
“On the basis of the historical background of the Hussite reformation we regard the socialist movements as a part of our history.”

The Political Function of the Bohemian Reformation for Czech Protestants in the Twentieth Century.¹

Peter Morée (Prague)

Most Czech non-Roman Catholic churches today see themselves as an off-spring of the Bohemian Reformation. This self-definition occurs mostly in public documents concerning the confessional identity and orientation of the church. The Czechoslovak Hussite Church (founded in 1920) refers to the Bohemian Reformation in its three Foundations of Faith. The first two concern the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Early Church. The third foundation for this church includes some documents of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: “The Four Articles of Prague (1420) expressing the spirit and programme of the Hussite Movement and the *Confessio Bohemica* of 1575, which expresses the common faith of the Bohemian Reformation.”²

The Church of the Brethren – a free church, established in 1919 as the Unity of the Czech Brethren – emphasises its allegiance to the international family of charismatic churches, but puts the Bohemian Reformation in first place when it speaks about its genealogical identity. In its Principles it discerns the Unity of the Brethren as its forerunner.

Our church was born out of the same reasons, for which the Unity of the Brethren parted from the Hussite Church in the fifteenth century, [as it was] longing for genuine piety and discipline according to Holy Scripture. Therefore it gratefully adheres to the legacy of the old Unity and to the charismatic piety which came to us especially because of the mission work of the Anglo-Saxon charismatic churches.³

For our investigation about the Protestant milieu, the self-understanding of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (ECCB) is the most interesting. Today the ECCB says of itself:

¹ This study is a result of the grant project “Josef Lukl Hromádka (1889–1969) and Czech Protestantism between 1945 and 1989,” financed by the Czech Academy of Sciences (IAA801830801).

² See <http://www.cesh.cz/view.php?id=135> (accessed 27 April 2011).

³ See the Principles at http://cb.cz/main/file/download/219/zasady_cb_2.vydani.pdf (accessed 27 April 2011).

[Our church] continues in the tradition of the Bohemian Reformation, in the Hussite Movement, the Utraquist Church and the Unity of the Brethren, in the line of the evangelical churches of the Augsburg and Helvetian Confessions, which were allowed in our land by the Patent of Toleration in 1781.”⁴ The Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, founded in 1918 after the independence of Czechoslovakia, sees itself as the main representative of the Reformation in the Czech context. This strong conviction already played a role in the decades leading to the foundation of the church and even more so in the interwar period.⁵

Josef L. Hromádka

In this study we will focus extensively on the role of Josef Lukl Hromádka (1889–1969), as he influenced the position of Czech Protestants in political issues as no one else – especially after the Second World War. Hromádka was a pastor of this church and, since 1920, taught systematic theology at the Hus Faculty, later the Comenius Faculty in Prague.⁶ In the last part of his life, after the Second World War, he became the main authority for the non-catholic traditions in Czechoslovakia and as such an important partner for churches in Western Europe and for the ecumenical movement. Hromádka always emphasized that the Bohemian Reformation was one of his most important sources of theological inspiration. At the Constituting Assembly of the ECCB in December 1918, where every speaker underlined the Bohemian Reformation as an important source for the new church, Hromádka spoke about the meaning of standing in the line of Hus, Chelčický and Comenius.

The Czech Protestants stood always in a close relation to the culture of their nation. The roots of our national being came out of the piety of our fathers; the reformation piety was therefore an expression of the spiritual power of the Czech people and a manifestation of what in every nation makes the character and gives the nation a place in the human family. When we

⁴ See <http://www.e-cirkev.cz/rubrika/7-O-nas/index.htm> (accessed 27 April 2011).

⁵ See Petr Pabian, “Inventing the Hussite Nation: Liberals, Catholics, and Protestants in Conflict over Czech National Identity,” *BRRP* 6 (2004) 275–282 and Peter Morée, “Česká víra není římská víra, nýbrž husitská, českobratrská.” *Český nacionalismus a jeho evangelická podoba*, [“Czech faith is not Roman faith but the Hussite and Bohemian Brethren.” Czech nationalism and its protestant form] *Studie a texty Evangelické teologické fakulty Karlovy univerzity* 14 (2009) 111–123.

⁶ Josef Lukl Hromádka (8 March 1889 Hodslavice – 26 December 1969, Prague) studied theology in Vienna, Basel, Heidelberg and Aberdeen, philosophy in Prague; became pastor in Vsetín, Prague and Šonov; from 1920 professor for systematic theology at the Hus Faculty, Prague. From 1939 to 1947 he taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, from 1950 to 1966 he was dean of the Protestant Theological Comenius Faculty in Prague. Founder and long-term President of the Christian Peace Conference, established in 1958. Recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize in 1958.

proclaim to belong to the domestic reformation, we do so in the conviction that the work of Hus, Chelčický, the Bohemian Brethren and Comenius is up till now a vivid source and the highest spiritual value of Czech culture.⁷

At the end of his speech Hromádka proposed a resolution about the “religious programme” of the new church. The assembly adopted the statement, which again spoke about the Bohemian Reformation in its relation to current times.

The Czech Protestants are well aware of the fact that their piety in the spirit of the Reformation of the Hussites and the Bohemian Brethren is not a simplification of their life practice, but a heavy commitment before God and their own conscience. Therefore it defends itself against all religious directions which are either just an easy transfer of foreign ideas and opinions, or only a heated mood without moral responsibility and a goal oriented sense of consequence.⁸

Even when Hromádka used the usual protestant language of the time about the roots of the Czech nation in the Bohemian Reformation, in comparison to the other speakers at the Constituting Assembly he was much more cautious in his assessment of this issue. This might have been partly a matter of generation, as many of the church leaders of the time were at the peak of their careers, Hromádka was only at the beginning of his. He did not speak about Czechness and Protestantism as identical twins as did, for example, František Žilka.⁹

In the following years Hromádka became more and more critical of the protestant version of Czech nationalism. Against the main current of the time, he started to publish regularly on catholicism, underlining its importance for Christian faith and the church at large. Unlike most of his colleagues at the Hus Faculty, he expressed a profound sympathy for central parts of the Catholic tradition.¹⁰ He consistently criticised the patriotism of Czech protestants concerning Jan Hus and the Bohemian Reformation as a superficial approach to Christian identity.¹¹ In this context Hromádka used the austere figure of Petr Chelčický to stress the necessity of sticking to the independence of religion from social, cultural or political systems.¹² In his strict refusal of

