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Potential Roots and Options for Being Ecumenical

(with a Special Focus on the Czech Lands) ¹

I. On Ecumenism

What is Ecumenism?

Let me start with the explanation of the word 'ecumenism' – oikumene. HERODOTOS (V. century BC) is using this term in a geographical meaning that was describing the "whole inhabited Earth". Later, in the times of Hellenism, it was used to denote the "whole civilised world", meaning only the "Hellenistic world".

Septuaginta, the Greek translation of the Hebrew biblical texts, uses this term in a geographical meaning. The New Testament uses the word oikumene in three different meanings: political, eschatological and, of course, geographical. The one mentioned as last has the highest frequency of use and refers to the place, where the good news (evangelium - gospel) was spread.

Now in the modern world it is highly difficult to describe the word oikumene in one definition. It contains the burdens, obstacles and difficulties of the whole ecumenical movement. One of the best definitions is given by a Czech Protestant scholar, Pavel FILIPI who writes: "It is a conscious, organised struggle for co-operation and for understanding of Christian churches that in the past were divided into organisations that are strange to each other by their teachings, understanding of the officium or authority and of the sacraments."²

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Another interesting definition is given by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl RAHNER: "Ecumenical movement (less appropriate abstract expression ecumenism) is a general term for all kinds of struggle to reunite all Christians of all faiths, at first by preliminary organisational steps and at the end reaching the one Church of all believers in Christ according to His will."³

The Beginnings of Ecumenism

One of the most important questions for church historians is: where should we look for the start of ecumenism? This question is certainly difficult to answer. Potential answers are the years 1054 (the Great Schism) or 1517 (Luther's proposals summed up in 95 theses), since those were the years when the Church divided. Another option could be the times of increased papal pressure, when centralist tendencies provoked questions about local identity⁴. After all, the beginning of ecumenism could be connected with the period in which members of Christian communities realised their differences and started to look for what is authentic and for the unification of practice (what we call tradition). That would bring us back to the times of the New Testament, which was the time when the Church was being born.

On the basis of the above mentioned considerations it can be suggested that ecumenism could be understood as an effort to unite something fragmented that had been united before. For many Christian churches it took several centuries to alter their thinking about their fellow Christians and to acknowledge the value of their tradition.

The first steps towards some co-operation were taken in the 19th century by missionaries and by missionary organisations. This co-operation was, however, at times based on practical reasons and did not include a longer-term vision of working together. Financial interests also played an important part.

To be short, I will only briefly mention the most important milestones of the ecumenical movement. The Edinburgh Conference (1910) was a fresh

¹ This article is based on the diploma paper of VAŇAČ Martin, *Ekumenismus v ČR, Příspěvek ke studiu ekumenických vztahův ČR na pozadí vztahů státu k církvím v letech 1918-2000* (Ecumenism in the Czech Republic; A Contribution to the Studies about Ecumenical Relationships in the Czech Republic on the Background of the Relationship between the State and the Churches in the Years 1918-2000). Praha, 2001; submitted and defended at the Catholic Theological Faculty, Charles University, Praha. All bibliographical quotations are from this work. Martin VAŇAČ is currently the director of the Ecumenical Institute in Prague.

² FILIPI Pavel, *Církev a církve* (Church and Churches). Brno, 2000. 122.

³ RAHNER Karl – VORGRIMLER Herbert, *Teologický slovník* (Theological Dictionary). Praha, 1996. 79.

⁴ Such study cases can be the implementation of Latin liturgy (many communities, especially in Britain and Ireland, but also in Great Moravia disagreed with the usage of the Latin language in the liturgy and used their mother tongue); the fixed rule for celebrating Easter (VIIIth century); and the implementation of the Gregorian calendar in religious practice (XVIth century).

wind into the still waters, though questions about teaching and dogma were not on the agenda. The movement Life and Work applied ecumenism in its work in the social area. But so far the most important year is 1948, when in Amsterdam many Churches (Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican) joined together under the umbrella of the new organisation - the World Council of Churches (WCC). Since its conception, this new structure has not aspired to become "The Church" or "The Supra-church". Its goal has been to bring Churches in touch with each other. The Roman Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement officially for the first time during the Second Vatican Council, before it was not recommended to take part in such activities.

