

Summary

Text and context: *De Ecclesia* – M. Jan Hus’s fateful text and its historical “context”

The chapter focuses on the historical and textual circumstances surrounding the most important work of the Czech theologian Jan Hus – the Latin treatise *De Ecclesia* (1413). This comprehensive work, comprising 23 chapters (about 240 typed pages), was not only the medium that brought Hus’s name to the church dignitaries gathered at the Council of Constance but also proved to be fatal for the author himself. For the bill of indictment and finally the sentence on the Czech theologian presented before the Council was mainly composed on the basis of what he articulated in *De Ecclesia*. Another factor contributing to the fame of this text was certainly the slogan created at this Church Council that Hus’s critical thinking on the Church “demolishes the papacy just as much as Christianity demolishes the Koran”, while up to the time of the first textual criticism research into Hus’s writings at the end of the 19th century, *De Ecclesia* was considered the most important and most original of his works. It was essentially influenced by at least two treatises by the English theologian, Biblical scholar and university professor John Wycliffe (1331–1384), namely *De Ecclesia* (1378) and *De potestate papae* (1378), while noticeable textually genealogical links with Wycliffe’s other writings – *De civili dominio*, *De blasphemia*, *De fide catholica*, *De paupertate Christi*, *Ad argumenta aemuli* – and with his sermons have been established. Such a textual genealogy on the level of Wycliffe-Hus theology *about the*

Church and its structure, indulgences and papal power signalizes the reproductive reception of Wycliffism and thus through the semantic and operative fields of resistance against the supreme authority of the papal throne reveals the intellectual historical link between Wycliffe, Hus and his Bohemian and German historical successors – the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century. Like Hus in his treatise *De Ecclesia*, Martin Luther in his *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518), in comparable historical conditions, also primarily based his intellectual arguments on the discussion concerning *indulgences* and on criticism of the shameless brokering with the power of the keys. For like Václav Tiem and his commissioners with the indulgences of Pope John XXIII, a hundred years later Tetzel and the Fuggers right at the beginning gave the indulgences of Pope Leon X (or rather Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg) a bad reputation – and gave Luther grounds for thinking not only about indulgences but also such fundamental matters as the “extreme conditions” for God’s grace and salvation (by faith alone).

**Czech Brethren as outsiders:
Between the commitment of the Hussite break with Rome
and the challenge of the German Reformation**

The Unity of the Brethren (Unitas Fratrum/Jednota bratská/the Czech/Czech Brethren) can be considered in their activity as well as their theology as an original European Reformation preceding Martin Luther. The referential framework for the birth of the Czech Brethren, historically and in terms of church organization, differed considerably from the origin and establishment of the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. The basic difference, apart from the noticeably greater age of the Czech religious reform, is that in the lands of St Václav (Wenceslaus) the concept of church reform is closely linked with the pre-Reformation *striving for a good spiritual pastor* and the idea that *church reform is primarily a matter of practical everyday morality*, and not (necessarily) of theology. The call for church reform means primarily the correction of the individual and that applies first of all to the head of medieval society, i.e. the preacher or priest. The Czech Reformation (the Utraquist Church and after that the Czech Brethren) was above all a broad folk movement “from the bottom up”, which gains through its own development a theological articulation and reflection, while with Luther it was first of all an intellectual current “from the top down”, a dissemination of the insights and reflections (including intuitive ones) of a highly educated professor, a member of a learned culture, which at a certain moment – on the

question of church authority – becomes the subject of debate and identification in the vernacular folk culture, and then develops into a movement and finally into a new church. After accepting the Compactata of Jihlava (1436), the Hussite party spoke with a single, unified political voice, which was not the case in practical religious life. For although the Taborites with their radical anti-Rome theology were also pressed into a subordinate position and the Utraquist Church at least outwardly acted in a unified way, there remained *groups and circles* that were not satisfied either with adjusting with Catholics or with the situation in which the Church, including the Hussite Church, actually found itself. Consequently they clustered around individual preachers and tried, at least within a narrow circle of fellow thinkers, to practise a Christianity which would be as similar as possible – in its morals and Christian life – to the early apostolic church. The first such circles and groups began to form in Prague around 1450.