⁷ Ustavující generální sněm Českobratrské církve evangelické konaný v Praze 17. a 18. prosince 1918 [Constitutive General Assembly of the Evangelical Church held in Prague on 17 and 18 December 1918] (Prague, 1919) 27.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ “If someone would ask us: Why are you Protestant? – I think we would simply answer: Because I am Czech! What else could I be, when I know the religious roots and treasures of our national past, from which I am spiritually alive! And if someone would ask: Why are you Czech? – we would answer: besides that God created us as Czechs, we are Czech because our religion, our Protestantism does not allow us to be anything else.” Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ J.L. Hromádka, *Katolicism a boj o křesťanství* [Catholicism and the struggle of Christianity], (Prague, 1925).

¹¹ E.g. “K Husovým oslavám” [To celebrate Hus], *Kostnické jiskry* 3 (1921) 153 ff.

¹² Dorothea Neumärker, Josef L. Hromádka, *Theologie und Politik im Kontext des Zeitgeschehens*, (Munich, 1974) 160 ff.

any participation in worldly structures, the South-Bohemian reformer became to Hromádka a prefiguration of the dialectical theology of the twentieth century. The point for Hromádka to make was what he called a central principle of protestantism, i.e. the distance or non-identification between the secular and the revelation of God.

Protestantism brought renewed awareness of distance between God and man; it is a religion of that distance. This helps to explain all the individual religious changes, all the principles and slogans, with the help of which Protestantism combated not only Catholicism, but also every instance of less serious piety. That is the meaning of the reformed device “Soli Deo Gloria” (Glory to the One and Only God) and, in that sense, of the precept of our Chelčický: “There is no place for the Christian in the world!”¹³

In the years immediately before the Second World War, he developed a more critical stance towards tendencies in his own tradition that would lead away from the ecumenical movement and protestant traditions elsewhere in the world. He stressed aspects of the Bohemian Reformation concerning the responsibility of the human being for the wider community and its openness to ecumenical dialogue with other (protestant) denominations. The different role of Hromádka’s church as an established church in a more or less consolidated Czechoslovakia led him to criticise some of the exclusivist aspects of the Unity of the Brethren, especially concerning discipline in the church. From the protestant traditions in the world the Czech church should take the inspiration for a more complete or full theology, especially concerning ecclesiology.¹⁴

The Second World War

After the occupation of the Sudetenlands in 1938 Hromádka highlighted another aspect of the history of the Bohemian Reformation.¹⁵ He stressed the general significance of the Bohemian Reformation as represented by Milíč, Hus and Comenius, but also Palacký and Masaryk as the profound source of identity for the Czech people, now going through difficult times. Comenius became the central figure in his attempt to find consolation and encouragement in reformation history. In his address on Czechoslovak Radio after the Munich Agreement, broadcast on 1 October 1938, Hromádka stressed the parallel situations of the country in Comenius’ time and in the present.

When, after the Peace Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, the Czech nation was abandoned by all, Jan Amos Comenius wrote a testament [*Kšaft*] for it and finished with these words which today, because of their ancient lineage,

¹³ *Ústřední principy protestantské* [Main protestant principles], (Prague 1925) 12.

¹⁴ Neumärker, 173 ff.

¹⁵ Neumärker, 176 ff.

touch our hearts profoundly: “Like Moses... I give you, Czech (we say today Czechoslovak) people, the blessing of the Lord, your God, for parting [...]”. What a faith, what a legacy! When Comenius wrote the cited words, the situation was much worse, dramatically darker. We all have possibilities, not limited by anything. It depends on us, how we fill the word “Czechoslovak” and how we build up the Czechoslovak land.¹⁶

The last bishop of the Unity of the Brethren was forced to live in exile when his country lost its freedom of religion and had finally to accept that the Unity of the Brethren ceased to exist. Hromádka understood Comenius’ recommendations to the Brethren of his time as an appeal to modern Czechoslovak citizens under siege not to stick to their material losses, but rather to defend the immaterial values, rights and freedom in a time when the country was under foreign rule.

Between 1939 and 1947 Hromádka himself found refuge in the United States, where he worked at Union College in Princeton. In his regular contributions to the journal *Husův lid*, linked to Protestant Czechs in the USA, he sometimes referred to the Bohemian Reformation. Again, Comenius was a principal inspiration in times when he and many other countrymen were in exile in the United States. For them Hus, Comenius, the Brethren, Palacký and Masaryk were the leaders from whom to receive hope and energy in these years of separation from the fatherland.

In one of the first articles Hromádka wrote about the programme of the exiled Czechs, now living among Americans. The tradition of the Brethren, their theology and practice, should be a solid ground for identifying the new tasks and goals. “This is the foundation, which enables us today to unite in one unit all branches of Czechoslovak Protestantism in America. Only respect and love for the great spiritual legacy unites us in a true, living unit; in an organic unity.”¹⁷

In another article from March 1942 Hromádka wrote extensively about Comenius and his experiences of exile. The last bishop of the Unity of the Brethren did not go into the mode of victimhood, but investigated critically their own responsibility and guilt for the situation in which he and his people were finding themselves. He was critical of the vision and efforts of some countrymen in exile who were only interested in restoring the old order of before the Battle of the White Mountain. They refused to take another, wider and more global perspective, which would respect the profound changes of the world.

Comenius can help us very much, when we translate him into the struggle of today. Also we are time and again turning around between old

¹⁶ J.L. Hromádka, “Na novou cestu” [On the new path], *Křesťanská revue* XII, 1 (15 November 1938) 4.