II. Ecumenism from a Czech Perspective

Ecumenical Potentials

One platform for ecumenical discussion could be a shift-back in the church tradition to the age or years, when there was no major split. This might, however, turn out to be problematic especially for churches whose tradition includes elements based on a reformation of certain aspects of this ancient tradition.

In the Czech Republic we can try to base ecumenism on two such religious traditions. One is the Cyrilo-Methodian⁵, which had been established before the Great Schism; therefore it does not contain many problematic issues. It also contains the idea of the Slavs united in one faith⁶, or the idea of the liturgy in the mother tongue. This platform for discussion was considered mainly in the united activities of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Since the beginning of the 20th century until the year 1938, some discussions took place concerning this topic at the Velehrad Academy in Moravia.

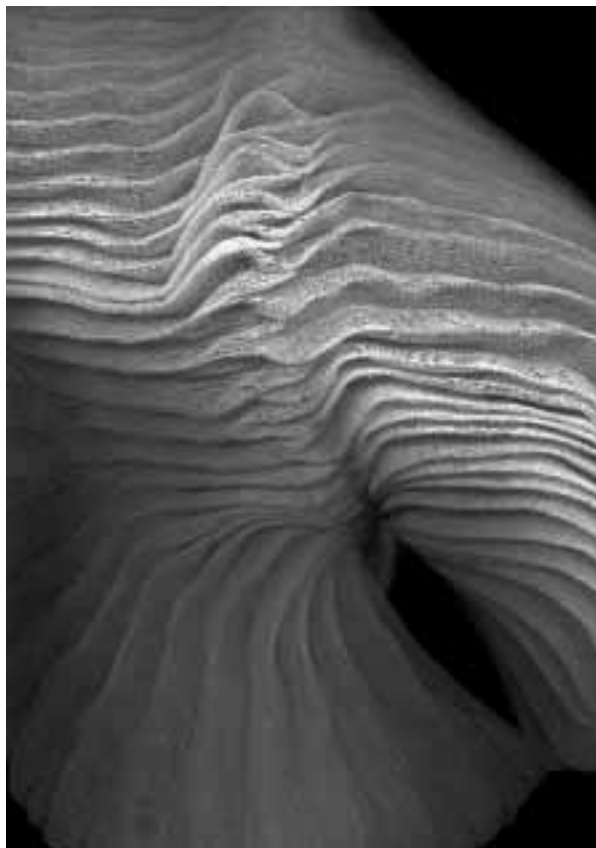
The Hussite and the Czech Brethren tradition are rooted in the so-called

⁵ This tradition comes from the missionary activities of CYRIL (*827, †869; sometimes known as CONSTANTINE) and METHODIUS (*before 827, †885) in years 863/864–885. They were brothers of Greek origin (from Salonika/Thessaloniké), who were sent to Great Moravia (which was situated in Central Europe in the territory of today's Czech Republic (Moravia, Silesia and Bohemia – Eastern, North-Eastern and Western lands of the state), Slovakia, Northern Austria, North-Western Hungary, Southern Poland and Southern part of the former East Germany (see map) to spread Christianity in the Slavonic language. Already this missionary activity proved to be a result of tensions between the Western (Latin, Roman) and Eastern (national languages, Constantinople) rite and tradition.

⁶ There are some new findings that deny such "pan-slavic" ideas behind the activities of CYRIL and METHODIUS.

⁷ Jan Hus (*130, †1415), priest, burnt at stake as heretic.

⁸ St. WENCESLAS (*?, † not sure, maybe 929 or 935; from the PŘEMYSL princely family). A legend says that he was killed by his pagan (or at least less religious) brother BOLESLAV at the doorsteps of the church in Stará Boleslav. In Greek, martyr means witness; in Christian understanding a witness of Christ, who by her or his blood swears on the truth of Christian teaching. In the case of the martyrdom of WENCESLAS, historians say that we have to keep in mind the political implications of those times as well, to fully understand the importance of his death.



Czech reformation that happened in the 15th century and that originally tried to reform the Roman Catholic Church. The personality behind this movement was Jan Hus⁷. Most of his objections have been incorporated into the practice of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the centuries till today and now we think of them as integral parts of the Roman Catholic tradition. Nonetheless this integration had its high cost.

