
A Sixteenth-Century Monument of Brethren Theology

Martin Wernisch

(*Prague*)

Against my normal inclination, I have decided to afford my readers a preview of one of my major but as yet incomplete projects. Indeed, I have laboured at it sporadically now for several years so that many are aware of this work without much likelihood of seeing it *in toto* in the near future. After all, even my academic habilitation is by and large a preliminary sketch only. The portrait of the author of the work, on which my research centres, offers the first cohesive monograph about the life and work of Matěj Červenka, the renowned theologian of the Unity of Brethren, who flourished under the aegis of Jan Blahoslav in the sixteenth century.¹

Brethren theology will be represented precisely by Červenka's work, *Obečné a hlavní artykuli učení křesťanského v Jednotě Bratrské* [Common and Principal Articles of the Christian Teaching in the Unity of Brethren].² The choice is not difficult to justify inasmuch as – unsurprisingly – the Unity's theological treatises are not plentiful. Although bearing marks of certain elitism and boasting highly educated individuals, the Unity was, in fact, a small religious body and lacked an academy of its own. As bearers of parochial and higher administrative ecclesiastical offices, the Brethren's stalwarts tended to compose either pastoral or polemical writings. This tendency led to the fabrication of a modern myth about the Brethren's indifference to dogmatic theology, which allegedly reflected their preference for religious practice over theory. Although tenaciously held, this view is highly inaccurate and misleading. Despite the character of applied religiosity in most Brethren writings,³ the component of dogmatic theology is not entirely negligible. Understandably, dogmatic theology is represented above all by the Brethren's Confession, issued in subsequent new additions, and an apology, a somewhat broader commentary, which later accompanied the Confession as a pair analogous to the coupling of the Augsburg Confession and its defence.

In fact, Červenka's *Articles* were to offer a fresh version of this companion confessional text, although earlier research might not have made this fact sufficiently clear.⁴ He approached his task in a strict orderly manner after he had completed one of the revisions of the Confession itself in the early 1560s, and he did so in the

¹ Martin Wernisch, *Praeclarus theologus Unitatis Fratrum: Život a dílo Matěje Červenky*, Habilitation dissertation in the field of church history, submitted to the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Charles University in Prague in June 2001; 387 pp. of typescript.

² Hitherto unpublished manuscript, which I am currently editing, is deposited in the Prague National Museum Library MS. III F 31, ff. 117^r-213^v.

³ Properly speaking, this also applies to the Brethren's hymns, as noted by Daniel Neval during the discussion of this study at the Fifth International Symposium on the Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice in Prague, June 2002. Taking Červenka as an example, it is possible to discover technical theological ingredients even in religious hymns.

⁴ It is revealing to compare the title of a work from the time of Lukáš of Prague, *Spis dosti činící z víry, kterýž v latinské řeči Apologia slove*, with the subtitle of Červenka's *Artikuly – kteříž místo Apologia, to jest dosti učinění z víry, sepsáni jsou*.

literal meaning of *ex titulo officii sui*: not in his own name, but in that of the entire Unity in his capacity as its Bishop-Chancellor, that is its Scribe. The title at that time did not denote the office of historiographer, as would be the case after the era of Blahoslav, but rather the highest authority *in theologicis*, which was particularly appropriate for Červenka's status. At this point let us clarify the relationship of Blahoslav, already mentioned twice as a seminal figure, to Červenka. Blahoslav, a scholar and clergyman familiar to every modern Czech reader, was Červenka's younger contemporary, friend and comrade-in-arms, and he also coined for the older man the epithet *praeclari theologi*, cited earlier.⁵ Thereby he admitted that, when it came to theological knowledge, he was unworthy to loosen the sandal thongs of his senior – now much less remembered – colleague.⁶ The Brethren expected that Červenka would acquit himself of the entrusted task with eminent success, and the apology would amount to more than just a revision of previous texts.