¹⁷ J.L. Hromádka, “Základy naší jednoty” [Foundations of our unity], in: J.L. Hromádka, O. Odložilík, *S druhého břehu, Úvahy z amerického exilu 1940–1945* [From the other side. Reflections from American exile 1940–1945], (Prague, 1946) 23. The text is a shorter version of a speech Hromádka gave to the so-called Národní Jednoty [National Unity] in Chicago on 30 May 1941.

formulations, also we are buried under petrifications of past times, also we think about our old positions, our political and societal successes. Without a new view, without understanding what is going on, without a refined estimation of today's abysmal changes we long for a renewal of the old order, as it was before Munich. [...] If we don't stop looking back, we will become perfect strangers in the world and in a renewed Europe.¹⁸

Even if Comenius did not see the end of the rule established after the White Mountain, he refused only to mourn, wrote Hromádka. Instead, he wrote about the Brethren and included their heritage into his projects of educational reform.

Let the whole educated world be enriched by what our people were working on and suffering for since their Christian beginnings and especially since the reformation! Friendliness, devotion, seriousness and authenticity, zeal for the truth of God, for freedom and true education – everything that determined the life of the Unity of Brethren – Comenius incorporated in his system of school education and which he handed over to the entire European society. He believed that the spiritual values, which the nation had lived over the last two centuries, had a permanent and global significance and it was worthwhile to lay the foundation of all Christian education.¹⁹

During the Second World War, the Bohemian Reformation in its pre-war protestant understanding was the main inspiration for Hromádka in order to define his position and goals. "I learn what it is to be Czech by listening to the quiet voice which speaks up in the sanctuary of the conscience of Hus and Žižka, Palacký and Masaryk", he wrote in January 1944.²⁰ The Bohemian Reformation was the source of Hromádka's identity, not only as a Protestant but also as a member of the occupied Czech nation.

The Rise of Communism

After the war, during the time of the increasing domination and, finally, dictatorship of the Communist Party, the Bohemian Reformation remained a key frame of reference for Hromádka's orientation. On his visits to Czechoslovakia before his final return in Autumn 1947 he gave frequently lectures and presentations about the current situation and the future of Czechoslovakia. On occasion, he mentioned the Bohemian Reformation in these lectures but not as a separate theme. In a speech to an international students' conference in November 1945 he spoke about the "Mission of Czechoslovakia in today's Europe". He discerned three central points of Europe-wide importance:

¹⁸ J.L. Hromádka, "Tragika a vítězství v životě Komenského" [Tragedy and triumph in the life of Comenius], *ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ J.L. Hromádka, "Na rozhraní věku" [At the interface of the ages], *ibid.*, 118.

the “socialization” of Europe (socialism as a relevant economic model); the relation between East and West, where Czechoslovakia now had closer ties to the Soviet Union, but a place where the two sides can meet; the renewal of the European intellectual tradition and civilization, which was destroyed in the Second World War. In the context of the last issue Hromádka referred to the Bohemian Reformation. It is necessary, he said, in order to share the same cultural and moral horizon, to reconstruct the humanist understanding, the “spiritual structures” between the people of Europe. Here Hromádka referred to the Bohemian Reformation as a part of that common horizon:

We have the advantage that our greatest thinkers were great Europeans. Whether I speak about Hus (or his predecessors), Jan A. Comenius, T.G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, they are all great Europeans, whose Czechness and Slovakness is anchored in ground deeply ploughed by the heritage of European civilization. But above that, these, our greatest people, understood the legacy of our spiritual civilization and tradition with a perspective turned forward. They did not just want to conserve.²¹

The Bohemian Reformation remained a source of strength and orientation in the years leading to the communist take-over as well as thereafter. For Hromádka, the reading of the Bohemian Reformation in the light of the events of the late 1940s and 1950s was affirmative of the revolutionary changes which were taking place in Czechoslovak society. In his evaluation of and theological reflection on the historical changes, Hromádka developed the concept of the End of the Constantinian Era, which he closely connected to the Bohemian Reformation.

In general, Hromádka had a positive opinion about the rise of Communism in Eastern Europe after the war. In his eyes, it was the consequence of the failure of Western democracy in 1938. The only power that had been able to defeat Nazi-Germany was the Soviet-Union, because it had adopted a new political rule. To him, communism was the most convincing political ideology of the post-war years and whose rise could not be stopped. It was pointless to depict communism as an evil system because history could not be reverted. Therefore, it was more fruitful to accept the historical reality and to deal with the situation in Central Europe that was dominated by the Soviet Union.

In his speech at the first general assembly of the World Council of Churches, Hromádka made it clear that there were also other reasons why communism should be accepted as an alternate system to western liberalism. Not only does communism have essentially humanist roots, which in the Russian tradition are represented by Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, Hromádka asserted, its struggle for a just and equal society is close to the struggle for social justice in the Christian tradition. There is no point in mistrusting the East, as the West has a major responsibility for creating the situation in the world. The time of Western dominance is over, he stated, and the rise of

²¹ J.L. Hromádka, “O nové Československo” [On the new Czechoslovakia], (Prague, 1946) 31 ff.

communism is a sign of that. Rather by creating confidence, a new way had to be found for Europe and for the world at large.²²

The Bohemian Reformation as Post-Constantinianism

From the Second World War onwards, Hromádka became more and more convinced of the depth of the changes which were taking place. First he likened the rupture of the war to the Reformation or to the French Revolution. The world was in a deep crisis of which the rise of National Socialism is a symbol. In 1942 he wrote an article about the end of the old world entitled "The Old World Collapses" in *Husův lid*.

Today nothing of the world as we knew it before 1938 remains. (...) We stand in the middle of the most horrifying landslides; in reality all solid forms of the old order are breaking up (*uvolňují se*) and sharp, characterising edges of present institutions are evaporating (*rozplývají se*).²³

In the following years his language became more apocalyptic in order to stress the meaning of the rupture. In the years around the communist take-over in Prague, he started to make comparisons with the end of the Greek and Roman ages and the beginnings of the domination of Christianity. The present crisis was a symptom of the end of the Christian age whose role is going to be taken over by other powers and ideologies.

In his speech at the assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in August 1948 he stated even that the present situation was unprecedented in world history.

