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The Church in the Czech Religiously Indifferent Society: An Ecclesiological Perspective

Abstract

The paper presents the situation of Churches in the Czech Republic and analyses the changes in the self-conception of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in the context of a secularised society characterised by a high degree of religious indifference. The changes of this Church in the past century faithfully reflect the spiritual climate of the Czech religious scene. The aim of the paper is to show and concretise, using the example of three ecclesiologies of this Church (the ecclesiology of associations and their activities, the ecclesiology of fellowship, and the postmodern ecclesiology of the spiritual centre), how Christian communities can adapt to a religiously indifferent society, what obstacles they may face, and what one-sidedness they resort to.

Keywords: secularisation, religious indifference, ecclesiology, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Czech religious scene.

Kościół w czeskim społeczeństwie indyferentnym religijnie: perspektywa ekleziologiczna

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia sytuację Kościołów w Republice Czeskiej i analizuje zmiany w samoświadomości Czechosłowackiego Kościoła Husyckiego w kontekście zsekularyzowanego społeczeństwa, charakteryzującego się wysokim stopniem indyferentyzmu religijnego. Przemiany tego Kościoła w minionym stuleciu wiernie odzwierciedlają duchowy klimat panujący w życiu religijnym Czech. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie i skonkretyzowanie, na przykładzie trzech ekleziologii tego Kościoła (ekleziologii stowarzyszeń i ich działalności, ekleziologii wspólnoty i postmodernistycznej ekleziologii centrum duchowego), w jaki sposób wspólnoty chrześcijańskie mogą dostosować się do obojętnego religijnie społeczeństwa, jakie przeszkody mogą napotkać i do jakiej jednostronności się uciekają.

Słowa kluczowe: sekularyzacja, indyferentyzm religijny, ekleziologia, Czechosłowacki Kościół Husycki, czeska scena religijna.

In my paper I will try to show, using the example of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church¹ (CSHC), what shifts in the self-conception of the Church occur with the changes in modern society, social narratives and lifestyles. As a regional Church limited to the Czech Republic and a few vibrant centres in Slovakia, the CSHC reflects the spiritual climate of Czech society quite faithfully. Its origins and development are closely linked to the spread of secularization and religious indifference. It could be said that the growth of religious indifference was one of the main impulses for its establishment, and that one of the main themes of its daily life and theological reflection was the attempt to come to terms with a religiously indifferent society. The various ecclesiologies with which the CSHC has identified itself in the course of its history can thus be both an inspiration for those who seek the place of the Church in a religiously indifferent society and a warning against the one-sidedness to which such a search leads. The Czech religious environment has its own peculiarities, so I will begin by briefly characterizing the situation of the Churches in the Czech Republic, which is often considered to be one of the most religiously indifferent countries in the world. After sketching the local religious scene, I will present three ecclesiologies that to some extent have been or are still able to counteract advancing secularization and religious indifference, and I will briefly summarise their limitations.

1. The situation of the Churches in the Czech secularised and religiously indifferent society

The Czech Republic is considered one of the most secularised or religiously indifferent countries today. According to the statistics of the *Pew Research Center*, which has been working for years on a project on the distribution of religious affiliation in the countries of the world, the Czech Republic ranks first among

¹ The Czechoslovak Church emerged from a schism in the Roman Catholic Church on 8 January 1920. Initially, its ideological orientation was influenced by the Czech national revival, Catholic modernism, liberal theology, the literary movement of Czech Catholic modernism and the religious philosophy of T. G. Masaryk. Shortly after its foundation, 500,000 inhabitants, mostly of Czech nationality, joined the Church; ten years after its foundation, the Church had almost 800,000 believers, and after the war in 1947, its membership approached one million. Vladimír Srb. 1949. *Statistická příručka církve československé 1949*. Praha: ÚR ČČSH, 19. After the Second World War, with the new generation of clergymen, mainly educated at Huss's Czechoslovak Evangelical Theological Faculty, the theology of the CSC moved away from its original modernism and liberalism and came closer in thought to biblical personalism, existential theology and the theology of the Word as presented by Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, etc. In 1971, it extended its original name to include the term "Hussite". From the 1950s, the number of its members began to decrease significantly. According to the Czech Statistical Office, in 2021 the Czechoslovak Hussite Church had 23,610 members, five dioceses and 280 religious communities. Cf. Sčítání 2021. 2024. Náboženská víra (29.6.2024). <https://scitani.gov.cz/nabozenska-vira#skupina-54316>.

the countries with the largest number of citizens described as unaffiliated. It is followed by North Korea in second place, with a full 4%, where – despite the official declaration of freedom of religion – organised religions are incompatible with the state ideology and the Marxist narrative that describes religion as “the opium of the people.”² While this statistic is outdated, having been completed in 2010, and the *Pew Research Center* is currently preparing a new one, the projections for the next decade that *Pew* worked with in 2010 have been more or less confirmed by more recent Czech national statistics.

