call in their conclusion for a humble prophetic dialogue (Bevans & Schroeder 2004: 398). Therefore, this sort of encounter, accompanied by a learning attitude, of the representatives of the two culturally proximal, yet differing, contexts might actually produce in establishing steps towards the mission in two directions – Czechs blessing former Yugoslavs, and former Yugoslavs blessing Czechs. The matter of the interconnectedness of mission to religious, non-religious, and ethno-religious identity, should be explored further in a future research. Also, it would be helpful to find similar, and more extensive, studies in yet another cross-cultural contexts, as “sending countries” and “mission fields” continue to evolve.

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<sup>42</sup> This includes some of the Protestant Evangelicals along the way, since they take it as a matter-of-course, without an actual celebration. One cannot of course generalize for Czechs, since many, especially those of Catholic tradition, perceive holidays not in a self-evident manner.



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