We are living, almost three years after the end of World War II, on a volcanic ground, pregnant with destructive explosions and earthquakes. The old international order is gone. No great issue has been solved, not one area of our earth has achieved stability and security. In the history of the human race it is a unique, unprecedented situation. Never in the past has the *whole* of the world been shaken so profoundly as during the last thirty years. Since the last war the magnitude of the international crisis has manifested itself with such terrific and inescapable pressure that every thoughtful person feels the proximity of an avalanche which, at the mere echo of a loud voice, may bury what has been left of our civilisation and spiritual heritage.²⁴

With the end of the domination of Christianity, the domination of the Western world also has come to an end. The Soviet Union and communist ideology is claiming a share in the control over the world. Moreover, this new

²² J.L. Hromádka, "Our Responsibility in the Post-War World," in: *The Church and the International Disorder, An Ecumenical Study Prepared under the Auspices of the World Council of Churches*, (London 1948).

²³ J.L. Hromádka, *Z druhého břehu*, 78.

²⁴ J.L. Hromádka, "Our Responsibility in the Post-War World," in: *The Church and the International Disorder ...*, 114. Italics in the original.

civilisation is much more dynamic and powerful than the West. In 1949, in a postscript to a collection of theological essays he summarised his conclusions on the rise of communism in his country and coined the term “the End of the Constantinian Age”:

When, after the war, I came back home (for the first time in August 1945), I was not able to understand that many acted as if nothing had changed, as if we could return to the political and social forms of the period before Munich. Horrible things have happened, the situation was very, very serious. The Church of Christ stood at the end of the Constantinian age – and humankind did not see it. (...) Everything that is dear to us, has to be recaptured on the ruins of the old, Constantinian world, in the middle of a society which is lead by a different ideology than the one which the official society lead for over 1,600 years.²⁵

The conviction that humankind (and with it the churches) was entering a new age, in which old certainties were shaken and overthrown, moved Hromádka to campaign both domestically and internationally to explain the state of the affair. At home he stressed the necessity of trusting the communist leadership of the country and of showing loyalty to it. In the international arena he pointed to the alleged enthusiasm of the Czechoslovak people for the new rule. Here the Bohemian Reformation emerged as an argument of legitimacy of the communist project in the country.

In July 1951 Hromádka went to Helsinki for a conference of the World Peace Council (he was a member of the presidium). On this occasion he gave a short speech to a Finish audience, convincing them of the benefits of the communist system and of the support it had from the wider population. Here we find the connection between “the end of the old world” and the Bohemian Reformation.

The common man, both in our cities and villages, is taking over the destiny of our country. The sense of human dignity is rising. All of us have very much to do. Every citizen is carrying a heavy burden of obligations. The differences between the classes are gradually fading away and the differences in the distribution of wealth are getting smaller and smaller. Yes, it is, in many ways, a great time of our history.

At this very juncture, I wish to emphasise two aspects of our situation. First, we are standing on the ruins of the old world. The last war and the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia brought a terrible time to our national life, to our material and cultural treasures. It is impossible to rebuild without first carrying away the ruins. This situation complicates our world but, simultaneously, makes it more inspiring and responsible. Second, we are to do our work in the spirit of the greatest ideals and movements of our history, of the old Hussites who had had a deep concern exactly for the common, poor, exploited, unprivileged man. The great heritage of our religious and social history gives us a social power which would we otherwise lack.

²⁵ J.L. Hromádka, *Theologie a církev* [Theology and the church], (Prague, 1949) 366 ff.

At the conclusion, one word on my personal approach to the work we are doing. I am a Christian theologian, and a member of an Evangelical Church and a member of the World Council of Churches. My participation in the reconstruction of our country is a reflection of my desire to apply my faith in Jesus Christ to ordinary life – to overcome in a realistic way, all the obstacles standing in the way of human equality, and the same also applies to my work in the Peace Council.²⁶

It was not only the enthusiasm of the Czech Protestants for the new communist order, motivated by their historical experiences of the Bohemian Reformation, which served Hromádka as an argument in the international context. It was certainly very powerful and convincing to link the historical roots of Czech Protestantism directly with the implementation of revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe. Many Reformed and Lutheran churches in the West incorporated Hus and other reformers from Bohemia in their theological and historical genealogy. To hear from the main representative of Czech Protestants in international ecumenical circles that the Czechs understand these roots as a legitimating their participation in the communist reconstruction of society was not easy to ignore or reject as a misinterpretation or even an error.

The second path Hromádka, and with him the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, took was to suggest that those in Western Europe and America who rejected communism out of a theological argumentation misunderstood the Christian message. This argument was much more provocative, as it essentially stated that a true Christian cannot be opposed to Communism. In 1953 the synod of the Evangelical Church issued a *Message to Protestant throughout the World* which aimed to explain “the very meaning of what is going on.” The draft of the message was written by J.L. Hromádka and accepted with only a few editorial changes by the synod of the church. In its first part it pointed out that Christians have become an integral part of “the old political, economic and political structure” which produced the injustice which the new force from the East in the world arena wanted to eliminate. The document suggested that Christianity had been captured by

²⁶ Personal Archive J.L. Hromádka, ETF UK Prague (preliminary inventory: section 3–28, box 3, map 18). The draft version is a bit more explicit about the Bohemian Reformation: “We, in Czechoslovakia, are finding ourselves amidst a deep and far-reaching transformation of our social and political structure. The basis of our life is getting broader and broader. The common man of our factories and villages is taking over the destiny of the nation. The sense of human dignity is rising and something new is coming into existence. The country is like a beehive – buzzing with activity, planning, labour to collective work. We are trying on the ruins of the old, pre-war world, to establish a better society; we do it along the lines of our great national tradition, of the old Hussites, the Unity of Brethren and our own great Reformers and writers and thinkers of the world. We had to make a great decision which way to go, to keep the social *status quo* or to make a new venture of social and economic justice. We have made a free, in many ways, strenuous, difficult, but also inspiring decision, and are looking with a great hope and determination to the future.” (Loc. cit.).

secular interests and would not be free until it liberated itself from these close bonds to the capitalist system. Because of the entanglement of the old order and Christianity, Christians saw the rise of Communism and its critique on the West easily – but mistakenly – as “an attack on the very substance of the Church and faith. It is all that much easier, as the secular and material interests have penetrated into the foundations of our sanctuary and corrupted the integrity of our faith.”²⁷ Although the statement of the ECCB does not state it explicitly, the conclusion was inevitable: Christians who reject communism, are wilfully a part of a system that produces sin. In the Message, to be anti-communist becomes a theological category: it is sinful.

