

---

## Zdeněk R. Nešpor, Zdeněk Vojtíšek: Encyklopedie menších křesťanských církví v České republice, Karolinum, Praha, 2015

Pavel Hošek

The Encyclopaedia of Smaller Christian Churches in the Czech Republic is a very unique book. In fact, it is a library in one volume. The authors gathered a rather impressive amount of very detailed data documenting the history, theological profiles, church buildings and contemporary life of all 27 accredited smaller Christian ecclesial bodies present in the Czech Republic: Adventists, Apostolic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Baptists, Church of Brethren, Church of Faith, Church of the Living God, Church of New Hope, Church of New Life, Christian Assemblies, Christian Community, Congregations of Brethren, Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter Day Saints, Lutheran Church, Lutheran Protestant Church, Methodists, New Apostolic Church, Oasis Church, Old Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Salvation Army, Unitarians, Unity of Brethren, Unity of Brethren within the Protestant Church of Czech Brethren, and Word of Life. There are only four churches missing from the group of all Christian denominations officially recognized by the state – the four most 'established' ones: Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Church of Czech Brethren, Czechoslovak Hussite Church and Silesian Lutheran Church.

The encyclopaedia is the first comprehensive compendium of information on this particular sphere of religious life in the Czech Republic. The authors used all the available scholarly literature, but they also conducted their own archive research and interacted intensely with the representatives of all the mentioned churches. They also took photos of church buildings and gathering places of all the denominations. Apart from the encyclopaedic presentation of all the churches in alphabetical order, the book also contains extensive topical chapters on the major streams of Christianity (Z. R. Nešpor), the Evangelical Movement (Z. Vojtíšek), the historical development of small size churches over the last hundred years (Z. R. Nešpor), and sacred architecture of small size churches in the Czech Republic (B. Altová).

Alongside the data provided in the encyclopaedic part of the volume, there are also surveys of statistical results concerning ecclesial affiliations in specific districts, covering the period of time between 1880 and 2011. The structure of all the encyclopaedic entries follows the following pattern: they begin with general information about the history of the given church, always with regard to its international context. The following part of each entry offers an analysis of the theological profile of the church and the characteristic features of its religious life. The last section provides statistical, geographical and historical data concerning all existing local congregations

and other organisational units. Each entry comes with a list of relevant literature for further study.

The great strengths of this encyclopaedia may also be viewed as its potential weaknesses. The impressive scope of the book brings together a large number of religious entities, some of which do not have much in common. Since the main criterion for inclusion has been a very vague attribute of size (besides the two other criteria: being officially registered by the state and belonging somehow to the “family” of Christian churches), the 27 ecclesial bodies included in the encyclopaedia comprise a very heterogeneous group. Alongside denominations with many centuries of rich history, we find new religious movements, which have emerged relatively recently. Alongside standard Christian denominations, there are also groups such as the Latter Day Saints or the Jehovah’s Witnesses – and whether these belong to the Christian ecumenical movement is a matter of considerable dispute. Alongside ecclesial bodies which came into existence as splinter groups leaving their parental denomination (sometimes due to religiously irrelevant organisational tensions), we find churches of an autonomous origin and relatively independent history. Alongside Czech branches of large international movements, we find uniquely Czech ecclesial bodies. Alongside traditional churches preserving and cultivating ancient forms of liturgy and spirituality, we find outreach oriented conversionist groups with virtually no concern for liturgy or tradition. The “family resemblance” of the 27 churches included in the encyclopaedia, which would justify their presentation as entities belonging to the same general category, is therefore somewhat questionable.

Another methodological decision made by the authors may be a matter of dispute. The length of each entry is, as they say, “proportionate” to the denomination’s “significance”. What exactly they meant by significance (besides the sheer factual number of people, who claim their affiliation to a given church) remains a bit ambiguous.

At the same time, one has to admit that the authors naturally had to make some methodological choices and (although some of their decisions remain open to critical questioning), the result of their effort is convincing and quite impressive. The Encyclopaedia of Smaller Christian Churches in the Czech Republic, which they put together and published last year, has already become an indispensable and reliable reference tool for scholars, students and lay readers interested in religious and ecclesial life of the Czech society.