

Kate WILSON

Klejnot swobodnego sumnienia –
the Jewel of Freedom of Conscience:
Churches together in Central Europe
after the Reformation

The phrase *klejnot swobodnego sumnienia* was coined by a Polish Lutheran, Świętosław ORZELSKI, to show his compatriots what a treasure their religious liberty was compared to the situation in other parts of Europe in the seventeenth century. He was very aware that Poland was part of a wider Central European context where plural social and political structures reinforced religious plurality. Unlike the countries to the West, where the fallout of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations caused wars over religion, or the East, where Orthodoxy dominated, Central Europe was a fascinating tangle of ethnic and confessional loyalties. This heady mix meant that people of different confessions were much more inclined to work together, to an extent which scandalised church centres including Wittenberg, Geneva and Rome.

Central Europe

Central Europe is difficult enough to define, but here I take it to mean the lands East of the Holy Roman Empire (now Germany) and west of Muscovy (now Russia). My focus will be on Bohemia, Moravia, and the Hungarian lands (including Royal Hungary and Transylvania). The huge Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania also included what are now Belarus and Ukraine; this is the area I know most about, where my archive research

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was done, so I apologise in advance for any mistakes I make in trying to put the Commonwealth into a wider context.

My time frame is the century from 1550 to 1650, a period when faith caused wars across much of the continent, the wars of religion in France (1562-98) and the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) in the German lands. This has led historians to speak of an age of 'confessionalisation', that is, denominational differences hardening with state backing and the creation of homogenous national churches. In Central Europe, however, this model of confessional conflict does not apply – because the model of the state was also different.

What makes the countries of Central Europe special? In the early modern period, they shared a common model of the state: elective monarchy. The rulers were elected by the nobles, who had more say in running the country, especially in interregna (between monarchs), but also afterwards as the ruler had to keep to the promises he made them on his election.

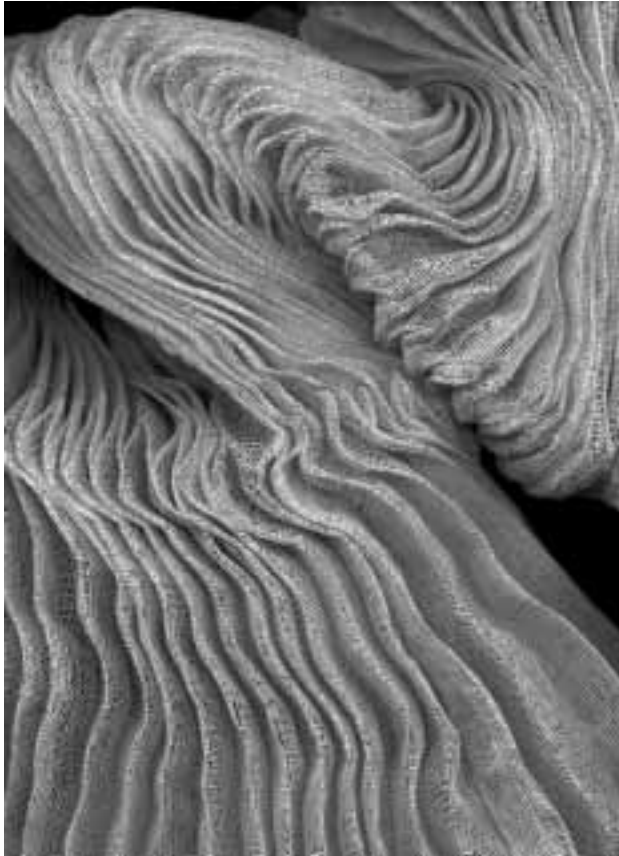
This made for more political participation than a hereditary crown; so many interests, including confessional ones, could be heard, unlike in Western Europe where the subjects had to follow the religion of the monarch and territorial churches emerged. So it was no surprise that these countries were also the earliest advocates of religious toleration; Bohemia (1485), Transylvania (1557) and Poland-Lithuania (1573) guaranteed liberty of conscience long before France's short-lived Edict of Nantes in 1598, the earliest in Western Europe.