Instead churches were called by the ECCB to repent for their share of guilt for the poverty and injustice in the non-Western world. The second half of the document brought suggestions of what Christians should do. As a sign of repentance they should express willingness “to understand the great process of history taking place in the eastern European and Asiatic countries, and especially in those nations which are awakening from a colonial status and long to take control of their public life into their own hands and long to be accepted as equals in the community of mankind.”²⁸ Churches in the West should cease condemning the events in Eastern Europe and start looking together with the churches from the East for ways to establish peace in a world torn apart by the Cold War. The Message indicated that churches from Eastern Europe felt rejected in the ecumenical context because of the dismissive reactions of Western churches to their affirmative stance concerning the communist system.

We often see that even those of you who have good intentions to ‘deal’ with the so called Eastern world, first declare the efforts of this world as something basically evil and worthy of condemnation – and only then are ready, with a certain condescending patience and a certain pathos of self-righteousness, to negotiate a kind of *modus vivendi* with it. We think that to approach the problems of today in such a way is theologically wrong and biblically dubious.²⁹

The Message mentioned the Korean War and the remilitarization of Germany as examples of a political direction which the churches should reject as a danger to peace. As such, the document has to be read as a critique of the political line of the World Council of Churches which, in 1950, adopted a statement supporting the intervention of the United States under the auspices of the United Nations in favour of South-Korea.³⁰

²⁷ *Message from the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren to Protestants throughout the World*, (Prague, 1953) 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Loc cit.*

³⁰ For more on the repercussions of the WCC statement in Czechoslovakia see: Jiří Piškula, “Evanston 1954 – první bitva studené války na poli církevním, příspěvek k interpretaci Josefa L. Hromádky” [Evanston 1954 – the first battle of the Cold War on the field of the church; a contribution to the interpretation of Josef L. Hromádka] *Církevní dějiny* 2 (2008) 37–47.

The State Bureau for Church Affairs, which executed control over church life in communist Czechoslovakia, printed the Message in English and German and disseminated the brochure through Czechoslovak embassies in the West. For the regime, the position of the ECCB as reflected in the Message, was very useful for propaganda. Now it could rightfully argue that it had the support of the Czech Protestants.

In the aftermath of the 1953 statement the ECCB got more space to participate in ecumenical events abroad and to publish some studies in foreign languages about the history and situation of Protestantism in Czechoslovakia.³¹ In these publications the history of the Bohemian Reformation plays the role of an avant-garde tradition, which gives a valuable orientation to the churches in modern times. It is especially the image of the Unity of Brethren as a community with a loose structure that accentuates the church as a *Communio viatorum*, a community underway, with hardly any institutional existence. Christianity is not connected to just one political or societal system, but is a community of pilgrims underway to the Kingdom of God. Hromádka mentioned this model of the church in a speech to the synod of 1953. In a talk to protestant ministers of 1955 he elaborated on this concept further:

We have an extraordinary serious task before us: to liberate the church from external institutionalism. The church cannot be an institution. The church is a community of pilgrims who are wandering through this world and find themselves all the time in new situations. It is true that the church is permanently *in statu nascendi*. The church is permanently being born, she is never given as an institution.³²

The Hussites and Brethren showed, that the church is even more genuine and true if she is without the privileges and protection of a church preferred and supported by the state. In the argumentation the Bohemian Reformation became the model of the church in modern times because, with the return of leaders like Chelčický to the model of the early church, the church of the Bohemian Reformation put itself in a position very similar to the present situation. Under communist rule, the churches in Czechoslovakia were deprived of their protected and secure position. Instead, they have the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves in the eyes of the population if they do not stick to the old, “bourgeois” situation.

In this context Czech protestant theologians started to speak about the post-Constantinian situation of the church. They suggested that the era of Christianity as preferred religion which had started with Emperor Constantine’s and Pope Silvester’s close cooperation, had ended with the

³¹ E.g. Amedeo Molnár, *Czechoslovak Protestantism Today*, (Prague, 1954); Luděk Brož (ed.), *Yesterday and Today: a survey of Czechoslovak Protestantism*, (Prague, 1955); Josef L. Hromádka, *The Church and Theology in Today’s Troubled Times: A Czechoslovak Contribution to Ecumenical Discussions*, (Prague, 1956).

³² “Poslání církve dnes” [The Mission of the Church Today], *Kostnické jiskry* 40 (1955) No. 28, 2.

collapse of Western liberalism and the rise of communism in Eastern Europe. The dominance of the Western Christian world was over and, with it, the role of Christianity as the dominant religion. At the heart of the Bohemian Reformation was the critique of the very concept of this societal order. Therefore, the heirs to the Bohemian Reformation were not only prepared to accept the political changes after the Second World War, but also had a positive understanding of them. They were not longing for a return to the previous order, but wanted to participate in the construction of the new one.

The Church as a *Communio Viatorum*

In 1956, the Comenius Faculty published a collection of studies on the Bohemian Reformation and its significance for contemporary times under the title *Od reformace k zítřku* [From the reformation to tomorrow].³³ Its aim was to explain key moments of the Bohemian Reformation in the perspective of the concept of the End of the Constantinian Era, this time to Czech protestants. It contained the well known study by Amedeo Molnár on the eschatological character of the Bohemian Reformation. In it the church historian underlined the hope of the early Bohemian Reformation on a radical new world, based on values of social justice and equality. In the context of the communist regime of the 1950s, the implicit suggestion could be nothing other than underlining that there are strong parallels between the Bohemian Reformation and the communist ideology.

In his contribution Hromádka presented the Bohemian Reformation as an inspiration for the new era that has started. The previous one was coined by Augustine, Hromádka wrote, who

through his enormous work created an atmosphere in which all individual fields with the state, science, education, philosophy were clustered around the church and, with it, formed one whole. That was the beginning of what was later called the Christian community – *corpus Christianum*.³⁴

The presumption of the publication of 1956 was that, ultimately, the Bohemian Reformation had gone beyond the boundaries of this *Corpus Christianum* by its denial of the possibility of a Christian state. This was something that was recognized by the new, revolutionary rulers of the time. According to Hromádka, they saw themselves legitimately in the tradition of the Hussite Revolution:

³³ A. Molnár et al., *Od reformace k zítřku*, (Prague, 1956). A few years later the German translation was published in the former GDR: Josef L. Hromádka, *Von der Reformation zum Morgen*, (Leipzig, 1959).