At the very beginning, the Czech Brethren were beyond the law, for in their theology and their behaviour they were far away from the dogmas of the Roman Church, which was true also of the Utraquist Church in the Czech kingdom: 1) they repudiated the dogma of the Roman Church concerning the transubstantiation of the bread and wine at the Lord's supper; 2) they did not wish to bow before the host; 3) they did not believe that a priest living in sin, merely through handing out the sacrament (*ex opere operato*), would be consecrated; 4) because of their literal understanding of the Sermon on the Mount they did not wish to give oaths. Most of all, they were far from agreement with the Utraquist and Catholic Churches, and thus outside the rights granted by the Compactata of Jihlava on the question of the investiture of priests. Here, it seems, they broke with the tradition of apostolic succession and the consecration of priests in the Roman Church, since they thought there could not be true priests in that church. The Czech Brethren therefore wanted to separate from such a type of priesthood. Since they did not find a model for their own manner of consecration either in the Orthodox Church or the Waldensian Church, they finally decided on the consecration of priests who were selected by lot from among the believers, although taking into account their functions, knowledge, gifts, and especially their exemplary Christian life, all of which ought to indicate the capability of these people for priestly service.

Even before Luther, the Christian Renaissance influenced the Czech Brethren; this developed in Italy as a part of humanism and then easily spread through Europe. The Czech Brethren were not unknown to Luther even before 1517, since their writings were published from 1511 in the

German-speaking region, either as independent books or as parts of larger volumes, but in most cases such editions represented a considerable theological sensation, which increasingly turned the attention of German theologians to theology and the defence of the small, persecuted, but independent and persevering Czech Reformed Church. Luther's direct contacts with the Czech Brethren came about through the role of Jan Hus's key text in Luther's historical appearance as a reformer. This was because Hus's crowning work *De Ecclesia* became the handbook for all those in the German lands who, after the Leipzig dispute between Luther and Eck (1519), took part in the heated debates about papal authority and stood up against the worldly power of the Holy Father; it became a real Noah's ark of anti-papal arguments, which Luther as well as his fellow thinkers drew from Hus's work. Hus thus became an intellectual patron, a saint and protector, the leading intellectual authority of critics of the dealings of the pope, the Roman Curia and the Roman Church, and especially the predecessor of Martin Luther's similar kind of writings.

After Luther's appearance – between reform and politics

After Luther's appearance in 1517 the Czech Brethren were faced with several important issues. They had to define their attitude towards the reformed movement near at hand, in Saxony, which in the decade since its beginnings had developed into a church with its own confession (1530). They had to tackle the challenges of Lutheran theology, especially concerning their own consideration of justification. They needed to define afresh their own teaching on the sacraments. And they had to determine over again the position of the church in society and the position of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia within itself. All these changes began to happen after the death of Bishop Lukáš of Prague (1528). The Czech Brethren accepted Luther as the leading religious teacher and officially turned away from the theological views of Lukáš of Prague and his predecessors. In 1535 they first published their own confession, in which the main emphasis on justification by faith shows Luther's influence. Moreover, they no longer recognized seven sacraments, but only two (the Lord's Supper and baptism). After 1543 the Church of Czech Brethren also "returned to society" – it ceased to build the life of a secluded Christian community on the fringe of society or even beyond it and its order. From then on its members could be found in numerous professions where previously they had not participated (due to the strong theological emphasis on the importance of works, i.e. "the true Christian life" for salvation):