Some people say that there is a high potential for ecumenical discussion in the personality known as St. WENCESLAS⁸ (Sv. VÁCLAV). This figure is of high importance in the Czech Republic, in Prague every important demon-

stration or gathering must take place at the feet of his statue. He is a recognised figure or a patron saint for some. Even if the importance of St. WENCESLAS is indisputable, the perception of his role differs from church to church and for this reason it might turn out to be difficult to present him as a general model for all the churches in an equal way.

Czech Ecumenical Church History

For a better understanding of the religious situation in the Czech Republic and of the events that have shaped the current conditions of the Czech society, it is necessary to mention certain important dates in Czech history as well as to see how history influenced the behaviour of the churches towards each other and what the churches were able to do together under given circumstances.

In 1621 the battle of the White Mountain took place, where the Roman Catholics defeated the Protestants. Many Protestants claim that after this battle the “times of darkness” started (and continued until 1918).

In 1781 the Tolerance Patent was issued. In this decree the state authorities recognised the Calvinist Reformed and the Evangelical-Lutheran confessions but no other confessions (the Czech confession was excluded). Since many people were of forbidden confessions, they had to change their confession to one of the allowed ones; the frustration of the Czech Protestants continued⁹.

In 1918 Czechoslovakia was established. There were some tensions between the Churches for a while, especially when the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren was established in 1918 and when the pro-reformists in the Roman Catholic Church (a stream called “Catholic modernity” that existed since the 19th century) created the Czechoslovak Hussite Church¹⁰ in 1920. All those changes and news meant that about one tenth of the population changed its church membership in just a couple of years.

This development was unique in Central Europe. Never before in the 20th century had so many people changed their church affiliation. Czechs were already in the past more “resistant” against being very religious¹¹. The shift from the Roman Catholic Church was determined by the connection between this church and the political power (the Imperial court and political parties). Religious matters were mixed with political matters. Many peo-

⁹ In practice the knowledge of this option was often limited.

¹⁰ Later, in the twenties, some congregations separated and formed the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church. In the fifties the ČSH declared herself a Protestant church, and joined the World Council of Churches.

¹¹ In Bohemia and Moravia especially, there was a highly developed industry and large portions of the population lived in municipal communities.

¹² In 1954 it was transformed into the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Czechoslovakia. Upon the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993 the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic and ECC in Slovakia were formed.

ple called for a national church and Protestant churches based on the Czech tradition seemed to be the option.

Of course, there were other small churches created, but these are the most important ones and we can speak about the “end of schisms” in the Czech Republic. Some ecumenical discussions have taken place, but were of an unofficial character. The relations between the churches were on the official level not particularly developed, it is better to say that they were rather cold. In 1927 the Union of Protestant churches¹² was established. Nearly the only lively platform of ecumenical discussions and activities was the Academic YMCA (Akademická YMCA).¹³ Its magazine *Křesťanská revue* (Christian Review) was of great importance for ecumenical work.

During World War II many ecumenical friendships were created under the burden of the Nazi regime. With great sarcasm we could say that the Nazi regime bore even some fruits in this respect, because most of those friendships came from oppression and without it they might not have been formed. But again, we have to keep in mind that those connections were of a personal character. They did help a lot even if they did not produce any official declarations or teaching.

During the first three years after the war, many of these “ecumenically experienced and trained” people were put into important positions. Was there a bright future for ecumenism in Czechoslovakia on the horizon? Perhaps, but the colour of brightness was red and had nothing to do with ecumenism. The future became bright for the chosen ones only and churches were simply (and understandably) not among them. The communist regime was a good pupil of the previous unpopular regime and some church members had the pleasure to receive ecumenical experience (some of them for the second time) while being in various labour positions¹⁴ in working camps. Churches, especially the various monastic orders of the Roman Catholic church, received a special attention from the Communists mainly in the years 1950–1952 and afterwards.

As an instrument of influence on churches, an Ecumenical Institute was established in 1955 and two years later, the phenomenal Christian Peace Conference was formed. Why phenomenal? Because among the ecumenical activists abroad this step was appreciated very much, and only few dared to ask what was behind the mask; if it was the will of the churches or something else. It is true that the timing could not have been better. The world was polarised, just on the fringe of a new war.

¹² Oikumené-Akademická YMCA, the Czech SCM (Student Christian Movement of World Student Christian Federation) is in legal continuity of the above-mentioned organisation and still publishes the magazine.