³⁴ J.L. Hromádka, "Odkaz reformačních otců" [The Legacy of the Reformation Fathers], in: *Od reformace k zítřku*, 235.

All great revolutionaries had this aim: to help humankind, ease its drudgery, remove injustice and lawlessness, and create such structures that people come closer to each other. Man indeed changes, but yet at the bottom of his human existence remains what makes him man. Therefore, also today, it is our task to gain the perspective on true humanity and to understand all large struggles about man in the past. We hear also today that our highest aims are a continuation of the longings, battles and victories of our Hussite and Brethren Reformation. These voices are manifestations of a deep responsibility. New political, social and economic forms, which are being built today, aim to create more suitable conditions for true humanity.³⁵

Hromádka underlined the provisional character of the Unity of Brethren, which never had the chance to establish a stable church structure as did the other churches of the Reformation elsewhere in Europe.

Also in this respect historians can remind us concerning the historical conditions under which the Brethren had to work. Never were tranquillity and peace their share. Never were they acknowledged in the full sense (except, perhaps, for a short period of eleven years between 1609 and 1620). Always were they in danger that the powerful of this world would take away the ground from under their feet. Always they lived in the uncertainty of what would come tomorrow or the next day. They could never live in accordance with their environment and build their church as a recognized, respected institution.³⁶

For the Brethren this state of permanent uncertainty did not result in fear and lack of faith but, instead, led to an inner freedom. Their enforced independence of official structures made them freer than other established and protected churches like those in Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands or Great Britain. "Especially today we are able to value the freedom of the Unity of Brethren over against the world. The freedom of faith which sees reality and does not flee from it."³⁷

Essentially, for Hromádka, a situation in which the church cannot rely on political or other societal structures brings the community of Christians closer to their genuine identity. As this church cannot guarantee its survival, its only chance is to live a true witness of Christ in the world.

The perspective ahead, to Christ who comes, liberated our Brethren from a confessional stiffness, ecclesiastical convention and from being tied up to earthly order. The status quo was valid for them neither in the church nor in the life outside of the church. The content of their faith was expressed by the church as a community of pilgrims that we are not allowed to halt, that we are not allowed to become slaves of the past and that we are not allowed to close our eyes before the new things we meet on our way.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 216.

³⁶ Ibid., 220.

³⁷ Ibid., 221.

³⁸ Ibid., 222.

The notion of the church as a community of pilgrims as the central ecclesiastical model of the Bohemian Reformation came back in 1958, when Hromádka started the journal *Communio Viatorum. A Theological Quarterly* [CV] – as was the subtitle, although it never saw more than three issues a year – fitted into the programme of the “internationalisation” of the Bohemian Reformation. Not only in ecumenical circles, but also in the academic milieu of theological faculties the avant-garde character of the Hussite and the Brethren movements had to underpin the political course of Hromádka and those around him.³⁹ Not by coincidence, the Christian Peace Conference also was founded in 1958, a structure for the Eastern European view on ecumenism and peace. It needed to be a counterweight to the World Council of Churches which, in the eyes of the communist regimes, was too “western” and “imperialist.”⁴⁰

In the Editorial to the first issue of *Communio Viatorum*, Hromádka explained that the journal intended to be a forum for a broader debate on theology. “We wish to indicate the way in which we wrestle with the main questions of theology and what is in the background of our practical decisions both in our domestic life and in the ecumenical cooperation.”⁴¹ In this line *Communio Viatorum* wanted to bring the historical tradition of the Czech Protestants, the Bohemian Reformation and its heritage, to the international forum:

But it is our desire to interpret in the most vital and actual way the great heritage of our own reformation, represented by the figures of Jan Hus, Petr Chelčický, Lukáš of Prague, Jan Blahoslav and John Amos Comenius (Komenský). As heirs of the Hussite movement and of the Unity of Brethren (Unitas Fratrum) we are guided by their great achievements, but we know that we have to re-discover and to re-interpret our spiritual heritage in our concrete life, in its real and vital impact upon our own life and upon the essential problems of the ecumenical fellowship and of the world humanity.⁴²

By all means, *Communio Viatorum* achieved this goal of introducing the Bohemian Reformation to an international audience. In almost every issue from its foundation, we find articles about representatives or developments of this Reformation, often written by the church historians of the Comenius Faculty: Amedeo Molnár, František M. Bartoš or Rudolf Říčan. In the later years we find also articles by German, Italian or Canadian church historians and even of secular, marxist historians from Czechoslovakia.

³⁹ On the context of the foundation of the journal and its further existence see Peter C.A. Morée, “Fifty Years *Communio Viatorum*: From a Theological Program into a Platform for Theology,” CV, 50,2 (2008) 126–146.

⁴⁰ For more on the foundation of the Christian Peace Conference see Jiří Piškula, “The Conception of the Christian Peace Conference and the Totalitarian Regime in Czechoslovakia,” CV 52,3 (2010) 254–269.

⁴¹ J.L. Hromádka, Editorial, CV 1,1 (1958) 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

The name of the journal, Hromádka explained in the first issue, is related to what he saw as the central motive of the Brethren. Here again appeared the main line of thought from the publication *Od reformace k zítřku* of 1956. It indicates a church under way, free from an institutional petrification, free from an inclination to search for institutional guarantees for survival and therefore free to explore its theological identity in the present circumstances. "We are finding ourselves in the midst of one of the most decisive spiritual struggle in the history of the Christian church. What is the basic meaning of this very struggle?"⁴³ This question was the leading motive for Hromádka to launch CV as an international theological quarterly.

Co-founder J.B. Souček, New Testament scholar at the Comenius Faculty in Prague, analysed the biblical evidence for the image of the pilgrim. His conclusion is that to be a sojourner is a difficult thing, because he is without the security of habitation, not knowing where his path will take him.