Indeed the Commonwealth settlement was directly influenced by murder of the Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572, as the nobility elected the French King HENRI IV Valois and wanted a guarantee that nothing like that would happen in Poland-Lithuania. The Bohemian settlement was the model for the other two. After two decades of civil war between churches, it showed that unity in Christ was as important as unity of the state.

Church Plurality

How could there have been religious wars in Catholic Bohemia decades before LUTHER's Reformation? The fifteenth century reformer Jan Hus predated many of LUTHER's ideas, such as the vernacular Bible and communion in both kinds, and his Hussite following stretched into Silesia and Poland. This was something else that made church harmony easier in Central Europe after the Reformation; for these countries, differences within Christianity were already normal when it began. In Poland-Lithuania, the Orthodox had been part of the same state for centuries.

The relationship between Catholics and Orthodox at this time is a controversial issue. The foundation of the Uniate Church in 1596, where some



Orthodox in Poland-Lithuania agreed to accept Papal authority while keeping their own ritual, has been seen as an attempt by Rome to absorb the Orthodox into Catholicism.¹ Nevertheless, Protestants at least, Lutheran and Reformed, were very keen to work together with the non-Uniate Orthodox. They held a joint synod in Vilnius in 1599, and agreed to work together politically, defending their rights in the Sejm (the Polish Parliament).

¹ Catholic historians blame Russian imperialist and then Soviet historiography for giving the Uniate Church a bad name; see KUMOR B., *Geneza i zawarcie unii brzeskiej*. Yet the Uniates were restricted in comparison to Catholicism; their bishops were not afforded a place in the Senate. There was thus much Orthodox resistance to the Union; see DYŁĄGOWA H., *Unia brzeska – pojednanie czy podział?* Both articles in ŁUŹYŃ R. et al (eds.), *Unia brzeska: geneza, dzieje i konsekwencje w kulturze narodów słowiańskich*. Kraków, 1994.

There were even plans for a theological union, proposed by Czech Brethren minister Szymon TURNOWSKI. He established the tradition of Orthodox and dissenter dialogue dating back to 1451, when the Patriarch of Constantinople wrote to the Hussites to support their break with Rome: "The Greek Church is much closer to Apostolic teaching than the Roman one."² The Czech Brethren (Reformed believers, following the Hussite tradition) were the greatest advocates of theological ties with the Eastern Church; they even sent a mission to Moscow in 1570, trying to persuade Ivan the Terrible to a union.³ Catholics responded to this by stressing the common ground they had with Orthodox belief and tradition. A Catholic Castellan, Jerzy ZBARASKI of Krakow, also defended them. So the churches were vying to make alliances with each other, rather than to split.

The situation was similar in Transylvania, where Prince Gábor BETHLEN approached the Patriarch of Constantinople about reformation in the Romanian Orthodox Church. Though Romanian historians have seen Reformed advances as attempted Magyarisation, this did not occur, as the Orthodox affirmed their independence through the Iași synod. Dialogue between Reformed and Orthodox strengthened with the efforts of Anglican priest Isaac BASIRE, who moved to Transylvania in the 1650s; he thought Anglicanism had a unique role to unite a divided Christendom.

