

JANČAŘÍK, Zdeněk – BALÍK, Stanislav – ŠEBEK, Jaroslav.
Český bůh: hovory o historii, víře a ateismu. Praha, Vyšehrad,
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Czech God: Conversations on history, faith and atheism is a book of interviews featuring the Salesian priest Zdeněk Jančařík, who invited historian and political scientist Stanislav Balík along with historian Jaroslav Šebek to engage in discussions on this topic. As all three confess in the book, they share – besides their expertise in historical context - a personal connection of living out the Catholic faith. Together they decided to share and present the role of this religion in Czech history. This is a three-part conversation between men who embark on an adventurous quest to discover the “Czech God” within Czech history.

The book, with a format of approximately three hundred pages, presents a chronological overview of key topics within the Crown of Bohemia, in which religious events played a significant role. The authors begin their Czech journey with the arrival of Christianity, continuing through the era of the Hussite reform movement, the celebrated Baroque era, the National Revival, the First Republic, the experience of Catholicism under Communist rule, and the clandestine church. Their historical journey concludes with post-revolutionary developments, extending to the present day. The authors are not alone in their search for the “Czech God.” Their historical exploration is enriched by an excursus on the role of the Jesuits in early modern Czech history (a conversation with Jesuit Miroslav Herold), a philosophical perspective added through a dialogue with Tereza Matějčková, and a final excursus where Zdeněk Jančařík “interviews” funeral industry worker Pavel Cajzl. Each chapter is introduced with citations from books of various genres relevant to the topic, effectively capturing the essence. For example, in the chapter on 1989, the book *Diary of a Country Priest* by Jan Rybář is used. He speaks of Václav Havel: “Before a meal, for instance, he would say, we have been given good food or we have been given the opportunity to sit together, let us give thanks for that...” (p. 210). The book concludes on a personal note, as Jančařík turns to Šebek and Balík, transitioning to a non-historical narrative. This personal glimpse behind the scenes serves as a pleasant farewell for the reader to the “heroes” who provided original insights into the role of the “Czech God” throughout the lengthy pages.

Although the book covers an extensive time period from approximately the eighth century to the present, it predominantly focuses on pivotal moments where significant shifts occurred. The authors do not attempt to address everything; instead, they emphasize crucial moments, elegantly leaving the rest aside without disrupting the narrative flow or losing context. Jančařík introduces the topics, and subsequently, with his historian colleagues they delve into the search for the “divine” in Czech history. For instance, in the context of Hussitism, Balík mentions the role of Charles IV, whose influence in supporting

and elevating the church was so great that it essentially created “a kind of substrate from which the chiliastic movement will emerge“ (p. 39). As Jaroslav Šebek discusses the significance of the first Czech saints being from the ruling dynasty and Stanislav Balík comments on the role of St. Adalbert, Jančařík reacts: “and here you have deconstructed the national mythology in real-time“ (p. 29). However, the emphasis in the book is primarily on modern history and the twentieth century, to which the authors bring their own memories in the form of experiences on a pilgrimage to Velehrad in 1985 or a professional historical interest in church history of the twentieth century. In addition to individual events and the atmosphere of the time, the authors also discuss the importance of key figures for the relationship of the Czech people to religion. Again, this list follows a chronological backdrop from St. Wenceslas through St. John of Nepomuk, President Masaryk to Cardinal František Tomášek. Jančařík, Balík, and Šebek not only focus on the real lives of these characters but also on their afterlife significance which often holds greater historical importance as Balík himself mentions on page 29.

On the cover of the book, the painting of the painter Miroslav Polách – Carrying the Cross II – is used, representing six men in reflective vests in the temple space, whose goal is probably to remove the massive cross with the crucified Christ from the wall of the cathedral. The picture is characteristic. The effort of the men seems a bit comical in combination with the calm face of the deceased Jesus of Nazareth. Somehow it might seem that it is also the case with faith in the nation of St. Wenceslas and the good soldier Švejk. However, the three-part conversation between the priest and the historians shows that the search for the “Czech God“ is not so clear-cut and that it cannot be discovered in some past year or period. The authors offer a different perspective which lie in conscious and critical reflection on Czech Catholic history. Their observations are delivered through an engaging dialogue that makes it easy for the reader to be informed and to understand many of the roots of contemporary Catholicism in the Czech lands. After all, the question of the existence of a “Czech God“ can provoke the same restlessness and searching as the ahistorical question of what happens after death (e.g., pp. 274, 287, or 300), which Zdeněk Jančařík asked his guests multiple times throughout the book.

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