
Ecclesiology of Reformation Churches in Relationship to Individual's Church Affiliation

Pavel Kurka (Prague)

The religious developments of the second half of the sixteenth century have come to be customarily labeled as “Confessionalisation”, particularly in German historiography.¹ This time period witnessed the end of the expansion of the Lutheran and Swiss Reformations, and the Roman Catholic Church revealed that it was unwilling to remain passive. At the same time, disagreements among the different reform ideologies began to emerge and the Protestant Churches slowly lost the advantage of the initial excitement. The confessional boundaries became stabilised and all sides were fortifying their achieved positions. The division of the empire according to the principle “*cuius regio, eius religio*” enabled the individual imperial dukes to influence their subjects. These princes sought to homogenise religiously their territories either through instruction in the ruler's confession, or in extreme cases through forced emigration.

Another characteristic feature of the Confessionalisation was the sudden emergence of “confession”, a heretofore-unknown category, as a prominent component of personal identity, similar to the nineteenth century advent of nationality. The incorporation of confession into identity, subsequently, divided previously unified Christendom. Religious differences, formerly limited to relations with the Jews, began to be ubiquitous in society. An allegiance to a particular confession also came to be required of the laity, who were traditionally not required to conform to such an extent. The process to a one word designation of confessional identity was, however, rather long. During this time, individuals typically responded to a question about their beliefs with their idiosyncratic summary of the catechism.

In Bohemia as a whole, the situation was different. All endeavours to legalise non-Catholic groups, from the Bohemian Confession to Rudolf II's Letter of Majesty, had to take into account the confessional diversity of the realm. This development also became reflected in the terminology: the non-Catholic opposition preferred the more comprehensive labels (i.e. *Utraquists* or

¹ Heinz Schilling, “Konfessionelles Europa. Die Konfessionalisierung der europäischen Länder seit Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts und ihre Folgen für Kirche, Staat, Gesellschaft und Kultur,” in: Joachim Bahlcke and Arno Strohmeyer, edd., *Konfessionalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa. Wirkungen des religiösen Wandels im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert in Staat, Gesellschaft und Kultur* (Stuttgart, 1999) 13–62.

Evangelicals in the period after the Letter of Majesty) to the more restrictive single-confessional designation.

In this process, nevertheless, the dominant position was held by the Lutherans (traditionally labelled as *Neoutraquists*).² Their position and goals were similar to the imperial evangelical estates; namely, the implementation of the Reformation from above, as it was already happening on the demesnes of Lutheran nobility. This implied the transformation of liturgy, introduction of the evangelical model of ecclesial administration, and the installation of suitable teachers and clergy. These individuals were subsequently charged with educating and ministering to the local population in order to keep the faithful on the straight and narrow path.

A particular instance is found in the five ecclesiastical regulations issued by evangelical lords for their domains and collected by Alfred Eckert. Only the Rokytnice church regulation explicitly mentioned the requirement to attend Sunday worship for all inhabitants. Others did not consider it sufficiently important. The Rokytnice example could, furthermore, be interpreted as a manifestation of social disciplining.³

Even the proposed ecclesiastical regulation drawn up alongside the Bohemian Confession would not have imposed any requirements on the laity. Although the passage on the visitations did include a remark that the visitor should also inquire about the life of the family and servants of the priests, it was, in my opinion, likely intended to prevent the reduction of clerical status through the misconduct of members in the priestly household.⁴

The actual laity – regular members of the church – were addressed only in the section, which required them to appear before the consistory if they were summoned for any legal proceedings. This regulation, furthermore, contains a rather unclear allusion to clerical election since it states that the consistory would recognise any priest elected by his community. This point suggests that some districts did in fact elect their clergy.

Yet, we have still not reached a conclusion how church affiliation was defined; especially if we are not satisfied with the description that everyone was considered a part of a church. An allusion can be found in the text of the Bohemian Confession itself,⁵ in the sixth paragraph of the eleventh section

² The designation of Czech Lutherans as *neoutraquists* was introduced by Ferdinand Hrejsa, *Česká konfese, její vznik, podstata a dějiny*, [The Bohemian Confession, its Origin, Substance and History] (Prague, 1912) 4–12; Hrejsa IV, 256–257. An alternative perspective was given by Zdeněk V. David, *Finding the Middle Way* (Washington DC and Baltimore MD, 2003) especially 198–204; most recently Jiří Just, Zdeněk R. Nešpor, Ondřej Matějka et al., *Luteráni v českých zemích v proměnách staletí* [Lutherans in the Czech Lands over the Centuries], (Prague, 2009).

³ Alfred Eckert, “Fünf evangelische (vor allem lutherische) Kirchenordnungen in Böhmen zwischen 1522 und 1609,” *Bohemia* 18 (1977) 35–50.

⁴ *Sněmy české od léta 1526 až po naši dobu* [Bohemian Assemblies from the Summer of 1526 to Our Time] IV (Prague, 1886) 334–338 (part of the *Diarium* of Sixt of Ottersdorf).