The greatest increase in religious indifference in the post-communist era occurred between 1991 and 2011. While in the 1991 census almost half of the population of the Czech Republic belonged at least formally to a religion or Church, twenty years later, in 2011, only 21% did. During these 20 years, however, along with religious indifference, the deinstitutionalization of religious space also grew. In 1991, out of a total population of 10,302,215, about 4.5 million people subscribed to one of the Czech Churches. In 2011, only 1.46 million inhabitants subscribed to Churches, but the statistics showed that about 705,000 more people do not subscribe to any Church or religious society, but still consider themselves believers. In the 2021 census, there was another remarkable development in the Czech religious space. The number of inhabitants belonging to a Church or religious society fell from 1.46 million to 1.37 million,³ but the number of deinstitutionalised believers rose significantly, from 705,000 to 960,000. Between 2011 and 2021, religious indifference seems to have reached its limits. While the decline of institutional Churches continues, the growth of non-institutional forms of religiosity overcomes this decline and slowly becomes the new religious mainstream. As recent research suggests that non-institutional religiosity is becoming more popular, especially among young people under 35, the trend towards non-institutional religiosity is expected to continue.⁴

The widespread religious indifference of Czech society and the declining influence of the Churches on society raise a number of questions. I will mention at least one of them. Why is religious indifference and deinstitutionalisation so

² Cf. Pew Research Center. 2024. Religious Composition by Country, 2010–2050 (29.6.2024). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/>.

³ From the numbers above, it would appear that the decline in institutional church believers between 2011 and 2021 is slowing considerably. However, such a conclusion is not entirely accurate. The numbers of believers in the large Czech Churches continued to decline during this period. In 2021, 341,000 fewer believers subscribed to the Roman Catholic Church than in 2011, 19,000 fewer to the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and almost 16,000 fewer to the Czechoslovak Hussite Church than in 2011. On the other hand, the number of believers belonging to the Orthodox Church, which has become the second-largest Church in the Czech Republic thanks to immigration from Ukraine, Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, has increased significantly.

⁴ Tomáš Havlíček, Kamila Klingorová et al. 2020. *Postsekularismus v Česku: Trendy a regionální souvislosti*. Praha: P3K, 78–80.

widespread in the Czech Republic compared to neighbouring post-communist states, Slovakia or Poland? There are certainly more reasons for this state of the religious scene: the weakening of the position of the Catholic Church and the first significant growth of the religiously indifferent population immediately after the First World War; the clashes between religious metanarratives – Cyril and Methodius, St. Wenceslaus and the Hussites – and their misuse (the traditions of Cyril and Methodius justified the ideology of Pan-Slavism, the traditions of St. Wenceslaus were misused by the Nazis during the occupation and the Hussites by the Communist regime); the strength of the Communist Party already during the First Republic and the relatively strong and long-lasting anti-religious propaganda during the Communist regime; the survival of this propaganda in the secular metanarrative, which points to religious intolerance, religious wars, forced conversions, superstition, rejection of science, or patriarchal oppression; the weak resistance of the Churches to the totalitarian regime and the collaboration of church leaders; bland church personalities; property scandals of the Churches, etc.

It is clear from these explanations and statistics that for more than a century, even before the rise of totalitarian regimes that began to restrict the life of the Churches by force and through legislative changes, the Czech Churches have had to cope with strong secularisation pressures and a relatively large segment of the population that is religiously indifferent or directly hostile to religion. Under these pressures, the CSHC (as well as other Czech Churches) identified with different self-understandings. Thanks to this, the vitality of these ecclesiologies was able to manifest and prove itself over a relatively long period of time. In the following chapters I will try to name and describe three conceptions of the Church that deserve our special attention because of their remarkable impact on Czech society. I have chosen the terms for these ecclesiologies: the ecclesiology of associations and their activities, the ecclesiology of fellowship, and the post-modern ecclesiology of the spiritual centre.

2. Ecclesiology of associations and their activities

The desire to associate and to form communities is seen by Christian anthropology as an integral part of human nature. Personal identity develops and changes not only in a closer community such as the family, but also in a wider linguistic, cultural, philosophical, religious and value context. Awareness of the importance of wider social structures is also firmly woven into biblical anthropology. This is succinctly expressed, for example, in the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia* (1987), according to which man is

created as a social being and cannot fulfil his vocation in life otherwise than in relationship with others.⁵

However, the mere desire to associate does not automatically create an ideal community. Christian anthropology is in this regard dialectical in its nature. In addition to the human desire for association, it also speaks of various forms of human corruption and the resulting antisocial behaviour, i.e. human pride and selfishness, human tendencies to manipulation, oppression and violence, individualistic narrow-mindedness, etc. The violation of human nature is projected into every interpersonal community, often multiplying in it or being directly deposited in its structures.⁶ Various liberation theologies have begun to use the apt (though often criticised) term “structural sin” to refer to this fact.

It is in this tension between the natural human desire for association on the one hand and the brokenness of interpersonal relationships on the other that the ecclesiology of associations and their activities comes into play. If the Church is called to be the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth, then it should be a medium of healing and salvation not only for individuals but for all forms of society. However, this particular task of the Church, the healing of society, cannot be achieved by mere words, i.e. by passive criticism of social structures, by moralising or even by distancing itself from society and from the cultural, educational, sporting and interests’ needs of people. It is much better achieved through active participation in existing social structures or through the creation of new social forms. Only in an active approach can the Church show that it is capable of forming a quality non-ecclesial or quasi-ecclesial communities based on Christian values.