Those who are somewhat familiar with the theological development of the time can easily grasp Červenka's predicament. The 1560s were a period of accelerated broadening of theological problems with a striking increase of materials that were considered of fundamental importance. Moreover, their significance was in contemporary thinking closely related to confessional identity and thereby to the denominational image of true Christianity. The fresh theological lore required processing into new compendia, some of which aspired to normative validity, and the clergy were expected to widen their education in order to encompass the broader theological horizons. Also the Brethren could not but feel this need, and the Unity endorsed the call for a comprehensive compendium that would address the emerging dogmatic issues from the Unity's point of view. Blahoslav called such a desideratum *Summa nostrae theologiae*.⁷ The image of a *Summa* had just undergone a significant shift of paradigm. At one point the term tended to designate a catechetical summary, or a dense gist of the dogmatic matter, by the mid-sixteenth century it had begun to acquire the form of a comprehensive gathering of all relevant knowledge. The results would be embodied in multi-volume works that, in their extent, could hold their own against the awesome size of Thomas Aquinas's famous creation.

The penchant for the systematization of theological lore was, therefore, a long lasting one within the Unity, and voices to hold pace with this trend were repeatedly heard until the very demise of the Brethren's Bohemian branch.⁸ The continuous yearning for a *Summa*, of course, suggests that the goal was never attained, even if the obsolescent brief manuals were being rejuvenated. The grand opus, despite commissioning several specific writers for that purpose,⁹ never came to fruition in the form of a printed work, and the resulting manuscripts, or more likely

⁵ Mirek Čejka, Dušan Šlosar and Jana Nechutová, eds., *Gramatika česká Jana Blahoslava* (Brno, 1991) 296 (281^r).

⁶ *Ibid.* 382 (f. 362^v): "Scribere graviora, nempe theologia supra vires meas videbatur..." it was "...veluti ardua res magis, magis erudito B. M. Č. Charissimo collegae meae..." entrusted.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Anton Gindely, ed., *Dekrety Jednoty bratrské* (Prague, 1865) 259.

⁹ *Ibid.* 279. Their succession is related in English by Rudolf Říčan, *The History of the Unity of Brethren: A Protestant Hussite Church in Bohemia and Moravia*, trans. C. Daniel Crews (Bethlehem, PA., 1992) 334-340.

their torsos, were lost during the forthcoming turbulent times. This sorry outcome, if judged sternly, might indicate, rather than the Brethren's unwillingness, more their inability to deal with the problems of dogma. A more indulgent, and probably more accurate judgment would, however, stress the role of the retarding circumstances, already adumbrated in brief, which negatively affected the attainment of the cherished goal.

Nevertheless, the Unity's yearnings did not simply add up to unfulfilled wishes. This is demonstrated precisely in Červenka's *Articles* which emerged from the scattering of disjointed manuscripts at the start of the last century. Moreover, this fragment is in a form, which distinctly suggests that, although not printed, it could serve as a textbook of religious instructions. It is evidently a copy made by a beginner who committed glaring and ludicrous errors in occasional Latin phrases. Otherwise the manuscript is written in Czech according to the Brethren's usage. It is just a fragment, and the text, therefore, realizes only a part of the original design. Nevertheless it can stand on its own as a single treatise; the text is the completed first part of a work projected to include three treatises. The fragment, therefore, represents an entity suitable for analysis, which it undoubtedly deserves as a unique example of its type.

Indeed, the process of exploration has already begun. After Ferdinand Hrejsa had identified the manuscript, young Amedeo Molnár published its abstract that, however, was not entirely free of error.¹⁰ The two scholars, above all, placed Červenka's work within the main developmental lines of Brethren's theology. Neither, however, undertook a thorough comparison with contemporary European theological literature. Such a procedure would have been particularly apropos, considering the circumstances of the origin of Červenka's treatise. The two scholars made passing judgments, it is true, and Molnár expressed his by commenting that Červenka wrote his dogmatic treatise "with due critical regard for both main Reformation parties."¹¹ A more detailed analysis, however, was left to their successors.

To tell the truth, the task that remained was complicated in many respects. The textual analysis is impeded by a lack of fruitful points d'appui, such as explicit references to sources. Although this reticence was not unprecedented, Červenka's text aggravates the task of identification because by and large it does not cite its source in the original, but uses instead translations into an experimental and unstable Czech terminology. In addition, instead of explicit citing of authorities or even clearly stated position vis à vis the contending theological schools, one finds almost always just indirect allusions that are often enigmatic.

