

Editorial

Observations from the World of Kafka, Schwejk and Havel: The Beauty of Being Minority

One of the big concerns churches in Europe are facing is about their position in society. They are not anymore a given, a player in the public domain everyone automatically counts with, without the need to legitimise their place at the imaginary table where decisions about public affairs are being taken. The reality of diminishing numbers of members and of churchgoers has currently the shape of concerns about diminishing finances. What can and should we pay for, what are our priorities, which fields of our work in society should we leave and which new initiatives should we develop? Churches in parts of Europe where they have had an established tradition, are cutting expenses and activities, selling properties and merging communities. Churches in parts of Europe that went through many changes in the recent decades, are developing programs how to sustain their newly acquired presence by taking similar steps of reorganisations.

The changes taking place do affect theological faculties as well. The significant decrease in students are leading to consequences of that for their functioning. Reorganisations, mergers and closures seem inevitable or are already taking place. In March 2026 the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine* published an extensive article written by three theologians about possible strategies faculties of theology could adopt in the current situation.¹ They identified several essential questions German faculties should discuss. These are partly shaped by the specific structures of theological education in Germany, but have a broader significance for non-German institutions as well.

The first question the authors posed concerns the classical structure of theological studies as can be found in many historic faculties in continental Europe. “Does it make sense to continue to organise all theological

1 Hans Michael Heinig, Christoph Marksches, Stephan Schaede, “Sola structura,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30/3/2026, 8.

faculties – unlike many other university disciplines – in the same way as they were in the nineteenth century?” The current structure of five core disciplines (Old and New Testament, Church History or History of Christianity, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology) leads to the omission of other potential fields of research and complicates the communication with non-theological disciplines in the field of humanities which do practise a different structure of their scholarly activities. Often the existing structure prevents an interdisciplinary cooperation with its surplus of new perspectives.

Secondly, the authors asked about the confessional character of theological education. “Does it make sense that faculties continue to be single-denominational?” This is a relevant question not only for universities with more than one theological faculty like in Tübingen, Prague or Budapest, but also – and perhaps even more – for universities with faculties of one particular confessional colour. For students it could be much more interesting to have an inherent access to a pluriformity of approaches during their studies.

The third issue the article raised concerns the integration of practice into the academic studies. To the authors the study of theology, especially in its first stages, tends to be rather distant from practical application and relevance. Students could find motivation in experiencing the applicability of theology in a non-academic context much earlier. Consequently, the authors advocated an integration of small schools of theological education into larger entities in order to enable students to be a part of a larger academic community. To them the option of separate institutions for theological education outside the university, run by a church (or churches) would be unacceptable, because it would isolate theology not only from an organic communication with humanities, but also from natural sciences which on the level of ethical issues offer a multidisciplinary field.

Faculties (and churches as well) should not avoid this difficult discussion about their future, but instead take the initiative that would eventually lead to changes of theological education. By that approach the position of theology and its contribution for the wider society could be strengthened. “Our country’s academic landscape would be significantly poorer without strong theological departments. And the viability of a country that is becoming increasingly multi-religious would also be in a worse state. Conversely, anyone who expects religious law and the state-church agreements to protect permanently a university discipline from capacity adjustments undermines in the medium term both the acceptance of theology amongst other

disciplines as well as the legitimacy of a core element of cooperative-liberal constitutional law on religion. This price would be so high that it could not be justified by anything.”

The statement of the three German theologians proposed not only a restructuring of theological studies and institutions, but also a new model of the academic theological discipline. Faculties have to abandon models that were developed in the 19th century, because that world has gone by. As other academic disciplines have drawn consequences from this reality, so should theology if it wants to be a part of the discourse in wider field of academia.