To lead this life of pilgrims is certainly far from comfortable. It may lead to many troubles and trials. But this ultimate freedom from all temporary fixations of God's truth, this openness towards new and unexpected manifestations of his grace and of his judgment, is the true road of hope.⁴⁴

In a longer article Hromádka wrote about the ecumenical and church political background of the initiative for *Communio Viatorum*. The tone of the article reveals some frustration on Hromádka's side with the reactions of his Western colleagues to his position on the legitimacy of communist rule. The ecumenical movement is paralysed by the East-West division. Many theologians in the West are caught by anti-communism, but they do not see the crisis of Western civilization, he says. They refuse to accept the new, very different, situation in the world in which communism has shown to be a credible alternative.

We who have been living under a more or less communist leadership were not for a moment tempted to adjust our faith and theology to a communist ideology. Quite the opposite was true. Under the impact of Marxistic thought and action we had to re-examine the integrity of our faith and genuineness of our church life. But we also realized that we had to take seriously the men and women who after the indescribable suffering in view of the millions of dead and of the destruction of vast areas of Eastern Europe had started the work of rebuilding and renewal. We had come to realize that unless we all joined the work of reconstruction, without prejudice, suspicion and morose hostility; we could hardly cope spiritually and morally with the post-war situation.⁴⁵

The starting points of Hromádka were that Christians have their share in the guilt for the Second World War, that the West has lost a serious part of its credibility, and that communism has to be taken seriously. He described

⁴³ Loc. cit.

⁴⁴ J.B. Souček, "Pilgrims and sojourners," CV, 1,1 (1958) 3.

⁴⁵ J.L. Hromádka, "The Crisis of the Ecumenical Fellowship," CV, 1, 1 (1958) 24.

this as a very challenging theological journey, in the line of the Bohemian Reformation, which has to be undertaken for the future of Christian faith.

In the context of the Christian Peace Conference, Hromádka used the same theological and historical argumentation. To his understanding the programme of the CPC and its *raison d'être* was identical to that of *Communio Viatorum*. Christians from various backgrounds – though predominantly from communist countries – gathered in the CPC wanted to ease the tension between the West and the East, to establish God's peace on earth and to create an alternative model of the church in the present world. At a meeting in January 1961, Hromádka explained again the mistake of aligning the church to Western civilization. Instead, the Christian Peace Conference found its mission and inspiration in the beginnings of the Bohemian Reformation:

Unsere Aufgabe ist daher, uns an unserem Standort, in Ost oder West, in Nord oder Süd, aus diesen Konflikten durch den Geist Christi herauslösen, ja herauslösen zu lassen, damit wir, jeder an seinem Platz, Gottes Willen zum Frieden auf Erden verstehen und damit Zeugen werden des Geistes, aus dem allein die Gelegenheiten zum Krieg vermindert und der Frieden auf Erden gefördert wird. Wenn wir alle hier in dieser Versammlung einmütig etwas von der Ausschüttung dieses Heiligen Geistes erfahren und mit uns hinaustragen in unsere eigene Umwelt der gesellschaftlichen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Beschränkungen, dann ist Prag vielleicht doch noch, im Geheimnis göttlicher Vorsehung, das Jerusalem geworden, das sich vor 600 Jahren der Vater der böhmischen Revolution, Militsch von Kremsier, erträumt hatte.⁴⁶

Hromádka's Students

It was not only Hromádka who, from certain elements in the Bohemian Reformation, constructed a model of a church living in freedom under the communist regime.

Colleagues and students of Hromádka like F.M. Dobiáš, Josef Smolík, Pavel Filipi and Jan Milíč Lochman used the very same scheme of the Bohemian Reformation as a return to the Early Church thus making the church in present society much more able to act and react adequately. A good example of this is Lochman's book *Church in a Marxist Society, A Czechoslovak View*⁴⁷. It is a presentation of lectures and papers Lochman gave during his stay in the United States as a visiting professor in 1968–1969. The tone of the book is one of enthusiasm concerning the situation in Czechoslovakia before the invasion of troops of the Soviet Union and other communist allies in August

⁴⁶ J.L. Hromádka, "Vom Kalten Krieg zum Wirklichen Frieden," speech at the session of the Working Committee in Prague, 24–28 January 1961. Personal Archive J.L. Hromádka, ETF UK Prague (preliminary inventory: section 3–28, box 3, map 15).

⁴⁷ (New York, Evanston, London, 1970).

1968. Thanks to its loss of privileges, the church today is in a better position, was Lochman's conviction. It is also a partner to some Marxists who are becoming interested in the ultimate question. "Thus the way our theology came out of its cultural quarantine was not through relativizing but rather through strengthening our belief in the contribution which theology can make in secularized society today."⁴⁸ Because of its renewal as a post-Constantinian church, leading members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren became partners in the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the 1960s about the spiritual orientation of Czechoslovak society.

In the first section of the book Lochman explained what the Bohemian Reformation was about. He underlined the concept of truth, of its experience of persecution after 1620, of its practice as church-from-below, of its ecumenical orientation and of its tradition of peaceful engagement. Because of this heritage the Czech Protestants were able to find accommodation in the communist system. It is the post-Constantinian model that suits the church the best.

I have emphasized that the Hussites and the Brethren understood the gospel in its prophetic and evangelic orientation toward the weary and heavy-laden, the oppressed and belaboured. Consequently, they interpreted it in a revolutionary way. That helps us to find an open-minded attitude toward our socialist society. On the basis of the historical background of the Hussite reformation we regard the socialist movements as a part of *our* history. Our socialist friends regard our reformation as a portion of their own prehistory. This "common ground" does not imply any ideological fusion. In this respect we consider ourselves as a free church – a pilgrim church under the Lordship of Jesus also in this respect. Yet "free church" means at the same time a church without prejudices, open for positive possibilities of its society, a church of "proexistence," seeking what is good "for the city." As a church of the people we are a church of *this* people, *this* society.⁴⁹

In further sections of the book Lochman argued how beneficial it was for the churches in Czechoslovakia to lose their Constantinian privileges. Essentially it was a liberation for the churches who are now much more challenged to explore their new role in communist society. Theological models like the so-called secular interpretation of the Christian tradition or pastoral work in a labourers' environment (worker priests) are the answers to the loss that eventually turned into a gain.⁵⁰

This idea of the Czech protestant environment as an example for the world in a rapidly changing situation concerning the societal status of church and religion became an perennial topic in the Czech theological production.