The lack of clarity in citation provides a certain clue because we can be reasonably certain that it is not an accidental occurrence, but the reflection of a deep-seated trait in the author's approach. It corresponds fully to Červenka's character, as we know it, as well as to his irenic tendency, which had its tradition

¹⁰ Hrejsa first identified the *Articles*, which he had treated earlier, as Červenka's work in Ferdinand Hrejsa, *Dějiny křesťanství v Československu*, 6 vv. (Prague, 1947-1950) 5:363. Molnár's main contribution is Amedeo Molnár, "Theologická summa Bratra Matěje Červenky," *Křesťanská revue* 19 (1952) 80-88.

¹¹ Amedeo Molnár, "The Brethren's Theology," in Říčan, *The History of the Unity of Brethren* 395.

within the Unity, albeit not always present or dominant in all its parts.¹² As the author of an official confessional textbook, Červenka simply did not intend to get involved in *quaestionum disputatorum*, which gave rise to denominational fragmentation, especially that affecting the Protestants. Nevertheless the elaboration of the grandiose *summae* was directly related to the multifaceted disputations and to the trend toward a congealing of the schisms of the Reformation era by erecting the mutual boundaries of the several denominations. If Červenka wished to undertake the task of theological construction in a positive and conciliatory spirit, he chose an extraordinarily onerous approach, at times figuratively comparable to the task of squaring a circle. He proceeded bravely, and tried to forge ahead consistently with his principles, even if at times at the risk of a serpentine slipperiness.

It is understandable that only occasionally the author can discern a common ground between the contending parties and thus neutralize a conflict as being essentially artificial. Elsewhere he encounters problems, which demand a clear-cut solution. These he has to ignore, if he does not wish to enter the field of battle under the banner of one of the contending parties. Thereby I do not mean to insinuate any dishonesty on his part. It is not a matter that he falters as a professor of belief by concealing his opinion on key issues or – on the contrary – proclaiming what is not his conviction. It is more that he considers it inappropriate to proclaim definite opinions in matters uncertain, which he could dismiss as marginal or, perhaps, as so explosive that he does not dare to bring them up conceptually.

These contradictory pressures, stemming from the internal clashes of the author's intentions, can largely explain the mixed success with which Červenka accomplishes one aspect of his task. This aspect could be called the formal side, which however – as noted earlier – was also the aspect of motivation because the initiating incentive was the encyclopaedic vision to comprehend all the newly emerging theological lore, to cover all the currently debated *locorum dogmaticorum*. Červenka's approach that was, in the suggested sense, defensive simply could not result in a first-class work, which would attain the level of the most comprehensive contemporary syntheses of theological knowledge with the widest interpretative scope. Such outstanding *Summae* could unearth new layers of theological meaning, and also suggest the lines of future exploration. In addition to Červenka's irenic orientation and the absence of academic pretensions on his part, the suggested explanations diminish the suspicion that the basic cause of this second-rate performance was the intellectual limitation or a lack of academic expertise on the part of the author. He paid a considerable price for his conscious decision to maintain the *summam theologiae Fratrum* at the high niveau of a confessional creed. He did so by avoiding the controversial character of polemical treatises, although this genre was not entirely unknown in the Unity's intellectual arsenal.

The status of high dignity is also indicated by the parsimony, noted earlier, in the citation of authorities, or more precisely extra-biblical authorities. Compared with present-day textbooks of dogmatic theology, which virtually sparkle with names of the author's precursors and colleagues, Červenka's work seems odd, almost inadequate. This reticence appears less odd, if the comparison is made with solemn

¹² Daniel Neval confirmed in the discussion of this study that the enumerated characteristics could be viewed as commonly held within the Unity rather than idiosyncratic with Červenka. Neval considers many of them applicable also to the approach of Comenius.

confessional statements, which as a rule limit the witness to the big-league church teachers.