they were involved in civic and provincial administration, and the Czech Brethren nobility accepted military command responsibilities. The position of the aristocracy and intelligentsia among the Czech Brethren also changed. If both groups had previously been more or less merely a “tolerated” estate, without any important voice within the church, which did not demand any higher humanistic and theological education even from its priests, with the advent of Bishop Jan Avgusta (after 1537) aristocrats and intellectuals became leading representatives of the church in Bohemian society. On account of the Turkish danger at the gates of Central Europe (after 1529, when Suleiman the Magnificent besieged Vienna), the Czech Brethren theologians stopped especially pointing out the pitfalls that lurked with every political engagement of individual important aristocrats among the Czech Brethren. It was these who cooperated in the First Smalkaldic War on the Protestant side, which Emperor Charles V defeated in the Holy Roman Empire. Thus the Bohemian king Ferdinand I implemented numerous measures against the church, including reviving the St James mandate of King Vladislaus Jagiellon of 1508. All these interventions against the Czech Brethren were a warning for the future, since they clearly underlined the uncertain political and social position of the Czech Brethren against the Bohemian king as the Utraquist church.

On the intellectual stage: Jan Blahoslav

With Jan Blahoslav (1523-1571), the Czech Brethren reached one of their intellectual pinnacles, because the importance of his textual production for the development of the Czech language and literature can only be compared with that of Luke of Prague (Lukáš Pražský, 1460-1528) and John Amos Comenius (Jan Amos Komenský, 1592-1670). Additionally, due to Blahoslav, the Czech Brethren finally ceased to be intellectual “outsiders” or mere observers in the scholarly culture and passers-by.

Blahoslav’s intellectual formation took place in Czech Brethren schools, in the Latin school in Goldberg and universities in German-speaking lands (Wittenberg, Königsberg, Basel) as well as through contact with prominent contemporary humanists. As a *Christian humanist*, he wished that faith in the Saviour and piety would harmonically accompany the best education a Christian could obtain at that time. His concept of Christian humanism brought to the fore the *learned* Christian, of whom constant conscious training of the mind and capabilities and their perfecting with learning

and knowledge is expected. Consequently, he is able to engage in an effective dialogue also with educated “gospel critics.”

Blahoslav regarded the history of the Church in general, as well as the Czech Brethren as its special part, as the history of election manifestations, as the appearance of elected individuals throughout history, from the fall of man from the grace of God to salvation. In addition, he believed that the Almighty always had the limbs of his Church in the world and would have them until the end of the world, although in specific historical periods true believers are not always easily recognized among a multitude of other people. Hence, Blahoslav did not derive the right of existence for the Czech Brethren from the development of the Church, its attested historical structural features and shifts in the course of history, but rather from the *election* of believers. The driving force of (Church) history is therefore not a man with his intentions, conclusions, failures, difficulties, and disputes, but God through his creative and salvific initiative. With it, He turns the wheel of history in all historical periods and on all meridians of the world, in this way always maintaining his Church. Blahoslav believed that in certain periods the Church of God remained hidden, anonymous, and invariably in the *minority*, and only a look in the “rear view mirror” revealed that it was a true institution of God.

Blahoslav’s translation of the Bible, alongside his knowledge of contemporary humanistic approaches in translation, demonstrates a specific understanding of the status of the biblical language. This was attributed a special solemn and elevated meaning by the translator, which had to be expressed in a suitably high Czech linguistic style without expressions that, in his opinion, signified the colloquial Czech of the time. Blahoslav articulated such ideas in *Grammar* (*Gramatika*, 1571), after having implemented them in the translation of the New Testament (*Nový zákon*, 1564, 1568). When translating biblical texts, Blahoslav considered first and foremost systematic and practical theological reasons for the choice of vocabulary and expressions. He aestheticized and intellectualized biblical writings in Czech and consciously opted for a more demanding, aesthetically pleasing language that significantly and over centuries increasingly differed from the common spoken Czech. His New Testament became the cornerstone of the *Bible of Kralice* (*Bible kralická*, 1579-1593), which served linguistically as a foundation for the standard baroque Czech and, as a “biblical language”, for the standard Czech restored by Joseph Jungmann in the 19th century. Blahoslav thus profoundly influenced the Czech language and its use to

this day, as well as the diaeresis between the standard (spisovná čeština) and the spoken (obecná čeština) Czech, which in expression and use persists even today.