Grassroots Ecumenism

Despite the controversies of high politics, at the grassroots level, people usually did not worry about church differences. They knew believers of other confessions as family members, marriage partners and godparents, making confessional lines easy to cross. As the Socinian SCHOMANN said in his will to his sons, "from Catholicism through Lutheranism, Calvinism and Anabaptism I have come to the true Catholic faith. If a still purer church should arise at any time, then at once join it".⁴ Regional Jesuits produced Catholic vernacular translations of the Bible, despite the official ban. The Polish edition survived for decades, from 1599 till 1634, and another was produced in Transylvania⁵ in the 1620s. From birth to death, people crossed church boundaries. There are even examples of godparents between Catholics and Czech Brethren. One Brethren child was baptised by its Lutheran grandmother, while the father saw no need for re-baptism. Czech Brethren continued to do Socinian funerals into the 1640s.⁶ Synods of all denominations condemned mixed marriages so frequently that they must have been widespread.⁷

² TURNOWSKI S., *Kazania synodowe na generalnym ewangelickim synodzie w Toruniu 1595*. Królewiec, 1599.; successive preachers at the synod echoed him; Grzegorz z ZARNOWCA recalled the first schism between the Eastern and Western church with sorrow, and Andrzej CHRZASTOWSKI praised Orthodox rejection of papal authority.

³ BR (Biblioteka Raczyńskich, Poznań) MS (manuscript) 192 p.125.

Jan Ámos KOMENSKÝ (COMENIUS) epitomised the common ground between churches in Central Europe at this time. The famous educational theorist was a leader of the Czech Brethren. KOMENSKÝ wrote a plan for Christian unity in his *Labyrinth of the World* (1631). He got to know Christians of all confessions as he moved around Central Europe. When the Czech Brethren were expelled from the Habsburg Empire in 1627, he moved to Poland, settling in Leszno near Poznań where he set up two schools, one funded by a fellow believer and the other by a Catholic, and translated poetry into Polish. During the Swedish invasion of Poland-Lithuania, he moved again to Transylvania, where he encouraged Prince Zsigmond RÁKÓCZI to defend Protestants across Central Europe. Meanwhile, in the 1640s he travelled as far as England to advise the Puritans on educational and scientific ideas. He was an early advocate of interreligious dialogue, arguing against Christian hostility towards Muslims, since “they acknowledge Christ as a great prophet, and do not allow any blasphemy towards him”.⁸

KOMENSKÝ’s story shows that people were surprisingly mobile in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; migration did a lot to mix confessions up and foster their co-operation. The Thirty Years’ War was a major cause of this, affecting Hungary and Bohemia as well as the German lands. Not only Czech Brethren found their way to Poland, Germany and beyond as a result, but many Lutherans and Catholics were forced to move too. Many of these settled in the west of Poland, since the Commonwealth did not join the war; and they were determined not to repeat the religious conflict that had driven them there. The result was multilingual congregations and churches settling side by side.

Many Catholics made room for refugees from other churches to settle on their estates. Bogusław LESZCZYŃSKI, General Starosta (the highest official) in Great Poland, balanced building a Catholic monastery with approving the foundation of a new Czech Brethren church. Adam PRZYJEMSKI, Castellan of

⁴ SCHOMANN was an author of the first Socinian Catechism; Socinians did not believe in the Trinity. Cited by Kot S., *Socinianism in Poland*. Boston, 1977. xxiv.

⁵ The Polish one was only reintroduced in the nineteenth century. RHODE A., *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche im Posener Lande*. Würzburg, 1956. 47-48; the Magyar one was produced by a Jesuit at Transylvanian Prince Gábor Bethlen’s request.

⁶ Ostroróg synod 2 V 1634, ABC (Archiwum Braci Czeskich, Archiwum Państwowe Miasta Poznania) 1493. 70-75.

⁷ The Socinians did so in 1600 and 1605, the Catholics in 1643 and the Lutherans and Brethren from 1632. SZCZOTKA S., *Synody arian polskich 1569-1662*. In *Reformacja w Polsce 7/8* (1935-36) 50-51, 57; Gniezno archdiocesan synod at Uniejów on 7 VII 1643. In SAWICKI J., *Concilia Poloniae V – synody archidiecezji gnieźnieńskiej i ich statuty*. Warszawa, 1950. 240.; Rafał Leszczyński to the Leszno Lutherans, 4 XI 1633. In ABC 2530 p.65; Leszno synod 28 VI 1632, ABC 1486. 8; Ostroróg synod 2 V 1634, ABC 1493. 71; Leszno synod 14 X 1638, ABC 1502. 23; Skoki synod 8 III 1640, ABC 1504. 27; Leszno synod 29 IV 1643, ABC 1505. 18.

