

## Book Review

Michael Pfann, **K svobodě je dlouhé putování: Život Českobratrské církve evangelické v letech 1968–1989**, Praha: Karolinum, 2024, 344 pp., ISBN 978-80-246-5445-4

The publishing house of Charles University in Prague, Karolinum, has released a long-awaited book by Michael Pfann, a Czech church historian and minister of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) in Vrchlabí. ‘Long Journey to Freedom,’ used to be sung by Protestant youth in Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation to the tune of ‘The Last Supper’ from the Jesus Christ Superstar musical. The Communist regime undoubtedly could not stand the song because of its title (not to mention the lyrics) and the rebellious youngsters who sang it around campfires in the evenings. These moments were a liberating escape from the grey reality of communist Czechoslovakia. And it were the first words of this song, sung with great popularity to this day, that Pfann aptly chose as the title of his book. The subtitle, *The Life of the ECCB 1968–1989*, takes us to another clue: 344 pages of captivating, scholarly text await us (and there is no contradiction in that!), interspersed with numerous excerpts from interviews with eminent ECCB ministers, mostly from the 1925–1935 generation, who have significantly influenced the next generation of members of this church.

The book consists of a preface to the Czech edition, acknowledgements, an introduction, eight chapters arranged chronologically and thematically, a conclusion, biographies, a list of abbreviations, a bibliography, and an index of names and subjects. In the introduction, which defines the subject of the research and the methodology used, the author raises a fundamental question: “Was the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren free between 1968 and 1989 according to the present-day testimony of the ministers I interviewed, and according to other archival sources?” Pfann asks on p. 13. “The answer is not surprising, so I can reveal it straight away: it was and it was not,” he replies immediately. “But the aim of my study is not to state: either free or not free. The aim is to understand how freedom and the lack of it were experienced in the church, what its freedom consisted of, and how it was restricted.”

The author states that this answer is “by no means groundbreaking”. What is crucial, however, is the way in which he reached it. *Lege artis*, i.e., using oral history methods, he made transcripts of interviews with ten ministers (nine

men and one woman), conducted by himself or in collaboration with his supervisor, Dr. Peter Morée. The reason for this collaboration was not that he could not have undertaken them by himself, but so as not to distort the testimonies (p. 31). Both Pfann's parents and both his grandfathers are ECCB ministers, and he is related by family or friendship ties to several of the respondents. Thus, the interviews were conducted in the presence of another historian.

Authorized transcripts of the interviews, now kept in the faculty archives, were thematically divided by the author "through multi-level coding". He handles these prime elements, mathematically speaking, in his work in an excellent chapter-by-chapter manner. Grounded theory, on which Pfann draws, continually returns us to these conversations, which are both the point of departure and the object of research, though they are of course supplemented by research in numerous archival and published sources (pp. 28–29). The author opens up for us a microcosm of the ten ministers: he searches for the sources of their faith, and examines their ministry, communities, and life strategies.

### **A few bits and pieces**

Pfann's book is so complex that describing its contents chapter by chapter would be possible only in a brief summary in this limited space, and a treatise of such high quality does not deserve it. I therefore select only a few topics from it.

For example, the author reflects on the attitude of ministers who entered the service after World War II towards the ruling regime, which after 1948 was based on the monopoly of power of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He convincingly concludes that most (but certainly not all) ministers and church members partially supported the ruling ideology based on building socialism until the Prague Spring of 1968, but did not retreat from their own values (p. 62). The prominent theologian Josef Lukl Hromádka had a considerable influence on the formation of this position among ECCB ministers, although many of his students later began to turn away from his positive assessment of Czechoslovak socialism.

