

Kate WILSON

Churches Reconciled in Love?

The Colloquium Charitativum (Toruń, 1645)

What did reconciliation between churches mean for a people whose great-grandparents remembered the Reformation, a people whose neighbours were fighting a confessional war that had been raging for nearly three decades? They knew it was connected to caritas: ubi caritas, Deus ibi est. So when the King of Poland-Lithuania called a meeting between Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed in 1645, it became known as the Colloquium Charitativum, a meeting to promote loving reconciliation between the churches.

This was revolutionary. Until then, meetings between two confessions had been tried, in the German lands where the Thirty Years' War was then being fought, but this was the first time that three confessions were sitting round the same table. The king who called the meeting, WLADYSLAW IV Waza, was a Roman Catholic, whose father ZYGMUNT was famous for trying to undermine the position of non-Catholics in the historically tolerant Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. WLADYSLAW claimed to have called the Colloquium to "see and avert whatever causes conflict between Catholics and Protestants, by resolving these contradictions".

The Colloquium was an important witness for peace and reconciliation, but has almost been forgotten, as borders and populations have shifted between countries and churches. 150 years later, when Orthodox Russia and Lutheran Prussia were using Enlightenment ideals of toleration as a pretext to invade Poland-Lithuania; much had changed. Was the Colloquium really as conciliatory as it seemed?

EAST OF THE WEST AND WEST OF THE EAST

It was no accident that such a meeting took place on Polish territory; many Poles still see themselves as "East of the West and West of the East". The Commonwealth was the largest state in Europe in the seventeenth century, stretching almost from Berlin to Moscow. This meant that its population belonged to both the Eastern and Western Churches, and were familiar with confessional differences long before the Reformation even happened.

Like many of her Central European neighbours, Poland had introduced religious toleration early, and held on to it in a period when confessional states were forming. Since the Warsaw Confederation of 1573, all members of the nobility at least, were legally equal as *dissidentes in religione*. Dissenters in this context meant Roman Catholics as much as Protestants and Orthodox – each

new monarch promised on succeeding the throne to grant them all liberty of conscience:

"I will defend and maintain peace and tranquillity among those dissident as to the Christian religion; nor will I in any other way, either through our jurisdiction or through any authority of any of our offices and statutes, permit anyone to be troubled or oppressed on account of his religion, nor will I myself trouble or oppress him. And if (God forbid) I violate my oath in any respect, the inhabitants of this Royal Commonwealth and of all the dominions of every nation shall not be bound to render me obedience..." This guarantee of confessional plurality, allowing no one church from the East or the West to dominate, made reconciliation between confessions seem a realistic possibility in Poland-Lithuania.

Their attempt to re-unite drew international attention; theologians from abroad, such as Jan HÜSLEMANN from Wittenberg and the irenic Georgius CALIXTUS also attended the Colloquium in Toruń. HÜSLEMANN was amazed that the Polish Lutherans did not want to defend their own confessional interests at the meeting; they explained that they did not separate toleration guarantees, as all dissenters benefited from the Warsaw Confederation. One wonders why the churches of the Commonwealth needed to meet together at all, if they were living together so harmoniously.

WHOSE RECONCILIATION?

Reconciliation sounds innocent enough, but who wanted whom to reconcile with what? The prime mover behind the Colloquium was the Capuchin Valerian MAGNI, whose real aim was to encourage Protestants back into the fold



of the Roman Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church, the main church in the Eastern part of Poland–Lithuania, was not invited. Nor were the Greek Catholics, those Orthodox who accepted the authority of the Pope at the Union of Brześć fifty years before, in 1596.

The Socinians, who did not believe in the Trinity, were also barred from the meeting, although they tried hard to attend.

Protestants and Orthodox were worried enough about how the Colloquium might affect their churches to call a meeting before the Colloquium, held at Orla in 1644. Their noble leaders met at the *Sejm* (the Polish–Lithuanian parliament), and sent a statement to the king and primate, the Archbishop of Gniezno, affirming their religious liberty in the Polish tradition. Non-Catholics were used to allying in this way in Poland–Lithuania, and took the opportunity of the Colloquium to strengthen their ties, using the *Sejm* to network with each other across the Commonwealth.