⁴⁸ Lochman, 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 65ff. Italics in the original.

⁵⁰ It is interesting also for the credibility of Lochman's argumentation, that he did not return to Czechoslovakia from his tour through the U.S.A. but, instead, as a refugee from now occupied Czechoslovakia became professor of systematic theology in Basel and, as such, the successor to Karl Barth. He never returned to the ideas of a post-Constantinian church.

Post-Constantinism was presented as a Czech discovery from the Bohemian Reformation.⁵¹ *Communio Viatorum*, a notion taken from the Brethren, had to signify a programme for the political orientation of the church. By its essence it was a critique to Western, liberal society and its churches, where the church was a part of the establishment and therefore a part of the problem. This *Communio* concerned the pilgrims that had separated themselves from the idea of a Christian civilization and, instead, were building a church community without the seductions of power, influence and economic profit, just as the Brethren had done that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The Lenin Peace Prize

The year 1958 was of immense importance for the internationalisation of the Bohemian Reformation as presented by Hromádka, Lochman, Smolík and other Protestant church leaders in Czechoslovakia. Not only was the journal *Communio Viatorum* launched to spread the view of the Bohemian Reformation of an avant-garde movement to the present-day situation. Also the Christian Peace Conference was founded as an activist organisation of churches to defend essential elements of the peace politics of the Eastern Bloc.

To complete these efforts, in September 1958 Hromádka received the Lenin Peace Prize in Moscow. The Prize was the highest award of its kind in the realm of the Soviet block till 1990 and was intended to be the communist alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize. Hromádka was nominated for the Prize by the Czechoslovak Committee of Defenders of Peace, of which he, himself, was a member. In the proposition, the president of the organisation J. Mukařovský and member of the Politbureau of the Czechoslovak Communist Party J. Hendrych argued that Hromádka was very instrumental and very successful in his defence of the views of the Eastern Bloc in international ecumenical circles.

Professor Hromádka can be characterised as an important international protestant representative who manifested himself always as a progressive

⁵¹ As an example representative for many others we mention he Josef's Smolík's article "Die Überwindung des Konstantinismus als die Aufgabe der Kirchen Europas", CV 16,3 (1973) 133–138. The European churches have lost a significant part of their theological credibility because of their support for the present political order, responsible for the catastrophe of the Second World War and the nuclear arms race. In their response to this situation, the churches in Europe have to emphasise the church as a community under way to the Kingdom of God. "Zum konstantinischen Erbe gehört die Tatsache, dass zwischen der Kirche als der Institution im juristisch-politischen Komplex und der Kirche als der Gemeinschaft des Glaubens fast kein inneres Bindeglied besteht. Die Kirche ist nur dann wirklich frei, wenn ihre juristisch-institutionelle Gestalt in eine direkte Abhängigkeit zum eschatologischen Geschehen des Wortes gebracht wird. Werden die Kirchen Europas fähig sein, ihre Sicherheit in den Verheissungen Gottes, nicht in den erfolgreichen Investitionen, in der Hoffnung auf die Parusie, nicht in der Gunst der Welt, in der Liebe, nicht in äusserlicher Effektivität zu suchen? Das ist die Frage der jungen Generation, die Frage der Zukunft des europäischen Christentums." (Ibid., 138).

person. (..) As a member of the Bureau of the World Peace Council he has employed a lot of energy to gain certain circles in capitalist, especially protestant, countries for the active struggle for peace. (..) Both within the church and at the faculty he assumes progressive stances. It is possible to say that he is convinced about the legitimacy of socialism and its victory.⁵²

When Hromádka received the Prize in Moscow, he did exactly what he had done so far: the reasons for his allegiance to the communist regime were to be found in his understanding of the Bohemian Reformation. High ranking officials of the communist establishment in the Sverdlovsk Hall of the Kremlin got a lecture about Hus, Chelčický and Comenius as the ground why Hromádka was being decorated with the Lenin Peace Prize. The Bohemian Reformation became a ticket to the highest political decoration of the Eastern Bloc!

The International Lenin Prize “for strengthening peace among people” was awarded to a professor of the Protestant Theological Comenius Faculty in Prague, a Christian theologian, who has the Bohemian Reformation as his starting point and works on the basis of the notion of the Bohemian Brethren. (..) How is it possible that a Christian theologian of the Bohemian Brethren is receiving the Lenin Peace Prize? Is it not a misunderstanding on the one side or the other? I can’t answer this question with long deliberations. I would just like to say that from the beginning of the October Revolution I followed as a protestant theologian its deep meaning, both for the social liberation of the human being, as well as for the human history at large. (..) My view on the world, history and society is certainly different from Lenin’s view. Nevertheless I was always – till today – deeply impressed by his struggle about the human being, about not only his political, but also material, social and cultural liberation. How was it possible – I ask myself till today – that for such a long time certain classes of Christian people became richer at the cost of weaker and oppressed people? (..) There the name of Jan Amos Comenius, who decorates my faculty in Prague, shows what a real and deep understanding of the Old Testament prophets and of the gospel of Jesus means for the struggle against political, economic and church tyranny. With love and with pride I adhere to the powerful heritage of the Bohemian Reformation, from Jan Hus and Petr Chelčický to Comenius, to their evangelical love for people in need and suffering, to their protest against everything that enslaves a human being in his spiritual life and in society. (..) I believe that the living tradition of the Bohemian Reformation brings such a spiritual and moral help in the life or our new society, which it needs for its growth and stabilisation.⁵³

⁵² Národní archiv, Ústřední výbor Komunistické strany Československa, politbyro, 1954–1962, karton 166, mapa 225/16 (únor 1958), Vyznamenání prof. J. L. Hromádky Leninovou cenou míru.

⁵³ The speech can be found in a collection of Hromádka’s texts edited by Martin Stöhr: *Josef L. Hromádka, Der Geschichte ins Gesicht sehen: evangelische und politische Interpretationen der Wirklichkeit*, (Munich, 1977). The citation is found on p. 279 ff.