Next topic: Pfann writes in several places (e.g., on pp. 146–147 or p. 267) about the "legalistic" approach of the church authorities, who defended persecuted ministers and church members with legal provisions in the expectation that the state would abide by them, and he does so with a slightly negative connotation. We should not forget that until 1979 it was an unwritten rule

that at least one lawyer was a member of the Synodal Council, the innermost six-member leadership of the church. In 1953–1969, all three lay members were lawyers. And lawyers just cannot help themselves, they can only defend someone with the help of the law. That is just the way they are. After all, the civil service or the judiciary in any era, even the most politicized, is generally more receptive to legal reasoning than to laments. In criminal proceedings, it usually does not help when the accused invokes ethical, religious, or political principles not contemplated by the legal system in question. At a time when the law worked with the notion of socialist legality, the aim of which was to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat, it made no sense to defend oneself in court with the rule of law or human rights, because these were principles alien to the given legal order. What might have helped (but also might not) was to invoke laws that the state itself had enacted.

Pfann also extensively discusses the minister Zdeněk Soušek and the strategy he chose as a presbytery moderator in dealing with the state administration. A few months before his death, Soušek opened up to the author and for the first time publicly described his collaboration with the secret police, about which no file survives in the state archives. Soušek tried to protect his presbytery from interference by the Communist regime through these contacts, and he may have succeeded, but he may well have been imagining this (p. 200). After the regime changed in 1989, he retired and, as he confided to Pfann, he felt great mental exhaustion because of his collaboration with the regime, and he did not even attend ministers' congresses because of the generally accepted narrative that viewed collaboration with the secret police in an extremely negative manner (p. 202). This fate is undoubtedly distressing and sheds new light on the ECCB, which has long emphasized its "dissident past" (though it actually concerns a tiny minority of ministers in number) and marginalized people who conformed to the Communist regime (though they were certainly no less than dissidents). After all, how many scholarly works are devoted to "heroes", and how many of them deal with people marked by willing or unwilling collaboration with the regime?

Finally, the last of the selected themes: "The church simply focused, as if unconsciously, on the essentials," we read on p. 236 the words of Petr Pokorný, a foremost New Testament scholar. Pfann appreciates the publications for worship and congregational life that were published between 1968 and 1989. From today's perspective, it is hard to believe that an ecumenical group of ministers volunteered to publish the most widely used translation of

the Bible to this day because there was little else to do in Czechoslovakia. The state had forced churches into their buildings, not allowing them to operate very publicly, and so there was time for concentrated theological work. The Hymnal (replaced only in 2021) and the Common Order (not fully replaced to this day) date from this time. For these reasons, too, Pfann summarizes that to understand the life of the ECCB at this time, “the notion that church life takes place only in the congregations and during official church events and meetings is not sufficient. In order to grasp the reality of church life [...] it is necessary to work with a broader understanding of the church that also includes alternative forms of church activity and life, taking place well beyond the institutional setting” (p. 261).

### **Habent sua fata libelli**

Michael Pfann defended his PhD thesis, originally written in German, in 2019 at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague and the Faculty of Theology of the University of Leipzig. Five years later, in 2024, it was published in an amended Czech translation, with the preface to the Czech edition dated December 2021, when the text was completed, although several additions were probably made during the editorial work or proofreading – e.g., on p. 304 the date of death of Jiří Doležal is given as 30 December 2023. It is not known what caused the two-year delay in the publishing process, but in any case, the author can hardly be blamed for it.

The translation of the original German text into Czech was excellently done by Jonáš Plischke – it is almost hard to believe that the study was originally written in another language! The German edition of the treatise should soon be published in the Quocosa database as an e-book under the title *Zur Freiheit ein langes Wandern: Das Leben der Evangelischen Kirche der Böhmisches Brüder zwischen 1968 und 1989 im Zeugnis der älteren Generation ihrer Pfarrer/Innen*.

At least one fact in the book, however, has become obsolete since it was written and published – the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren in 2024 is safely no longer the largest non-Catholic church in the Czech Republic, as stated on p. 14 (and as many authors will surely continue to state out of inertia for many years, if not decades to come), because it has been overtaken by the Orthodox Church due to the arrival of war refugees from Ukraine. Even more recent scholarly works published after 2021 could not, of course, be included in Pfann’s book for the same reason.