⁸ MURDOCK, *Calvinism*. 141, 276.

Gniezno, founded Rawicz to welcome Lutheran immigrants in 1638; there was no Catholic parish there till the nineteenth century.

Churches Uniting

In Poland-Lithuania, Lutherans, Calvinists and Czech Brethren worked closely together, overriding their mother churches' call for confessional isolation in favour of closer local co-operation. This was based on the Sandomierz Union of 1570, under which all Protestants in the Commonwealth agreed to hold joint synods, to accept each others' ministers and discuss theology without trying to convert each other. They published two versions of Eucharistic theology side by side, Lutheran and Reformed, and aimed for one Eucharistic ceremony, where the congregation could choose whether to stand or kneel (*Consensus in fide et Religione Christiana inter ecclesias maioris et minoris Poloniae 1570 (Toruń 1586)*).

Czech Brethren delegates to Poland accepted that the Polish church could unite with other Protestants, remembering their own traditions. As union with the Calvinists approached, the home church worried that the Brethren in Poland were deviating from their confessional norm.⁹ The Czech Brethren and Calvinists in the Commonwealth finally united into one church, in 1633. This encouraged them to work more closely together with the Lutherans.

KOMENSKÝ published a proposal for union with the Lutherans in 1645. It presented the contentious issues; the Eucharist, the person of Christ and predestination, and hoped that these differences would be overcome. The Reformed assured the Lutherans that they would not have to change their confession, so both could affirm their wish for union.¹⁰ The Brethren wrote to the local Lutherans and to Wittenberg about the meeting and their theological differences. They offered a compromise version of their confession, with the addition that they agreed with the Augsburg Confession for the sake of Protestant unity.

⁹ Leszno synod 16 XI 1609, ABC 1459. 10-11; Leszno synod 28 VI 1632, ABC 1486. 9-11.

¹⁰ Records of the Czech Brethren and Lutheran joint synod at Leszno, 26 IV 1645. In BR MS 79-100.

¹¹ Decision to send controversial articles of faith to Wittenberg for comment, with a copy to local Lutherans, and Lutheran patrons' response, Leszno synod 26 IV 1645, ABC 1511. 16, 18-31. Brethren to Wittenberg, April or May 1645, ABC 1990; Wittenberg to the Brethren and responses, 22 V, 2 VII and 15 VII 1645. In ABC 1987. 40-57.

¹² *Conditiones et Confessiones tam Augustana quam Bohemica consilari possunt*. In ABC 1997. 28; *Confessio fidei status civis et ecclesiae in Polonia, Prussia et Lithuania inv. confessionis Augustanae addictae in Colloquio Charitativi* (1645, pub. Gdańsk 1735) 65, 120, 124; PRAWDECKY C., *Entdeckung der unwarheiten... welcher D J HÜLSEMANN in seiner wiederlegung ausspregnet*. Leszno, 1647. 19-28.

¹³ "Den Streit von Sacramenten, Communicatione idiomatum, Praedestinatione, und andern zur Seligkeit ganz unnötigen Sachen wie de erergeten dadurch die kirchen bisher greulich zerrissen, zermutet und verderbet waren, so sen ihnen anbefohlen... Sie wollen allen Hass, Streit und Berdacht beiseit geseszt, sich neben ihnen in guter Einigkeit zum Colloquio einstellen und mit gesampter Hand ritterlich streiten." HÜLSEMANN J., *Widerlegung der Calvinischen Relation vom Colloquio zu Thorn*. Leipzig, 1646. 11-12.