⁵ The Bohemian Confession cited here is according to the edition in Rudolf Řičán, *Čtyři vyznání. Vyznání augsburské, bratrské, helvetské a české se čtyřmi vyznáními staré církve*

dealing with the “certain and inerrant signs of the holy church...” These passages, which will be cited below, have their origins with the Church fathers and were part of ecclesiology throughout the Middle Ages. We find them in the writings of Jan Hus and quoted in the evangelical confession as well as among the Catholic authorities in the Counter-Reformation era.

In the first section the Bohemian Confession defined church affiliation based on the preaching of God’s word. We can dismiss this point for our present discussion, since the laity were not permitted to preach, and therefore could not identify with a church on this basis. From their perspective only the constraint of a passive participation in worship remains. The second point related to the participation in the sacraments involves the laity; however, it does not contain anything specific. The third article emphasised submission.

Third, the dutiful and compulsory obedience in the observance of all things commanded by the holy Gospel and the law of Christ... (Cynically, I would translate this as submission, submission, and again submission.)

And since also these signs of God’s Church are brotherly love of one another as members of Christ; the cross and great persecution for the truth and the kingdom of God; and finally the breaking away from visible sins and all iniquities against God through kind brotherly admonition and chastisement as well as orderly divinely instituted excommunication from the holy church of those, who are not corrected by the aforementioned admonition. And these are the things called church discipline by the holy fathers.

Here we have an echo of the fourth Prague Article and also the practical implementation of discipline in the Unity of the Brethren, which was also (and especially) extended to the laity. Nevertheless, it was not something intended to be implemented in the “Bohemian evangelical church” purported by the Bohemian Confession. The authority of the consistory in the field of discipline was supposed to be enacted only with respect to clergy in matters of marital disputes. The resolution of other issues relied on the secular enforcement of justice. This legal definition was based on ecclesial immunities established long before the beginning of the Reformation.

The ecclesiology formulated by Bohemian Confession also provides one positive delineation of the Church, particularly article XI, 8:

Wherever the word of Lord Christ is preached to the believers and the sacraments are administered according to his instruction, there

a se čtyřmi články pražskými [Four Confessions. The Augsburg Confession, the Brethren, the Helvetic and the Bohemian with Four Old Church Confessions along with the Four Articles of Prague] (Prague, 1951) 265–306.

certainly he is present. In such assembly he is surely present and through the ministry of the word and sacraments he works salvation in the hearts of the believers according to his instruction, even if sometimes the servants of the church, who preach the word and administer the sacraments, are hypocrites and dead members of the Church.

This text opens the question concerning the authenticity of the church, which played a prominent role in Bohemian and other early reformations. From the perspective of a layperson it presents not only the call for the search for the incorrupt church, but also the uncertainty of salvation for reasons beyond one's control.

Similar structure of the church could be found also within Lutheran attempts to create a unified ecclesial organisation. The ecclesiastical regulation from Uherský Brod in 1578 transformed the local deanery into a voluntary association of clergy. At the same time, however, it imposed guidelines not only on the ministers. Parishioners subsequently belonged to the church as much as their pastors. If they could influence his position, we would have here the principle of indirect representation. Yet, the ecclesiastical regulation did not reach this far.⁶

A different tradition emerged in the Unity of Brethren. Already present in its origins was the emphasis on voluntarily and selective membership. An individual became a member of the Unity based on a deep conviction. The Unity was also cautious and thoroughly assessed every candidate. While the requirements were not exactly delineated, their basis was goodwill. The Brethren further differentiated three levels of membership: the church was divided among “the novices”, “the intermediate ones”, and “the perfect ones”.⁷

The Brethren's confession of faith from 1535 emphasised the utmost individuality of finding the correct life path and its realisation in the church:

Since we consider it essential for each Christian to seek the holy church. When it is found, then enter into holy communion with it and enter into apprenticeship with it, as the ninth article of faith – I believe in the communion of saints – preaches. That is, to hold the unity of spirit with the church and to embrace all of its members in love and devote oneself to the church's benefit and education. And then to remain in the unity of truth and concord and not wilfully to cause disagreements, seditions, and sects against truth.⁸

⁶ Petr Zemek, *Reformace, protireformace a rozvinutí protireformačního katolictví v Uherském Brodě – Křesťanská víra v proměnách času* [Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the Deployment of Counter-Reformation Catholicism in Uherský Brod – Christian Faith through the Ages], (Uherský Brod, 2006) 450–457 and 106–109.

⁷ Rudolf Řičan, *Členství v Jednotě bratrské* [Membership in the *Unitas Fratrum*], *Křesťanská revue* 18 (1951) 142–148.

⁸ Bratrské vyznání VIII:6; R. Řičan, *Čtyři vyznání*, 145.