What is somewhat disturbing are the repeated quotations of the book *Století evangelických snů na okraji české společnosti: Českobratrská církev evangelická 1918–2018* (A Century of Protestant Dreams on the Margins of Czech Society: the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren 1918–2018), which Pfann cites with the remark “soon to be published” in his 2019 thesis (p. XVI), but in the book under review he quotes it several times (without mentioning the page) with the remark “in press”. I do not know whether this refers to the date of completion of the text in 2021 or to the date of its publication, but the announced book has not yet been published, although many of us are already looking forward to it.

### General impressions

Pfann’s treatise completely immerses the reader: for most of the time I spent reading the book, I had rather anxious feelings. I felt like a character in an Agatha Christie novel during the final living room climax scene, in which Hercule Poirot gathers all the suspects. Indeed, the first six chapters are devoted to issues that are often dark, especially social and church developments after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, the effects of renewed oppression of the churches by units of the Communist government (whether the civil service or the secret police), and the ways in which the ministers who provided interviews for the author tried to cope with this situation. Each of the respondents faced Pfann’s investigation, which he undertook with the persistence of a detective. Do not look for humour in these ‘noir’ chapters.

I had a quite different impression of the last two chapters, especially the penultimate one, in which the author deals with what he calls the inner life of the church, which ranges from learning courses and retreats in church resorts, to Bible work and the creation of an alternative space in an otherwise unfree society, e.g., volunteer work on church building sites, which was – wonder of wonders – a popular way for Protestant youth to spend their free time together in the 1970s and 1980s. The persecution of the churches does not play a role (at least not the most important one) in this chapter, and the reader will often even smile at the black and white photographs of today’s church leaders, captured in their youthful years with shovels and wheelbarrows. Proof that in the years between 1968 and 1989 people were laughing and having fun too.

This contrast makes me think about what Pfann himself criticizes, namely, the historiography – supposedly even supported by the church – “which pays

disproportionately more attention to oppositional movements” (p. 134). He himself openly admits that his contributions in the editorial series *Cesta církve* (The Way of the Church) do not deviate from this trend (cf. footnote 388 on the same page). The narrative which the author rightly criticizes is certainly too one-sided and unbalanced. On the other hand, it is true that Pfann devotes two-thirds of the text of his book mainly to the views of these “oppositional movements” and to the views of ministers who held other, shall we say more conformist, positions. (The point of departure, however, is in any case the oppositional movements.) It is perhaps a mistake, therefore, that the subtitle of the book – as opposed to the thesis – dropped out the fact that the volume deals with the life of the ECCB in the years 1968–1989 “in the testimony of the older generation of its ministers”, because the life of the church as a whole, as the author repeatedly states, was less marked by political upheavals than the fate of the ministers-respondents, on whom, on the contrary, they often had a dramatic impact. The original subtitle was probably too long for the publishers, but it was more accurate.

The question remains, however, whether the history of the ECCB in 1968–1989 is primarily a history of oppression: namely, whether it was oppression that shaped the life of the church, or whether it was the church itself that deliberately (and not passively) chose its path in spite of the dictatorship, or alongside it, or in its train. The attention that the ten ministers, in giving their testimonies, paid to the impact of the political regime on their lives is, in Pfann’s interpretation, more indicative of the first position.

It is indisputable that thanks to Michael Pfann the literature on church history has grown by a brilliant book that will be essential in any research on the history of the ECCB in the second half of the 20th century, but also on the history of Czechoslovak society as a whole. Pfann opens up unpopular topics for discussion, introduces new narratives and sometimes arrives at uncomfortable conclusions. He does not expect the reader to agree with him on everything, on the contrary, he invites you to think out of the box.

Church history at its best.

**Adam Csukás**

Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren

Central Church Office

Jungmannova 9, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

csukas@e-cirkev.cz

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