Our lengthy and complex explanation notwithstanding, there is no guarantee that our descriptive efforts have arrived at the definition of a universally valid genre. Nevertheless to bolster the validity of the suggested characterization of the *Articles*, it is useful to compare them with another treatise of the same author, his *Osvědčení a očištění se Jednoty Bratrské proti nářkům pana Vojtěcha z Pernštejna* [A Testimonial and Exculpation of the Unity of Brethren Concerning the Charges of Lord Vojtěch of Pernštejn].¹³ In this case also Červenka a few years earlier entered the field of polemical apology and lower decorum, when by and large he had to stay at the level of risqué tales that were to determine whether the Brethren were more corrupted or more virtuous than the Utraquists. Citing now specific titles, he could thus explicitly demonstrate his wide knowledge of literature, ranging from a catechetical *summa* of Jesuit Peter Canisius to Martin Bucer's *Knih o zřízení zboruo v slavném království Englickém*.¹⁴

In his *Articles*, to the contrary, Červenka prefers to cite conciliar decisions rather than views of individual divines. Probably more often than renowned teachers, he names outright heretics or theological suspects, such as Origen, according to the established conventions of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹⁵ When he does cite orthodox authors, it happens in the initial sections of the treatise; thereafter such citations cease entirely. A part of the citations, which despite the rarity of quotations is not negligible, refers to ecclesiastical historians rather than to theologians. A case in point is a mention of Eusebius as an eye-witness of Bible burning under Emperor Diocletian.¹⁶ Loosely speaking, one can conclude that the role of a guarantor of dogmatic statements is reserved to a single authority, which by the incidence of references (although small in absolute numbers) by far exceeds all others. It is not surprising that this stalwart is none other than St. Augustine, Father of Fathers, in whom Reformation theology saw the principal witness of its own conformity with the teaching of the ancient church.¹⁷

Nevertheless the impression of Augustine's monopoly is contradicted by several passages, which cite with approval other theologians as well. Their selection, which can be viewed as virtually symbolic, does not alter the theological tenor of the treatise. In addition to Western Antiquity, the Ancient East is represented by one of its paragons, St. John Chrysostom.¹⁸ The juncture between the world of Augustinian Antiquity and Medieval Papacy is epitomized by St. Gregory *in Moraliis*, that is Gregory I, the Great.¹⁹ Finally, the mosaic of theological ancestry is completed by a diptych of adherence to a domestic tradition, introducing the

¹³ Matěj Červenka, *Osvědčení a očištění se Jednoty Bratrské proti nářkům pana Vojtěcha z Pernštejna* (Prostějov, 1558). For a relatively substantive extract, coordinated with Pernštejn's arguments, see Jan V. Novák, "Spor Bratří s p. Vojtěchem z Pernštejna v Prostějově r. 1557 a 1558," ČČM 65 (1891) 46-56, 197-207.

¹⁴ Červenka, *Osvědčení* f. H5^v and E6^r.

¹⁵ Červenka, *Artikulové* f. 120^v.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 120^v.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* ff. 127, 143^v, 145^r, 153^r and 190^v, for Augustine's statements that are simply accepted, but also those which are subject to interpretation rather than taken at face value.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* f. 122^r.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* f. 153^r.

founding father of Bohemian Reformation: the martyr Master Jan Hus, and Master Jan Rokycana. The inclusion of the two in the Brethren's iconostasis symbolizes the respect not only for the domestic church, but also for mainline Utraquism that recognized both the Biblical paramountcy and the authority of Scriptural interpretation within the apostolic succession.²⁰