Sadly Wittenberg responded that the Czech Brethren were too influenced by Calvinism; Wittenberg could only negotiate with them if they rejected the Calvinists. The Brethren response is an elegant argument against syncretism in favour of tolerating differences, unity rather than uniformity.¹¹ The Polish Lutherans wanted reconciliation too and published a joint statement with the Reformed, despite the response of Wittenberg.¹² In this they agreed not to argue about doctrinal differences, as it destroys the Church.¹³ The Reformed also distanced themselves from Geneva, condemning BEZA's intolerance of other beliefs and adding that Catholics also needed protection where they were in a minority.

The stimulus for closer church relations in Poland-Lithuania was called by Catholics; in 1645, King WŁADYSŁAW IV called the Colloquium Charitativum, a dialogue between Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed to resolve their theological differences. Though by this time the distance between confessions could not be overcome, this had much to do with the divisiveness caused by outside theologians, and delegates still prayed together at the meeting. This was noted with amazement across Europe; until then, only rare meetings between two, never three confessions had taken place.

Religious Freedom and Political Freedom

The common political rationale for the states in Central Europe was liberty including liberty of conscience. Catholic ŁUKASZ OPALIŃSKI, Royal Court Marshal, represented the general view in Poland-Lithuania. He saw political and religious liberty together as part of the same whole. Socinian writer Samuel PRZYPKOWSKI explained this clearly; "what use is liberty in anything else to a noble if he is not free in his conscience and his efforts to gain eternal salvation?"¹⁴ These grand statements were reflected in the political reality; representation to the Sejm from the province of Great Poland was one third Protestant in the first half of the seventeenth century.¹⁵

Bohemia and Hungary before Habsburg rule were also part of the same context where all Christian confessions could not only live together peacefully, but were included in political life. This lasted for a long time in a hostile climate, as the case of Transylvania shows. The Calvinist nobility there not only resisted Habsburg efforts to expand Catholicism but also reacted against Reformed efforts to impose their theological norms with princely backing, standing by the ideal of religious and political liberty into the 1640s at least.

¹⁴ "Bo na co się przyda szlachcicowi w czym inszym wolność, jeśli w sumieniu swym i w staraniu się o wieczne zbawienie swoje wolen nie będzie?" *Braterska deklaracja* (1646). In OGONOWSKI (ed.), *Mysł społeczna XVIIw.* 543.

¹⁵ Protestant deputies from Sroda averaged 30% from 1587-1648; DWORZACZEK W., *Skład społeczny wielkopolskiej reprezentacji sejmowej w latach 1572-1655.* In *Roczniki historyczne* 23. 1957. 304.

Habsburg rule changed the picture of toleration in Bohemia and Hungary in the seventeenth century; but not without a struggle. Emperor FERDINAND II (rule 1619-37) became determined to crush the opposition of strong Protestant nobilities in Bohemia and Hungary, where he was king in 1617 and 1618 respectively. The Bohemians dethroned him, replacing him with Calvinist Elector Palatine FREDERICK of Wittelsbach, until their 1620 defeat at White Mountain after which the emperor imposed Catholicism on both states. A change of ruler did not mean hasty religious change, however; the Catholic Reformation took time to permeate, yet the decisive factor was the reduced ability of the nobles to protect other confessions on their lands, which were confiscated after White Mountain.