This ecclesiology was not a new concept. In some ways we find its elements in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. It played a role in the early Reformation in the theology of Martin Luther, who argued that every activity in society should be understood as a vocation to Christ, and that following Christ should be applied in all orders of life.⁷ This ecclesiology, however, did not be-

⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Article 149 (22.8.2024). https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷ This does not mean that Luther’s doctrine of the Church automatically leads to the establishment of unchurched or quasi-churched communities based on Christian values. Some theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy, on the contrary, saw such communities as fundamentally at odds with Luther’s ecclesiology and sometimes even as sectarian; they saw the family as the basis of the religious community and every member of the church, if not directly a pastor, should fulfil his Christian mission in the ordinary vocations of life. This conviction was still quite strong in some of the Lutheran areas at the beginning of the 20th century. In his memoirs, for example, the well-known Lutheran theologian Karl Heim describes this experience. Cf. Karl Heim. 1960³. *Ich gedenke der vorigen Zeiten: Erinnerungen aus acht Jahrzehnten*. Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 76–80.

come a significant theological current until the late Enlightenment boom in associational activity. Since the Enlightenment, demands for the right of association and the free formation of associations have appeared in the programmes of many democratic movements. And although the Churches were not always open to the ideas of the Enlightenment, they very quickly became familiar with the new situation and became one of the most active founders of associations of various kinds.

In the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the activity of associations began to determine the rhythm of social life in the 19th century, and after the publication of the Law on Associations (18 November 1867), which established liberal association rights, the activity of associations multiplied many times over. The period from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century is sometimes referred to as the “golden age of associations.” It was interrupted only by the rise of totalitarian regimes and, later, by the general transformation of society by modern media culture. The relative stability of the Catholic Church and other religious groups in the Czech lands was maintained through the activities of associations, despite ongoing secularisation.⁸

The Churches recognised the importance of association activities quite early and became participants, founders and operators of many associations themselves. Along with this, an ecclesiology of associations and their activities began to be thought through. Even today one can read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Certain societies, such as the family and the state, correspond more directly to the nature of man; they are necessary to him. To promote the participation of the greatest number in the life of a society, the creation of voluntary associations and institutions must be encouraged «on both national and international levels, which relate to economic and social goals, to cultural and recreational activities, to sport, to various professions, and to political affairs.» This «socialization» also expresses the natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities. It develops the qualities of the person, especially the sense of initiative and responsibility, and helps guarantee his rights.”⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states that “the social nature of human beings is not uniform but is expressed in many different ways. In fact, the common good depends on a healthy social pluralism. The different com-

⁸ Concerning the importance of associations in Czech society from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, see: Zuzana Hloušková. Ed. 2001. *Historie spolkové činnosti na Hradecku*. Hradec Králové: Občanské poradenské středisko, 7–22; Eva Hájková. 2013. “Zlatá éra spolků”. *Deník Referendum* (26.2.2024). <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/14659-zlata-era-spolku>.

⁹ [–]. 1992. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Article 1882 (27.8.2024). https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6G.HTM.

ponents of society are called to build a unified and harmonious whole, within which it is possible for each element to preserve and develop its own characteristics and autonomy.”¹⁰

Until the 1940s, the large folks Churches were an integral part of society thanks to their associational activities. The Czechoslovak Church, founded in 1920 by a relatively small number of Catholic priests who were dissatisfied with the situation in the Catholic Church, began to spread rapidly in society, mainly thanks to its associational activities. In addition to founding religious communities, the new Church also set up charitable and social departments, social centres and sisterhoods, which organised charity collections, holiday camps, children’s days, festivals and qualification courses, theatre societies and associations, choral societies and music academies, sports and conscription associations, etc. The Church also co-operated with a number of associations of an interest, pro-social and political nature: the Czech Sokol Union, the Czechoslovak Legionary Association, the Association of Free Thinkers, the Union of National Liberation, the Firemen’s Associations, the Chelčický Brotherhood, the Riflemen’s Association, the Kostnická Association, the Crematorium Association, etc. The activities of the Church were so successful that thirty years after its foundation the number of its members approached one million.

The dynamic growth of the Czechoslovak Church in the first three decades of its existence is rightly associated with the “golden age of associations”. The Church literally lived in associations. Associational activity became one of its main characteristics. For this reason, it was sometimes pejoratively referred to as the “Church of Associations”. The emergence of the Church in this period was also mirrored in its theological reflections. For example, it is clear from Article I of the Church Constitution of 1924, which reflects the Church’s search for self-definition in its beginnings – “The Czechoslovak Church is composed of Christians who seek to fulfil the present endeavour of moral and scientific knowledge with the spirit of Christ...” – it is clear that it understood its mission to be primarily linked to social action.¹¹ In the 1940s, Alois Spisar, one of the Church’s leading theologians, reflected consistently on this ecclesiology of associations and their activities. In his ecclesiology, the Church is presented as the archetype of a healthy society. It should inspire the other components of society (associations) with its spirit and enthusiasm for the cause, its unity, its good relations and its conviction that what it is

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 151.