The crux of the matter is undoubtedly that Červenka's *summa theologiae Fratrum* was not to sum up the specific teaching of a small Bohemian sect, but rather to express a Catholic and Orthodox faith seen through the prisms of a concrete time and a concrete place. In fact, a comprehensive account of Christian dogmata could be hardly conceived otherwise, if it were to remain really respectable, and I hasten to add that in this respect Červenka's approach was not peculiarly exceptional in his times. Let us recall the Second Helvetian Confession, produced two years after the *Articles*, and subsequently the most widespread confession of so-called Calvinist orientation. Its florid title does not contain words, such as "evangelical" or "Reformed," and – on the contrary – introduces the book as *Confessio et expositio simplex orthodoxae fidei, & dogmatum Catholicorum sincerae religionis Christianae*, by which *Ecclesiae Christi ministri, qui sunt in Helvetia* want to attest to *universis fidelibus* that "they stand firmly in the union with the true and ancient Church of Christ," etc.²¹ The example, which it offers, is as representative as it is distinct. In the same sense, Červenka in the forum of world Christianity does not deem it necessary to prove the authenticity of those, whose teaching he accepts as genuine, by an appeal to their authority. Thus he avoids circular reasoning. Consequently, his *Articles* entirely lack not only the names of the Unity's own theologians, but also the names of European Reformers, on whose works he necessarily draws most heavily, despite his efforts to remain even-handedly ecumenical even in the area of source materials.

This endeavour, however, does not deserve to be underestimated. Červenka ranks with those theologians, who legitimately claim to have comprehended most theology, at least in the European context. Let us recall what I noted about the bishop's²² wide-ranging sources for *Osvědčení proti Pernštejnovi*, and I will add another surprising source, which I have thus far held in reserve. The knowledge of Chrysostom's work, which is an established part of the conventional repertoire of Patristic literature, could not be viewed as evidence of interest in specifically Eastern Orthodox theological tradition. The matter is just the opposite in the case of "Nyciphor, the ecclesiastical chronicler,"²³ who is a late Byzantine author from the first part of the fourteenth century, cited in modern literature as Nikéforos Kallistos Xanthopoulos.²⁴ The emergence of his name among Červenka's authorities appears so much more remarkable, because during the polemics of the Reformation era

²⁰ *Ibid.* f. 121^v-122^r. The actual text, however, dwells heavily on the respect of Hus and Rokycana for the paramount authority of the Scripture. St. Augustine is portrayed in the same light through the citations from his works.

²¹ Wilhelm Niesel, ed., *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Wort Gottes reformierten Kirche* (Zollikon-Zurich, 1946) 219; and Rudolf Řičan, ed., *Čtyři vyznání: Vyznání Augsburské, Bratrské, Helvetské a České: Se Čtyřmi vyznáními staré církve a se Čtyřmi články pražskými* (Prague, 1951) 185.

²² I.e., Červenka's.

²³ *Artikulové* f. 127^r.

²⁴ Bořivoj Borecký, Růžena Dostálová, and others, eds., *Slovník spisovatelů – Řecko: Antická, byzantská a novořecká literatura* (Praha, 1975) 624.

Nikéforos's name was often invoked as that of a defender of the veneration of relics, and similar rituals. Nor does Červenka share in the usual ridicule of Nikéforos by other Protestant writers, as one who had the ambition to be another Thucydides and ended up as a mere *theologorum Plinius*.²⁵ In the *Articles*, the Byzantine chronicler figures simply as a critic.

On the whole, it cannot be doubted, that Červenka accessed Nikéforos's ecclesiastical history only in Johann Lange's Latin translation, repeatedly published in Basel since 1555,²⁶ and this indicates the limits of the bishop's efforts and ability to explore Christian thought in the more remote geographic areas. In correspondence with his own firm grounding in the domestic soil, his theological teaching is clearly Western, distinctly Evangelical and – despite his evident desire to avoid the trap of internal Protestant controversies – it will be possible to define fairly distinctly Červenka's stands in these disputes.

* * *

To avoid unsubstantiated assertions, I shall open for the reader the *Articles* now *in a loco finito*. It will be in a place, which is in one sense exceptional, although in another sense characteristic. It is devoted to “that great question hitherto not yet resolved, concerning the origin of souls.”²⁷ In a rare way, almost unexpected, Červenka in this instance abandons his self-imposed reserve and actually ventures to endorse one possible solution against another one. Even now he does not completely dispense with his timidity, beginning with a ritualized incantation of reserve and caution: “This matter we also leave in balance and commend it to God, like many other ineffable matters.” Nevertheless, in this instance, he can not contain himself, and proceeds blithely not only to endorse one alternative, but also to reject another alternative that, moreover, he views as the prevalent one: “Yet, it seems that the issue should not be so deep or ineffable that it could not be resolved from the Scripture, and more dubious and suspicious appears that which is asserted than that which is doubted.”