The same could be applied to churches and models of churches. The current wave of reorganisations in many European churches should – along the same line of argumentation – not only be implemented because of diminishing finances, but also because they reflect the realisation that the hitherto usual model of being church is related to a world of the past. A quite radical consequence of this type of analysis is drawn by Jan Loffeld in his *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt. Das Christentum vor der religiösen Indifferenz*.² For Loffeld, a German theologian of roman catholic origin now teaching in Tilburg, this means that in church and theology we have to accept that the claim of many theologies that a human being needs religion, is not anymore valid. Many people in the modern world live a good, sustainable and fulfilling life without God, faith or church. We have to acknowledge that faith does not have a relevance for every human being, and that God is not necessary to achieve a completeness in one's life. This, according to Loffeld, should lead to a transformation of the church, away from the approach to be universally accessible and present (the parish model) towards core communities representing biblical values in a pluralist world.

Loffeld's theses have caused much more debate in roman catholic circles than in the protestant environment. In the Czech context – the book was translated in 2025 – it became a part of the debate on a reform of the Roman Catholic Church related to the efforts of Tomáš Petráček (see e.g. his article in *Communio Viatorum* 2025/2) and Tomáš Halík. Books of the latter (especially his *Patience with God: The story of Zacchaeus continuing in us*³) have been translated into several main languages and are being read in both protestant

² Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder GmbH, 2024.

³ New York: Doubleday, 2009.

and roman catholic circles in European countries where people realise that the majority church of the past is currently in fact a minority church.

The discovery of Löffeld, Halík and Petráček and their readership is that being a minority can also be a positive value. Minorities have often much better sensors for what is going on in the broader society, are more inclined to stand up to warn against potentially harmful developments, to defend or improve standards of justice and equality, because they are easily affected by them as well. In the current search for encouragement and orientation for how to be church in the dramatically changing circumstances churches with a long experience of a minority existence could therefore serve as a source of inspiration for communities with a majority background. Such an exchange is now regularly taking place in the network of a minority church like the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. Visitors – often groups – from especially Germany explore the situation and the experiences of this church that has never lived in other circumstances than “diaspora”: small communities with a distinct identity in a society that treats them either with indifference or – in some periods – with suspicion, sometimes distrust. The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren carries within its theological DNA the important realisation that, even during many of the more challenging periods of its past, it has managed to survive and carry out its work in a meaningful way. It harbours a healthy scepticism towards institutions and institutionalism, and knows that the church lives in communities. This minority status embodies a certain freedom, joy, critical thinking, determination and a sense of belonging. Freedom, because it has learnt from experience that a change in its status does not merely signify the loss of what has passed, but also the gain of what is to come. It is able to take joy in finding meaning in how it can make a difference in society. As a minority, it is acutely sensitive to a lack of understanding and acceptance in the public sphere. It possesses a significant, disproportionate potential for integration within the context of public life.

Human rights, as a set of values concerning human dignity, responsibility and solidarity, became, following the fall of the communist regime, a clear framework through which the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren presented itself – and continues to present itself – to society. Its commitment to building a democratic, open society led to remarkable steps which, in the context of the time, were pioneering like in the case of the 1995 Declaration on Czech-German Reconciliation or the Declaration against Racism from the same year. The church demonstrated that it is not afraid to stand up against

the prevailing tide in Czech politics (with the exception of the painful silence of the church to the situation in Palestine). It is no coincidence that in the last years many Protestants have actively participated in a grassroots movement defending democratic principles of society.

To be a minority community is not *a priori* a handicap, but can present an environment of hope and encouragement. Or in the words of Tomáš Halík paraphrasing Jan Löffeld:

The fundamental transformation we are currently experiencing in Europe cannot be overcome by some external intervention or at the snap of a finger – that would lead to an underestimation of the situation and to a further spiral of the old frustrations. Nevertheless, we should open ourselves up to a discussion that might shift our perspectives slightly and rearrange our priorities. This would certainly also require a review of dogmatic assumptions and topics, which we may explore at another time and in a different way. Do not expect precise formulations of grand theological theses, nor ‘applications’, or indeed a comprehensive consideration of practical implications. One thing is clear, however: Christianity undoubtedly has a future, though it is likely to be completely different from what we can imagine and plan for today.⁴

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4 Tomáš Halík in the foreword of the Czech translation of Löffelds *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt*, 14.