¹¹ For the discussion and drafting of Article I of the Constitution, see [–]. 1924. *Zpráva o I. řádném sněmu Církve československé konaném ve dnech 29. a 30. srpna 1924 v Praze-Smíchově*. Praha: Ústřední rada Církve československé, 47–50.

doing is right and beneficial. In this model, the Church is presented as the teacher of community life. The way of living in community, received from Christ, is to be transmitted.¹²

The crisis of the Church's associative activity came with the advent of the totalitarian regimes. The totalitarian regimes were well aware of the political power of the associations, so they began to restrict their activities on the one hand and, on the other, to create an alternative in the associations over which they could maintain permanent control, or which directly promoted the values of first Nazism and then Communism. The long period of the communist regime, which lasted for two generations, was particularly responsible for the destruction of the church's activities in society. As a result of the centralisation and Bolshevisation of sports, cultural, educational, interest, health and social institutions, the Church lost almost all possibility of church-social engagement. Those who wanted to be active in society could do so in institutions controlled by the regime. Along with the obstacle to social engagement, there was also a crisis in the ecclesiology of the associations and their activities. The Church's one-sided focus on society, and thus its dependence on the activities of associations, showed its weakness. The identity crisis of the Church has led to the assertion of a new self-understanding, which is best described by the term ecclesiology of fellowship, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Immediately after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the Church sought to renew its activities in society. The Church developed a number of important projects. The clergy returned to schools, organised children's camps, children's days, various cultural, educational and sports activities, initiated new forms of social and charitable activities, and the phenomenon of chaplains in hospitals, prisons, the army and the police appeared. Many clergymen have found second secular jobs, often in the fields of education, social services or health care. However, the Church has not come close to the range of social activities in which it found its meaning between the 1920s and the 1940s.

The failure of the Church in the process of social renewal has often been justified by the fact that society has stopped being accustomed to the presence of religion in the public sphere, or by forty years of strong anti-religious propaganda; by the closed way of life imposed on the Church in religious communities and the long reduction of its activities to worship, devotions, ceremonies, Bible studies, catechesis and pastoral care; by the loss of active lay people and the transfer of lay activities to the clergy; by the unprofessionalism of priests

¹² Alois Spisar. 1946. *Věrouka v duchu církve československé II*. Praha: Blahoslav, 84, 116–118. For a detailed analysis of Spisar's ecclesiology, see: Jiří Vogel. 2005. *Církev v sekularizované společnosti: studie k husitské eklesiologii*. Brno: L. Marek, 28–35.

who tried to renew social activities, etc. All these justifications for the failure to renew social activities are only true to a certain extent. In fact, the crisis of social activity occurred even in countries that were not marked by the rise of totalitarian ideologies. The crisis of social activity in these countries began to manifest itself later, from around the 1970s, and was closely linked to the advent of new media, first television broadcasting and later the spread of personal computers, the Internet, social networks and smart phones. The gradual shift of the whole of society towards virtual reality became the main competition for all associative activities.

This does not mean that the ecclesiology of associations and their activities is doomed to failure. Thanks to the post-communist democratisation and liberalisation of society, it has found its supporters again, but it will probably never again play as important a role in the Church as it did in the first decades of its existence. It should also be noted that with the shift of society into virtual reality, there have been significant changes in the activities of associations. Some forms of these activities have been significantly reduced: for example, educational associations, social and charitable associations, politically active associations, leisure associations for children and young people, hobby associations focused on travel, culture, gardening, film clubs, singing and theatrical associations, and so on. On the other hand, sports and entertainment associations still have a relatively strong position in society.

A renewal of the church's associational activity is certainly possible, and some religious communities that have moved in this direction have seen their membership base stabilise and, in some places, grow. However, the mainstream society's focus on sports and entertainment tends to be perceived by the Church as too secular; the Church does not see any particular importance in organising such activities, and usually does not even have the qualified manpower to devote to such activities. However, thanks to its rich First Republic tradition and its pro-social orientation, it seems that the Church could move in this direction in the future. Despite the fact that the "golden era of associations" is over, the Church could develop these activities to a much greater extent in the future. The fact that the Church still possesses this pro-social spirit of the First Republic is also evident from the fact that a relatively large percentage of clergy are involved in activities that go beyond the boundaries of religious communities. Either they are involved in some form of pastoral care in addition to their work in local parishes, or they are active in non-profit organisations or as teachers in schools, etc.