Secondly, the conception of the Church in the Brethren's confession was based on small communities, and the Unity considered itself only one among them:

About our congregation we believe and hold what is deserved to be believed about every Christian association however small or large: that it alone is not the holy catholic church, but only its part similar to the Corinthians, about whom the apostle wrote: "You are the body of Christ and each one of you is part of it (1 Cor. 12:27)."⁹

The ecclesiology of the Brethren was based on a completely different foundation than the territorial churches, which assumed the pre-Reformation parish structure with its entire population.

From an individual standpoint, it meant that one could not be merely a formal member of the church. Everyone avowing to the Unity had to participate in the life of a particular congregation, adapt his/her life to strict requirements, and submit to church discipline.¹⁰ The Unity's ecclesiastical regulations (the last one from a synod at Žirovnice in 1616)¹¹ formed basic standards for all its members. Somewhat more complicated is the question about the conduct of the Unity's adherents in a diaspora. Since the Unity did not consider itself as the only true church but rather a unique association within it, it did not forbid its members from attending worship in other churches, even though it did not support them.

The Brethren's church model is ecclesologically and sociologically entirely different from the model employed by territorial churches whether Catholic, Utraquist (both in its old Utraquist form and in the newly organised de facto Lutheran Church after the Letter of Majesty, instituting religious freedom) or in the respective Lutheran and Calvinist territories of the Empire. Although in these churches existed the standard definition of the exclusive jurisdiction of the parish priest over the community (*přímus farní*, see *Ottův slovník naučný*, vol. 9, 19), this prerogative applied only to the administration of the sacraments, not to a regular attendance at church services by the faithful. Not only was it likely irregular among many parishioners, but there was also no punishment for such a laxity (if one overlooks the extreme cases of Calvinist Geneva or re-catholicised regions or the Church of England from the time of Elizabeth I until, in theory, the second decade of the nineteenth century). Especially in towns there existed the possibility of attending a church

⁹ Bratrské vyznání VIII:7; R. Řičan, *Čtyři vyznání*, 145–146.

¹⁰ Jindřich Halama, *Sociální učení českých bratří 1464–1618* [The Social Teaching of the Bohemian Brethren 1464–1618] (Brno, 2003).

¹¹ *Řád církevní Jednoty Bratří českých podle učení Kristova a příkladu prvotní církve ku pobožnému ostríhání hned v původu vyzdvižený, nyní pak z příčin hodných vůbec vydaný* [The Church Order of the Bohemian Brethren According to the Teachings of Christ and the Example of the Early Church...], ed. Antonín Vávra (Prague, 1897).

according to one's desire regardless of parish boundaries. Unfortunately, this aspect cannot be properly supported with documentary evidence.

For Catholics, Utraquists, and Lutherans there was the complex issue of living in a diaspora or pluralist society. These confessions did not know how to live as a minority church and could not adapt their ecclesial structure to the reality of life amidst other confessions. All of these traditions assumed the original parishes and higher organisation wherever they were able to take control of them. Alternatively, where they did not possess them, they did not create anything new. If the *přímus farní* had been thoroughly enforced, the believers would be dependent on local ministers of a different confession. True, the religious peace of Kutná Hora stated that every priest was required to administer the eucharist either under one or both kinds based on individual preference. Similarly a century later the Council of Trent allowed Roman Catholic priests to administer the sacrament under both kinds to Czech Utraquists; however, this did not become customary.¹²

For the laity, the sacraments and other ecclesiastical rites became not only the basis for characterisation of the various confessions, but also criterion according to which they differed. This idea was reflected in the Augsburg Confession: "The church is the congregation of the saints, in which the Gospel is clearly taught and the sacraments properly administered."¹³ Apart from the demand for unity, this definition also contains division. If the catholic and evangelical understanding of the sacraments is incongruous, if the subsequent divergence of the Lutheran and Reformed understanding of the eucharist, then the complete community is impossible and one cannot speak of a unified Church. At the same time, however, one has to consider another statement in the Augsburg Confession, which opposes such delineation of the importance of the sacraments: "... sacraments are ordained not only to be the signs of ecclesiastical affiliation, but rather... to be the signs and witnesses of God's will toward us..."¹⁴

In practice, however, the different understandings of God's presence in the eucharist, other ecclesial rites, liturgical language and vestments, images and statues provided the basis for the laity to identify with a particular confession and to differentiate itself from other churches. In the second half of the sixteenth century, therefore, an individual would respond to the inquiry about his/her faith allegiance with a natural identifier such as "Christian" with a reference to one of the characteristics related to one of the aforementioned features.

(Translated from the Czech by Jan Volek)

¹² František Kavka and Anna Skýbová, *Husitský epilog na koncilu tridentském a původní koncepcie rekatolisace* Čech, [A Hussite Epilogue at the Council of Trent and the Original Concept of the Re-catholicisation of Bohemia] (Prague, 1968) 109–158.

¹³ *Confessio Augustana* VII:2.

¹⁴ *Confessio Augustana* XIII:1.