Alliances formed across Central Europe to resist the take-over, and the resulting policy of one church in one state. Risers in the Polish civil war, the *rokosz* of 1606-9 supported their neighbours in resisting Habsburg rule, both during their own rising and in the following decades. The risers led secret negotiations with Gábor BÁTHORY, Prince of Transylvania, during the rising hoping to put him on the Polish throne. The former riser Marcin BRONIEWSKI followed the Bohemian and Hungarian risings closely and sympathetically in reports to Lithuanian leader Krzysztof RADZIWIŁŁ.¹⁶

Noble leader Rafał LESZCZYŃSKI supported Silesian and Bohemian opposition to Habsburg rule in the 1630s and welcomed immigrants onto his land. LESZCZYŃSKI also corresponded with FREDERICK, the Bohemian "Winter King".¹⁷ He was in regular contact with Prince Gábor BETHLEN, who sent him reports on the situation in Hungary and even invited him to his wedding.¹⁸

The above mentioned were all Reformed, but Catholics also joined the resistance. Jerzy ZBARASKI, the Castellan of Krakow, a close ally of RADZIWIŁŁ and LESZCZYŃSKI, stressed that religious peace was more important than religious zeal. He also joined them in a 1626 plot to replace ZYGMUNT III, King of Poland-Lithuania with the French duke Gaston D'ORLEANS.

This plan made a clear connection between dominant Catholicism and centralising state authority; the plotters feared their king would copy the

¹⁶ KONOPCZYŃSKI W., *Dzieje Polski nowożytnej*. Warszawa, 1999. 231. BRONIEWSKI's letters of 25 III and 9 IX 1620, 1 X 1621, 1 and 22 XII 1622, 22 V, 3 VII, 18 and 22 VIII 1623, 9 IV and 5 VII 1624 in AR (Archiwum Radziwiłłów, Archiwum G_owne Akt Dawnych, Warszawa) V-1419.

¹⁷ Letter from FREDERICK to LESZCZYŃSKI in BC (Biblioteka Czartoryskich, Kraków) MS 367. 113; SZELĄGOWSKI A., *Śląsk a Polska wobec powstanie czeskiego*. Lwów, 1904. 477; see Leszczyński's entry in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*.

¹⁸ Letters throughout the 1620s; LESZCZYŃSKI to BETHLEN recommending his servant OTWINOWSKI on 23 X 1624, and BETHLEN's acceptance 17 I 1625, report on Hungarian dissenters 18 I 1629 and wedding to princess Katherine HOHENZOLLERN of Brandenburg, invitation 6 XI 1625 in BC MS 367. 5, 110, 116, 121.

¹⁹ See AUGUSTYNIAK U. (ed.), *Spisek orleański 1626-28*. Warszawa, 1990. The plotters were led by Czech Brethren Rafał Leszczyński, Palatine of Belz, Calvinist Krzysztof Radziwiłł, Palatine of Vilnius and Catholic Jerzy Zbaraski, Castellan of Kraków.

model of their Habsburg neighbour. Gábor BETHLEN was a key ally in their machinations.¹⁹ The king discovered the plot too soon; still it shows how across Central Europe, Protestants and Catholics were working together to uphold the ideal of religious toleration.

The End of an Era

Just as Habsburg invasion upset the political and confessional balance in Bohemia and Hungary, so the Swedish invasion did the same in Poland-Lithuania. This occurred in 1655-60, and only thereafter did the identification of Polishness with Catholicism begin to harden, a single ethno-religious model in contrast to the earlier inclusion of different confessions in the framework of shared noble liberty.

The further development of the modern, militarily advanced nation state in the eighteenth century overrode the earlier model of plural estates and interests within one polity. Ironically, it was when the Commonwealth chose the path of one state and one church that it began to decline towards partition, weakened against its powerful neighbours, Prussia, Russia, and Austria.

So ties between churches were strong in early modern Central Europe; the polarisation of confessions, which was happening to the West of the continent, took place long after the Reformations, from the middle of the seventeenth century. The idea that only one confession could exist in one state was not native to these countries; it was inflamed by external political conflict. Where there was a balance between many different churches, co-operation between confessions could flourish as part of a wider political pluralism.