On a local level, co-operation between churches went further than even the Colloquium could hope for. The Reformed and Lutherans in the Western province of Great Poland met before the Colloquium and published a joint statement, focussing on where they could agree. This was conciliatory: “They decided to end the conflict on Sacraments, Communion and Predestination, and other less important issues which have so far divided the churches [...] they laid aside all Hatred, Conflict and Suspicion, to approach the Colloquium in good Unity and debate nobly, hand in hand” (Johannes HÜLSEMANN). This co-operation was renewed over the decades to come.

So while the official Colloquium did not reflect the real diversity of churches in the Commonwealth, it stimulated reconciliation between many churches outside the framework of the meeting. Churches were coming together in unexpected ways, allying outside the controlled encounter which king WLADYSLAW had set up.

AFTER THE CONFERENCE

You can still visit the room in the town hall in Toruń where they met. Dark wood panelling, heavy chairs, pictures on the walls of these men who died four hundred years ago; it is not that big, not that impressive, though the town hall itself is an imposing Gothic building. But you can imagine them debating, passing notes to their friends and rolling their eyes in frustration, finally calming down enough to pray together, getting refreshed by it, meeting in little groups on the stairs, quarrelling over how



their names were written in the minutes. They did. They could not even agree on a final version of the minutes, and asked the king to produce a fair record for decades afterwards. In the end all confessions published their own version of events.

So had the ‘ecumenical conference’ been an empty showpiece, failing to have any impact, just another free travel opportunity? Some historians, like Edmund PIŚCZCZ, certainly think so. Nevertheless, it brought all the churches in Poland–Lithuania together, not only at the Colloquium but also in other meetings outside it. These meetings involved the Orthodox and Socinians too, and the co-operation between churches, which the Colloquium had stimulated anew, went on for decades, down to a local level. Those present at the Colloquium actually prayed together, at a time when differences between Christian denominations were being used to fuel political conflict across the continent.

Such conflicts still occur, four hundred years after the Colloquium, and we are still wondering how best to pray together. Union into one Church may seem a long way off, if that is even what any of today’s churches want. Maybe every generation has to seek reconciliation over again, to find it for itself.

We have come a long way. But it is still worth listening to the voices of our ancestors who tried before us. A key contemporary case for reconciliation instead of conflict between churches was to listen to each other and wait for revealed truth. Krzysztof OSTROBÓG, a Socinian minister, argued this most eloquently: “soon the truth of the Christian religion will rise like the sun, errors will vanish, just as the shadows do at sunrise.” After four centuries, are we able to listen and wait for the sun to rise as Krzysztof hoped?



ACCOUNTS OF THE COLLOQUIUM

Acta Conventus Thoruniensis Celebrati 1645. Warszawa, 1646.

(The Royal Records)

CYRUS Jan, *Idea Colloqui*

Charitativi. Kraków, 1646. (A Roman Catholic Perspective)

HÜLSEMANN Johannes, *Widerlegung der Calvinischen Relation vom Colloquio zu Thorn.* Leipzig, 1646. (A Lutheran Perspective)

PRAWDECKY Constantio, *Entdeckung der unwahrheiten... welcher D J Hülsemann in seiner wiederlegung ausspagnet.* Leszno, 1647. (A Reformed Perspective)

1647. (A Reformed Perspective)

1647. (A Reformed Perspective)

1647. (A Reformed Perspective)

1647. (A Reformed Perspective)

Suggested Reading

MAAG Karin (ed.), *The Reformation in Eastern and Central Europe.* St. Andrews, 1997.

OGONOWSKI Zbigniew (ed.), *Myśl*

spokojna XVII w – 700 Lat Myśli Polskiej. Warszawa, 1979.

PIŚCZCZ Edmund, *Colloquium charitativum w Toruniu 1645.* Toruń, 1995.

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Kate WILSON is a Roman Catholic from Wales. She is coming to the end of a PhD about the politics of toleration in early modern Great Poland. She is a member of the Executive Committee (ExCo) and the European Regional Committee (ERC) of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). Her email address is kaska@hotmail.com.