¹⁴ They were called “Assistant Technical Battalions” and their members received shovels instead of machineguns, since they were not reliable enough. These army units were primarily composed of people uncomfortable for the regime and priests, monks or ex-ministers often met there in common work and prayer.

There were, of course, other ecumenical discussions and works, which were, at least at the beginning, of an unofficial character. The major work was the ecumenical translation of the Bible, which was in fact the first such work to happen in the world¹⁵. Within the Roman Catholic Church there were debates about joining the National Ecumenical Council of Churches. Following the year after the beginning of the Second Vatican Council (1962), ecumenical seminars were started in Prague.

Most of the churches (except the Czechoslovak Hussite church known for its positive relationships with the communist regime) united even more after the 1968 “friendly” visit of the Soviet and coalition armies that put an end to the dream of a socialism with a human face. The churches joined their voices in the actions that were called the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, during which ecumenical services were celebrated. This activity had officially continued until it was prohibited in 1969, then it unofficially existed in small groups.

After 1968, the regime introduced another oppression of the churches¹⁶ and this was certainly not a good ground for any ecumenical work. The regime invented a new game, which brought distrust among the churches. Only in 1977 some individuals, especially from among the intelligentsia, including a few church people, pastors or priests, produced a joint call for liberty¹⁷ in the declaration known as Charter 77 (Charta 77).

In 1989 significant changes took place in Central and Eastern Europe and after many decades, the churches could freely conduct their activities. Unfortunately, certain disputes arose which at times endangered the reputation of the churches based on their opposition activities during the years of totalitarianism¹⁸.

The churches established a commission on Jan Hus and the recatholisation of the Czech lands. Apart from this academic project the churches have in recent years co-operated with state authorities in projects of spiritual care conducted in the army and in prisons. The churches co-operate in the area of media (TV and radio) and sometimes consult internal documents (e.g.

¹⁵ The work started in 1961 and was finished in 1979 and the translation was the second work of its kind to be completed after the French translation.

¹⁶ This was possible due to the fact that every person working for the Church had to receive the approval of the state for her or his job. Of course, those who opposed the regime or who were in contact with the dissidents, did not receive such approval.

¹⁷ In 1975 in Helsinki, the Czechoslovak government signed the *European convention on Declaration of Freedoms and Rights*, and the following year the parliament approved it. However, the practical implementation of the provisions of the Declaration was done in a very dubious way.

¹⁸ Questions about church property (how the state should return the church property confiscated by the Communist regime) and about the financing of the churches (relations between the state and the churches, sources and structure of funding; state support for the churches, etc.) arose and produced long-lasting discussions.

the latest document of the Roman Catholic church on marriage). In general, there are joint projects of different kinds, but in certain fields of action the co-operation still needs to be expanded. A lot of important activities happen at the grassroots-level, and are based on personal friendships.

III. Conclusion

And what can be the message of the historical part of this article for the ecumenism in Central Europe? It is obvious from the above-mentioned facts that many of the churches in Central Europe went through a more or less similar experience. It is in a way our common history, something that unites us all, no matter of our confession or nationality. Our behaviour is and will be influenced by this common heritage.

In general this article can be concluded with the following words: "The character of ecumenical work and activity in a particular area will always be influenced by the concrete character of the ecumenical situation of a given place."¹⁹ We should always bear in mind that ecumenism is something that is deeply rooted in the grassroots – in the parishes and congregations – and is indeed a concern of every individual. Furthermore, there is a need for good leadership at the grassroots-level. When an open-minded leadership or charismatic personalities are missing ecumenism does not have much chance to flourish. The history has proved this too often already.

If the activities of the Central European Subregion of the World Student Christian Federation remained unconnected to the work done in local Student Christian Movements, they would be just another drop into still waters. Therefore let us go and be ants in the common struggle for a better understanding among Christians and among all people.

Suggested Reading

FILIPÍ Pavel, *Církev a církve* (Church and Churches). Brno, 2000.

KINNAMON Michael – COPE Brian E. (eds.), *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*. Geneva, 1997.

VORSTER Hans (ed.), *Ökumene in Ungarn, der Tschechoslowakei und Polen*. Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau.