3. Ecclesiology of fellowship

An ecclesiology that emphasises natural associational needs and activities is very dynamic, and I think it will always find a place among those church members who feel comfortable in social activities, who are very practical, and who do not feel comfortable in a church where there are only regular worship meetings, Bible classes and other events aimed at developing spirituality, because they do not find full meaning in them. However, as we have seen above, such an ecclesiology of the association naturally comes into crisis when it is unable to carry out its activities freely because of a state regime that interferes with liberal rights of association, or when there is a decline in interest in associational activities, as has happened in the past because of the gradual shift of the population to virtual reality and the decline in interest in certain types of associations due to the increase in the standard of living of the population and other factors. The Czechoslovak Hussite Church experienced its first major identity crisis with the advent of totalitarian regimes. During this period, it had to give up most of its social activities, and its life was gradually reduced to worship and catechesis, which moved from schools to parishes. Together with the loss of the possibility to act publicly in society, it began to search for a new meaning of its existence.

In the late 1940s, a new self-understanding of the Church, which we might call an ecclesiology of fellowship, began to assert itself and became stronger as the Church was driven more and more into the ghetto by the totalitarian regime. The ecclesiology of fellowship was characterised by a sharp critique of the previous mainstream ecclesiology. In particular, it was criticised for its low emphasis on individual and devotional spirituality, its liberal resignation to the contribution of biblical thought, its failure to engage with contemporary theological reflection, its reduction of the spiritual life to practical Christianity, and its overemphasis on associational activities.¹³ The Church, according to this new ecclesiology, is not there to transform society through its pro-social activities, practical Christianity, the founding of associations and various other organisations, to bring the principles and values of Christian life into society. The Church is there to become a place where Jesus Christ is made present, in the spirit of the well-known verse from Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.” In other words, where people come together

¹³ The ecclesiology of associations and their activities, which Alois Spisar gave the main seal of approval to in his book *Věřouka v duchu církve československé II.* (1946), was attacked from the perspective of the new ecclesiology by Spisar’s disciple Zdeněk Trtík. In 1955, Trtík published an extensive commentary on Spisar’s book, in which he subjected Spisar’s entire work to a thorough critique. Cf. Zdeněk Trtík. 1955. *Komentář k Věřouce – dílu II.* Praha: HČSBF, 173–240.

in following of Jesus Christ, where they build community (*koinonia*, *ekklēsia*), interpersonal relationships, if carried by the quality of Jesus' love for his neighbour, become a place of God's presence. Even this ecclesiology, of course, envisaged that it would influence society, but rather by radiating the love of God and neighbour that takes place in the fellowship of the Church. This biblical personalism, inspired by the work of Ferdinand Ebner, Martin Buber and especially Emil Brunner, did not have as great an impact on society as the attitudes of the previous ecclesiology, but it was much better able to strengthen faith and identity in community and to uncover for the Church a hitherto neglected source of Christianly lived spirituality.¹⁴

As early as the mid-1950s, thanks to the theologian Zdeněk Trtík, this new orientation of the Church promoted the ideas of biblical personalism in a new catechism entitled *Foundations of the Faith of the Czechoslovak Church*.¹⁵ The ecclesiology of fellowship is the subject of the first fifty questions and answers in the Catechism, it is the most extensive part and the real ideological basis of all the other themes of faith, morals, worship, and sacramental life. The ecclesiology of the Catechism is based in particular on the concept of the Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner, who in his book *Das Missverständnis der Kirche* (1951) drew a sharp distinction between the ecclesial organisation (institution), which according to him is characterised mainly by the legal framework and formal membership, and the community (fellowship) of the Church, which is characterised by the quality of personal relationships that have their origin in the following of Jesus Christ in the spirit of the twofold commandment of love for God and neighbour. Brunner was concerned that his distinction between the church as institution and the church as community (fellowship) might be identified with the traditional Reformation distinction between the visible and invisible church. But the quality of personal relationships in the fellowship of the church is, in his view, as visible as the legal framework of church organisation. He finally rejected the old Reformation doctrine of the visible and invisible church as outdated, unbiblical, and too objectifying a distinction between the church as an institution and the church as the aggregate of all those who are predestined to salvation. Finding the meaning of the church in the visible community (fellow-

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of Trtík's ecclesiology, see: Vogel. 2005. *Církev v sekularizované společnosti*, 66–138.

¹⁵ A draft of the new catechism was first published in the pages of the theological journal *Náboženská revue*: Zdeněk Trtík. 1954. "Základní věroučné these (Návrh katechismu)". *Náboženská revue* 25: 194–228, 258–273. After extensive modifications, additions and approval, the catechism was published by the Central Council of the Church under the title: [–]. 1958. *Základy víry československé církve*. Praha: ÚR ČČS. At the Sixth Council of the Church in 1971 it was received as an official doctrinal document under the title [–]. 1975. *Základy víry církve československé husitské*. Praha: ÚR ČČSH.

ship) naturally led Brunner to place the community (*koinonia, ekklēsia*) above the institution of the church. For him, the purpose of the ecclesial institution is to serve the fellowship of the church of Christ. If the roles of the ecclesial institution and the community are confused, or if the believer serves the institution more than the community, the existence of the church loses its meaning. Brunner went so far in his argument that he even believed in the possibility of a church without any institutional elements, without any legal framework and without formal membership, based only on fellowship in the sense of the verse quoted above from Matthew 18:20.¹⁶

From Brunner's concept of the church, it is clear why many personalities of the Czechoslovak Church, which originally started from the ecclesiology of associations, suddenly turned critical towards the activities of associations. If the meaning of the Church lies in community, and if the institutions of the Church can threaten the existence of community (*koinonia, ekklēsia*), then the Church should at least be cautious in expanding its institutional base, for example through associational activities. It also follows, of course, that further expansion of the institution should always be directed towards the fellowship of the Church and should serve its spirituality of biblical personalism, which shows that only in personal relationships of love for God and neighbour is Christ made present, who comes through the other fellow human being in the form of a gift or a challenge, a grace or a vocation.