Suggested Reading

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**Kate WILSON: Klejnot swobodnego sumnienia –
A lelkiismeret szabadsága kincs:**



Közép-Európai egyházak egymás közt a reformáció után

Az esszé témája a vallásszabadság kérdése Közép-Európában 1550 és 1650 között. Míg ekkortájt Nyugat-Európában a felekezeti öntudat erősödése jellemző, Közép-Európát még nem zavarják az egyházak közti különbségek, melyek máig oly sok vizzályt okoznak. A különféle népek e térségre jellemző keveredése, és a megegyezésen alapuló kormányzati modellek lehetővé tették az egyházak szoros együttműködését. Nyugat-Európában erről álmodni sem mertek, ahol akkoriban a vallási különbségek nyílt háborúskodáshoz vezettek. A tanulmány bemutat néhány igen befolyásos személyiséget (például Jan Ámos KOMENSKÝT – akit COMENIUS-ként ismerünk), valamint történelmi eseményt (nevezetesen a különféle felekezetek képviselői között létrejött szerződéseket és találkozókat).

Kate WILSON: Klejnot swobodnego sumienia:



Kościół razem w Europie Środkowej po Reformacji

Esej ten zajmuje się zagadnieniem swobody religijnej w Europie Środkowej między 1550 a 1650 rokiem. W tym czasie, kiedy to konfesjonalizacja rozprzestrzeniła się w Europie Zachodniej, różnice między Kościołami, które dziś nadal powodują podziały, nie były problemem dla Środkowych Europejczyków. Unikatowa mieszanka ludzi w tym regionie oraz modele rządów oparte na konsensusie umożliwiły Kościołom wspólną pracę do stopnia, o jakim nawet nie marzono w Europie Zachodniej, gdzie różnice wyznaniowe prowadziły do otwartych wojen. Esej przedstawia niektóre z najbardziej wpływowych osobistości (np. Jan Ámos KOMENSKÝ) oraz wydarzeń historycznych, a mianowicie kontakty i spotkania pomiędzy reprezentantami różnych wyznań.



**Kate WILSON: Klejnot swobodnego sumnienia –
Klenot svobody svědomí:**

Círky ve střední Evropě v poreformačním období

Esej se zabývá otázkou náboženské svobody ve střední Evropě mezi lety 1550–1650. V tomto období, kdy se západní Evropou šířil konfesionalismus, nebyly ve střední Evropě rozdíly mezi církvemi, které i dnes způsobují rozkol, žádným problémem. Jedinečná směsice národů v tomto regionu a modelů vlády založených na konsensu umožňovala církvím spolupracovat v takové míře, o které se západní Evropě, kde náboženské rozdíly vedly k otevřeným vojenským konfliktům, ani nesnilo. Esej představuje i některé z nejvlivnějších osobností (Jan Ámos KOMENSKÝ) z historických událostí, zejména setkání mezi představiteli rozdílných konfesí.



**Kate WILSON: Klejnot swobodnego sumnienia –
Das Juwel der Freiheit des Geistes:**

Die Kirchen in Zentraleuropa nach der Reformation

Das Anliegen dieses Artikel ist es das Thema „Religiöse Freiheiten in Zentraleuropa zwischen 1550 und 1650“ zu erörtern. In dieser Zeit, als die Zersplitterung in die verschiedenen Konfessionen in Westeuropa weit verbreitet war, waren die Unterschiede zwischen den Kirchen, die auch heute noch Konflikte verursachen, kein Problem in Zentraleuropa. Die einzigartige Vermischung der Völker dieser Region und die auf Konsens basierenden Regierungsmodelle ermöglichten es den Kirchen in einer Art und Weise zusammen zu arbeiten, die in Westeuropa, wo religiöse Unterschiede zu erbarmungslosen Kriegen führte, unvorstellbar war. Der Artikel stellt einige der einflussreichsten Persönlichkeiten, wie z.B. Jan Ámos KOMENSKÝ, und wichtigsten geschichtlichen Ereignisse vor. Insbesondere werden die Kontakte und Treffen der Vertreter verschiedener Konfessionen behandelt.