As for the problem itself, it should be quite familiar. After all, the triple possible solution to the question of the individual human soul's origin has preoccupied the Christian tradition for centuries. It figures to this day in virtually every theological manual that is (as usual) historically organized.²⁸ Červenka follows other theologians who customarily simplified their task by ignoring the third variant that was the least likely – the preexistence of souls – and that, after the discrediting of Origen, remained the speculative domain of eccentric lone wolves. Only two possibilities appear relevant to Červenka, creationism, preferred by the Aristotelians, according to which God “every time and in every case creates” souls by a new act of creation, and traducionism, postulating that “at conception the soul, just like the

²⁵ Ernst von Dobschütz, “Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos,” *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Leipzig, 1904) 14:21, with reference to Johann Gerhard.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 21 n. 46; *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, (Tübingen 1930²) 4:559.

²⁷ For this and the other quotes in this paragraph, see *Artikulové* f. 159^v.

²⁸ For instance, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, 1958) 196-201.

body, is derived from the parents.” And it is the latter solution, once proposed on the basis of Stoic tenets by Tertullian, that Červenka affirms.²⁹

It appears that in this place the author heedlessly abandons his reticence. Such a conclusion, however, would be mistaken. Červenka has enough reasons to assume that in this case he could express a definite opinion without an undue risk. Partly the issue was semi-philosophical, and partly the commitment to a solution did not bind him irrevocably to a particular denomination, or preclude amicable relationship with another. Indeed, a theory of the souls’ origin had not become fully obligatory in the dogmatic sense in any of the several Christian denominations.

Yet, this lack of dogmatic rigor did not prevent the individual denomination (at the time of their mutual differentiation and affirmation) to adhere to one or the other solution as a mark of distinction, albeit of a secondary (less than dogmatic) significance. The process was to culminate in a later period, but it was already in progress during Červenka’s lifetime. It must be admitted that the selection had its own logic. The Calvinist orientation was largely imbued with a spiritualistic emphasis because of which it collided with orthodox Lutheranism in most respects, in particular in the teaching on sacraments and on related Christological themes. The creationist approach harmonized with the spiritualistic orientation.³⁰ On the contrary, traducianism fitted better with Lutheranism’s opposing incarnationalist tendencies. The stand on the soul’s origin might have been interpreted in isolation as an optional hypothesis, but in real life such a stand could hardly remain in isolation. More likely, it reflected a submerged iceberg of denominational thought.

In my opinion, an underlying connection will be demonstrated also in Červenka’s case. Despite its Melancthonist overtones, his theological system nevertheless remains Lutheran. Indeed, this theme deserves to be pursued elsewhere later.

[Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David]

²⁹ “...na počátku všech věcí pochází ze semen jest, v něž Bůh vlii vlastnost kmene a tvárnosti, a aniž těla mohou rodičové dáti, neráčí-li Bůh. Ale obého toho, a tak celého člověka, Bůh jest vyvoditel, však prostředkem semena nebo krve, jakž Písma sv. mluví.” *Artikulové* f. 160^r.

³⁰ It is true, of course, that among Červenka’s contemporaries, there were Calvinist theologians who still reserved judgment on the validity of either solution (e. g. Wolfgang Muscul’s *in medio*), or at least admitted that traducianism could not be refuted on the basis of the Scripture (like Petrus Martyr Vermigli). Although less definite than Červenka’s statement, even these seemingly neutral judgments adumbrated the irrepressible progress of Calvinist theology to a largely unambiguous endorsement of creationism, which subsequently – in a more resolute or gentler form – would reject traducianism, as Leonhard van Rijssen did. (For documentation on this issue see Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* [Neukirchen, 1958²] 182, 184.) In this regard, the orthodox Calvinists became paradoxical bedfellows of Roman Catholic controversialists, in particular of Cardinal Bellarmine, the notorious polemicist against the radical Protestant Augustinianism.