The ecclesiology of the *Foundations of Faith* differed from Brunner's conception of the Church in one respect. While Brunner wrote his reflections in free Switzerland, Trtík developed them in Czechoslovakia during the period of the worst persecution of the Church by the communist regime. Compared to Brunner, Trtík had a much greater experience of being faithful to Christ, of creating space for encountering Christ and finding him in one's neighbour, which is the way of the church in a society hostile to the activities of the Christian communities. In this ecclesiology, the CSC has found new hope, enthusiasm and optimism, and an alternative to the false construction socialist zeal of Czech society in the 1950s.

The understanding of the Church as a humane alternative to the totalitarian mainstream gave a strong impetus to the ecclesiology of fellowship, which, together with the reduction of the Church's activities to the only development of fellowship in religious communities, led to an intensive search for new forms

¹⁶ Emil Brunner. 1951. *Das Missverständnis der Kirche*. Zürich: Zwingli Verlag. Brunner also incorporated this sharp distinction between *ekklēsia* in the sense of community (fellowship) and *Kirche* in the sense of ecclesial organization into his three-volume dogmatics, see: Emil Brunner. 1964². *Dogmatik III. Die Christliche Lehre von der Kirche, vom Glauben und von der Vollendung*. Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 15–158.

of individual and congregational spiritualities. The activities of religious communities grew to include Bible classes and other alternative gatherings in addition to regular worship, devotions and religious education in children's and youth groups. The previous neglect of sacramental preparation, fasting, personal and family prayer began to be discussed. A number of clergy and laity initiated new worship, prayer and other spiritual approaches. For example, the song-based worship service,¹⁷ the Psalter¹⁸ or alternative hymnbooks were created, and new methods of pastoral and spiritual care were developed. Many believers sought spiritual inspiration in other Churches, some in the Catholic Church, some in Orthodox and traditional Protestant Churches, and others in revivalist movements. Despite the collaboration of some clergy with the communist regime and the nostalgia of some members of the Church for the glorious period of "growth" of the Church in the 1920s to 1940s, which was manifested especially in a reluctance to change the established forms of religious life, this spiritual Christianity played a large part in bridging the life of the Church during the communist period. It was able to find new meaning and deepen the spiritual life of many communities of the CSHC.

The ecclesiology of fellowship was able to create space for an alternative way of life for many people during the communist totalitarian regime, and to this day the biblical personalism of spiritual Christianity remains something that believers value highly in their Church.¹⁹ It should be noted that other Churches in the Czech Republic, especially the Catholic Church, followed a similar path, i.e. the path of dialogical personalism, as evidenced by the theological works of Josef Zvěřina, Karel Vrána, Otto Mádr, Jolana Poláková, Ctirad Václav Pospíšil and others. The Catholic Church had it a little easier in this respect, because it was not as strongly tied to the social activity as was the case in the CSHC and could draw on the depth of the inner and mystical spirituality of its own tradition. This new self-understanding of the Church as a community was not dynamic enough,

¹⁷ For the song-based worship service, see: Hana Rohlíčková. 2007. *Liturgický projev Církve československé husitské* (diplomová práce). Praha: HTF UK, 96–101.

¹⁸ Vlastimil Klos, Anna Klosová. Eds. 1985. *Žaltář: modlitby duchovního života*. Hradec Králové: DR CČSH HK.

¹⁹ This attitude of the Church was discussed at the conference *Identity of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church* held at the Hussite Theological Faculty of Charles University on 19 November 2015, Cf. Jiří Vogel. 2017. "Naděje i ohrožení plynoucí z formování křesťanské identity". *Theologická revue* 88: 17. See also other papers from this conference: Pavel Kolář. 2015. "Identita CČSH v kontextu duchovní správy". *Theologická revue* 86: 371–382; Matějková Veronika. 2015. "Identita CČSH z pohledu duchovní správy". *Theologická revue* 86: 383–388; Filip Sedlák. 2015. "Duch Kristův a svoboda svědomí jako pojmové vyjádření husitské identity". *Theologická revue* 86: 397–406; Zdeněk Kučera. 2015. "Identita CČSH". *Theologická revue* 86: 355–360; Tomáš Butta. 2015. "K identitě liturgického slavení Církve československé husitské". *Theologická revue* 86: 361–370; Kristýna Mlýnková. 2015. "Liturgie, Identita a mladá generace v církvi". *Theologická revue* 86: 407–412.

and the Church was not able to stem the outflow of its membership base, but at least it slowed down the outflow. In a way, this spiritual understanding of the Church, despite its popularity among the believers, entered to a crisis in the mid-1990s. With the collapse of the communist regime and the restoration of a free democratic society, the Church was no longer seen as a spiritual and opinionated alternative to the social mainstream. From today's perspective, it is clear that the dynamics of the ecclesiology of fellowship were largely related to the state's restriction of public church activities and the ghettoisation of the Church. In a free society, with its wide range of social activities and opportunities for self-realisation, and with its postmodern plurality of spirituality, the ecclesiology of communion naturally began to weaken, and the Church gradually came to realise that it had to find its meaning of existence in society again.