Jiří SIBRT: Ökumenikusnak lenni – forráslehetőségek és választak (különös tekintettel Csehországra)



A cikk egyfajta “bevezetés az ökumenizmusba”. Első része az ökumenizmus kifejezésének megértésével és az ökumenikus mozgalom történeti fejlődésével foglalkozik. A második rész pedig a csehországi párbeszéd lehetséges ökumenikus kiindulópontjairól szól. Ezen eszmék olyan történeti alakokra vezethetők vissza, akik a vallási fejlődés szempontjából komoly hatást gyakoroltak a térségben. A szövegben olyan események történeti áttekintését is kapjuk, amelyek az egyházak mai kapcsolatát is alakítják; hiszen akarjuk, vagy sem, annak a múltnak vagyunk gyermekei, amely nagy részben meghatározza viselkedésünket. A cikk Martin VAŇAČ cseh nyelvű diplomadolgozatán alapszik: Ökumenizmus a Cseh Köztársaságban – adalékok az ökumenikus kapcsolatok tanulmányozásához az állam-egyház viszony hátterében, 1918-2000. (Prága, 2001).

Jiří SIBRT: Potencjalne korzenie i moż liwości bycia ekumenicznym (ze specjalnym uwzględnieniem ziem czeskich)



Artykuł jest wprowadzeniem do zagadnienia ekumenizmu. Pierwsza część dotyczący samego rozumienia słowa ekumenizm oraz historycznego rozwoju ruchów ekumenicznych. Jest również fragment poświęcony platformom, na których możliwe są dyskusje ekumeniczne w Republice Czeskiej. Te platformy opierają się na postaciach historycznych, które wpłynęły na religijny rozwój w tej sferze. Następnie omówione są historyczne badania nad wydarzeniami, które oddziałują na obecne stosunki między kościołami, ponieważ chcemy tego czy nie, jesteśmy owocami przeszłości, co częściowo determinuje nasze zachowanie. Należy również wspomnieć, że artykuł opiera się na pracy dyplomowej Martina VAŇAČa: Ekumenizm w Republice Czeskiej: Wkład w badania na temat ekumenicznych stosunków w Republice Czeskiej na tle stosunku państwa do Kościołów w latach 1918-2000. (Praga, 2001); napisanej w języku czeskim.



Jiří SIBRT: Ekumenismus; Potencionální kořeny a možnosti pro ekumenické bytí zahrnující historický přehled se zvláštním zaměřením na české země

Článek se pokouší poskytnout čtenáři uvedení do ekumenismu. Obsahuje části, které se zabývají chápáním slova ekumenismus a historickým vývojem ekumenického hnutí ve světě. Zahrnuje také odstavec o možných východiscích pro ekumenický dialog v České republice. Tato východiska jsou založena na historických postavách, které významně ovlivnili náboženský vývoj v oblasti výše zmíněného státu. Nakonec je připojen výčet historických událostí, které ovlivňují současné vztahy mezi církvemi, protože ať chceme nebo ne, jsme plody minulosti, která částečně předurčuje naše jednání. Nakonec ještě důležitá poznámka. Článek vychází z diplomové práce Martina VAŇÁČE: Ekumenismus v ČR; Příspěvek ke studiu ekumenických vztahů v ČR na pozadí vztahů státu k církvím v letech 1918 – 2000, Praha 2001.



Jiří Sibrt: Ökumene: Wurzeln und Möglichkeiten (mit einem besonderen Fokus auf die Tschechische Republik)

Mit diesem Artikel eine Einführung in die Ökumene versucht. Zum einen wird die Bedeutung des Wortes Ökumene analysiert, zum anderen die historische Entwicklung der ökumenischen Bewegung beschrieben. Ausserdem wird in einem Abschnitt diskutiert, wie es möglich wäre, in der Tschechischen Republik Plattformen für ökumenische Diskussionen zu schaffen. Grundlage dieser Plattformen sind historische Begebenheiten, die vor allem im Hinblick auf die Religion die Region geprägt haben. Ausserdem werden die historischen Begebenheiten, die auch heute noch die Beziehungen der verschiedenen christlichen Kirchen beeinflussen, analysiert. Wir sind, ob wir es wollen oder nicht, Kinder der Vergangenheit und das beeinflusst natürlich zum Teil unser Verhalten.

Zu guter Letzt muss gesagt werden, dass der Artikel auf der Diplomarbeit von Martin VAŇÁČ mit dem Titel Ökumene in der Tschechischen Republik auf der Grundlage der Beziehungen von Staat und Kirche in den Jahren 1918-2000 (Prag, 2001) (auf tschechisch) basiert.