

Anna Janouskova's Bachelor's thesis on American expatriate missionaries working in the Czech Republic is a thoughtful, insightful and well-executed piece of undergraduate research on several levels.

First of all, Ms. Janouskova's focus on cross-cultural differences is a timely and appropriate one, given the extent to which we are seeing – and will continue to see for some time to come – how the mixing of cultures, the conflicts between them, and the ways those conflicts increasingly influencing our world. Moreover, the development of her focus over time has reflected an honest and thoughtful attempt to identify a manageable segment of the best number of possibilities that present themselves in this domain, a willingness to respond to comments, criticisms and suggestions from those she approached about her work, and the gradual evolution of a balanced view of and a set of tools appropriate to the topic and the subject in the study. (There are those who might criticize the study's use of Geert Hofstede's work as an important part of the basis for her study, but I would disagree with that criticism. Though Hofstede's work has been improved upon by others – and, sadly, his late work did not show the attention to principles of social science his earlier work did – he nonetheless has provided a firm foundation for the work that came after his, and that foundation is more than sufficient for research at the undergraduate level.)

Substantively, the final decision to focus the project on expatriate missionaries from the US working in the Czech Republic was not only a wise and economical one, it was also quite fruitful. While the target population is a small one and operates in a somewhat unique setting, those characteristics also allow for a closer examination of the elements that go into the cross-cultural interface between the expats and the culture in which they have chosen to work. In this respect, the decision to use interviews, both in person and via Skype, over a questionnaire was a wise one: such interviews allow the researcher to, as it were, see the attitudes of the subjects "in action"; they often reveal subtleties which can be elusive, or go completely unnoted, in the setting of a questionnaire. One must be careful, certainly, not to overgeneralize from a limited sample such as this; but the thesis is quite careful about identifying the limits to which its findings can be applied to other people in other settings.

Finally – for me, the true test of good research – there is the extent to which this project has created fertile ground for future research, perhaps at the graduate level: other questions are brought to the fore by this thesis, questions which offer to deepen our understanding, not only of what these settings tell us, but how they do so. There is, for instance, the question of the extent to which expatriate missionaries – and particularly aspects of the mind-set they bring to their "mission" – may lend themselves to the attempt to "turn barriers into bridges", or may have the reverse effect. Missionaries generally have a high degree of investment in the belief system they represent: as a consequence, they may well enjoy a much higher degree of confidence in their identity (especially, perhaps, via their membership in a larger community of belief) than, say, a business person who comes to a foreign country for reasons that have exclusively to do with a career assignment. On the other hand, the very fact that missionaries have as their goal the attempt to change (they might prefer to say

“transform” or “enlighten”) aspects of the behavior of their “target” group, might well be operating at a very deep level of existential conflict with some of the features of that group’s culture. Put simply, one might wonder if American expat missionaries in the Czech Republic aren’t actually present to challenge and overcome the well-known self-image that Czechs often have as “the most atheistic culture in Europe.” That is not to challenge anyone’s beliefs or goals; it is simply to suggest that there is a remarkable interplay going on in this setting, and, as I’ve noted above, it offers a very fertile field for future work.

There are other such areas – the role of cultural vs. religious identity; the attraction of religion to groups whose culture has suddenly and powerfully been inundated with the cultures and practices of global consumer culture; the extent to which large power/small power international relationships do or do not influence attempts by one group to influence another at a more personal level. It is to the credit of this project that its focus it has cracked the door on a number of these questions. If the author considers graduate work in this area, I think the prospects of doing more, and more highly defined, work are quite good. At very least, I would strongly suggest that the thesis be shared with the organization(s) that send these missionaries abroad. Exposure to the project and what it has found can only facilitate the communication between the missionaries and the host country nationals in the future.

Dan Shanahan
Faculty of Humanities
Charles University
Prague