4. Postmodern ecclesiology of the spiritual centre

In the late 1980s, and especially after the Velvet Revolution in the first half of the 1990s, the Czech lands were hit by a great wave of interest in various forms of religiosity. Churches inspired by the spirituality of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements grew rapidly, new Churches were founded, and large missionary gatherings were held in larger cities. However, the wave of new religiosity was not always well received by the established Churches, which suffered from internal disputes over future direction, proselytism and partial schisms. Along with new forms of Christian spirituality, religious communities and movements that had nothing directly to do with Christianity, or were perceived as borderline from a Christian perspective, began to spread. The significance of the spiritual ferment of this key period for the further development of folk Churches with a long tradition in the Czech religious space has not yet been sufficiently reflected upon.

From today's perspective, it is clear that the transformation of society in the 1990s was not a return to the liberal mindset and culture of the first half of the 20th century, but something else. The world had moved into a postmodern era. Postmodernism, which had gained its philosophical depth in the 1980s (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Felix Guattari, Richard Rorty, etc.), became a mainstream of thought and culture. Postmodernism no longer trusts modernity's belief in the continuous progress and improvement of a united humanity that will solve the world's greatest problems, but has come to see everything, including scientific knowledge, as culturally and historically conditioned and relative. Postmodernism does not put all its energies into building a better society; it is more impressed by individual freedoms than by grand social projects. It sees the terms

used to describe it, such as autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism and moral relativism, not as pejorative labels, but as the pinnacle of social progress.²⁰

Compared to modern metanarratives, postmodern thought and culture cannot be considered as a homogeneous stream. It is not a unified worldview, but many competing perspectives that combine traditional, modern and postmodern elements into one large cultural stream, which can be characterised by slogans such as “looking for the signs of the times”, “accepting challenges,” “discovering the new,” “not being afraid of visions,” but which also retains a respect for the old and calls for a return to origins. Postmodernism is often described as a fluid culture in which social moods are constantly shifting from conservative to progressive and vice versa. Under the influence of the constant deconstruction of narratives and the disintegration of identities, the knowledge of clear truths has lost ground and has been replaced by never-ending debate.

The multiplicity of perspectives and constant debate are not only the by-products of postmodernity, but for many the most appropriate approach to reality. It is in the postmodern ability to share, accept and appreciate otherness that some theologians have begun to see a new sign of the times and to ask: What does this new social order and way of thinking imply for the future existence of the Church? What form should the Church take in order to better fulfil its role in society? In other words, how can this plurality of approaches and perspectives be integrated into the life of the Church so that it can respond effectively to post-modern human beings?

Before I try to answer these questions, I would like to make a short excursion and return from the abstract description of postmodernism to the inglorious reality of the Churches in the Czech Republic, where the membership of the vast majority of Churches is not growing or is decreasing. Respectively, in the traditional Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, the number of members is rather constantly decreasing, the Orthodox Church is growing, but mainly due to immigration, and it seems that the number of believers is decreasing or stagnating even in the Evangelical Churches, even though they devote much of their energy to evangelism and mission.²¹

²⁰ According to the American theologian Thomas C. Oden, postmodernism became mainstream with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. What he means by this is, of course, a symbol of the disintegration of the metanarratives of modernity and a confirmation that postmodernity is no longer just a counterculture but a cultural mainstream. Some postmodern theorists place this turning point in the 1970s, 1980s or even 1990s. Thomas C. Oden. 1992. *Two worlds: notes on the death of modernity in America & Russia*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 32.

²¹ The missionary activities of evangelical communities were successful immediately after the fall of socialism. At the beginning of the new millennium, however, their numbers stopped growing significantly, stagnated and many even began to decline significantly. In the surrounding post-communist states, but also in Western Europe, these Churches have been much more successful in the

I already pointed out in the introduction that this decline in believers in Czech Churches cannot be identified with a decline in religiosity. The latest census in 2021 shows that not only are non-institutional forms of religiosity on the rise, but the growth of their adherents is outpacing the decline in believers in traditional Churches. They are currently followed by about 10% of the Czech population and are slowly becoming the new religious mainstream. Several important conclusions can be drawn from the spread of these non-institutional forms of religiosity. First, they confirm that the need for religiosity and spirituality are not just temporary social phenomena, but important components of human identity. Despite changes in society, they are often sought even by people who come from backgrounds where they have had minimal religious stimuli.

Non-institutional forms of religiosity cannot be completely identified with the new religious movements, which tend to create solid organisational forms. Rather, it is a kind of religious eclecticism in which personal belief in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Virgin Mary, in personal angelic patrons can play a fundamental role, in which impulses are drawn from Christianity, Buddhism, Zen, from regional, Western or Eastern mystical traditions, from New Paganism, from astrology or card reading, and which can also be limited to the practical development of personal spirituality through meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, various healing practices, etc. The approach of people who practise these non-institutional forms of religiosity is sometimes referred to as ‘somethingism.’²² They may describe themselves as believers or active agnostics or even atheists, and may claim to belong to traditional Churches, to have free access to religion, or to be disaffiliated from Churches and religion altogether. It is therefore very difficult to determine the true extent of non-institutional forms of religiosity in society, but it is almost certainly a much larger segment of society than the census suggests.

These non-institutional forms of religiosity can also be seen as a kind of mirror of postmodernism. The people who practise them do not seek a unified worldview and usually do not see the multiplicity of perspectives as a fundamental problem. They accept both traditional and new forms of spirituality and shape them according to their abilities and needs. They decide for themselves which forms of religiosity are of interest to them, how much time they wish to devote to them, which hours of the day, which days of the week, etc.

long term. Some studies point out that the missions of Evangelical Churches reach the most active and passive members of traditional Churches. The success of evangelical missions seems to be largely due to proselytism; they are not very successful among the religiously indifferent population.

²² Somethingism can be described as belief in “something” without religious affiliation or vague belief in something beyond.

The spread of these postmodern, non-institutional or rather post-institutional forms of religiosity is a global phenomenon to which Churches are often resistant or, on the contrary, see it as a “sign of the times” and integrate some of its postmodern approaches into their spirituality. The shift in the concept of the Church from traditional models to a postmodern, open concept of the Church was very aptly characterised at the beginning of the millennium by the sociologist of religion David Lyon in his book *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (2000).²³ The Church in postmodernity has become part of the consumer chain against its will. If it resists, it finds itself in a ghetto; if it is too accommodating, it risks a postmodern relativisation of its faith, spirituality and values. Nevertheless, Lyon is tending towards an open Church, noting the growth of ecclesial communities that had already taken this path in the 1980s.

Finally, I would like to mention at least two outstanding personalities who see today’s mainstream religious attitudes as a “sign of the times” and a challenge for today’s Churches, and who have inspired many church communities with their open postmodern model of the Church as a spiritual centre. The first is the Dutch Reformed pastor Klaas Hendrikse, who, despite his avowed atheism, has sought to transform the religious communities under his care into spiritual centres offering a wide range of spiritual and cultural activities.²⁴ The second is the Czech Catholic theologian Tomáš Halík, whose practical ecclesiology of the spiritual centre has inspired many Churches across the ecumenical spectrum in the Czech Republic and abroad, and who does not hesitate to warn the Churches of their inability to respond to the needs and lifestyles of contemporary people, and to critically evaluate the resources and energy invested in maintaining the traditional model of a network of parishes.²⁵

The ecclesiology of the spiritual centre does not seek to be a universal recipe for reforming the whole Church, but rather to create an alternative to traditional forms of religious community. The church in the sense of a spiritual centre should be, as far as possible, an ecumenically open community whose institutional boundaries, usually defined by membership, are rather looser. It should offer a rich spiritual programme, including meditation, opportunities for silence, spiritual exercises, spiritual guidance, prayer groups, lectures (not only on religion), discussions (not only on theological issues), courses (not only on biblical issues), various workshops, music concerts, art and poetry presenta-

²³ David Lyon. 2000. *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity.

²⁴ Klaas Hendrikse. 2007. *Glauben an einen Gott, den es nicht gibt: Manifest eines atheistischen Pfarrers*. Zürich: TVZ, 174–190.

²⁵ Tomáš Halík. 2021. *Odpoledne křesťanství: Odvaha k proměně*. Praha: NLN.

tions, book and film presentations, theatre performances for young and old, in order to provide sufficient stimulus for pro-social activities, charity work and public engagement.

Although this concept of the church is gaining popularity even in the traditional Churches, it is likely to be much slower to take hold, because it requires considerable courage to make structural changes that could concretely affect the existence of poorly attended parishes and lead to a great independence of spiritual centres.

Even a postmodern ecclesiology of the spiritual centre is likely to have its limits. I suspect that they may be related to the breakdown of a fixed confessional identity and the relativisation of faith, spirituality and values. This could happen if regular service, the traditions of the liturgical year and sacramental practice are lost in the flood of spiritual centre activities. Service has always been an essential element of the identity of the Christian community. Its apparent purposelessness creates an important alternative for life in a postmodern consumer society. Without it, the church of the spiritual centre could be reduced to a mere spiritual centre. Service provides a safe haven from the world and a place where you are valued as a human being, where you find warm and personal relationships.

In the history of the Church, two extremes regularly appear: on the one hand, a lack of courage to try new things and to respect contemporary people and a changing society; on the other hand, a certain one-sidedness which, regardless of the best practices of the past, tries to interpret everything only from the perspective of current experience. History confirms the ancient Christian insight that the Church cannot be expressed by a single ecclesiology. The Church is a mystery that defies clear definition and whose nature is best defined by a multiplicity of biblical images.

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