

Reformation in Czech Republic

In the Czech lands, efforts to change the conditions in the Church began one hundred years earlier than in most European countries (i.e. the 14th – 15th centuries). The most famous personality associated with this early phase of the so-called “Czech Reformation” is undoubtedly Jan Hus, who was martyred in 1415. His ideas were followed by the Hussite movement and the first independent Czech Evangelical Church, the Unity of Brethren (1457). Reformation in the Czech lands thus was a specific phenomenon from the very beginning and its history is also a story of repression, wars and forced exile.

At the beginning, the Czech Reformation’s ideas were inspired by the texts of English philosopher Wycliff. Scholars did not aspire to establish a new Church; they only called for changes. Jan Hus, rector of Prague University, was highly celebrated. He gained the support of the common people thanks to his lectures in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. Finally, he was burnt at the stake for his views in the German city of Constance (6th July 1415) during the Church Council, where he arrived on his own free will to defend his ideas. Similarly, Jerome of Prague, a close friend to Hus, was sentenced to death by the same Council one year later (30th May 1416). The death of these two Czech scholars triggered riots amongst the masses, who wanted the opportunity to serve the communion under both kinds (Utraquism). Jacob of Mies, a colleague of Jan Hus, was the first preacher who pursued this concept. He began to symbolically offer both Christ’s body (i.e. a communion wafer) and Christ’s blood (wine in a chalice) to all believers, not only to the church clergy.

The Hussites were a socially and religiously motivated movement originating from the dissatisfied poor and lower Czech nobility and promoted communion under both kinds as one of their main demands. This is also why the chalice was chosen as their main symbol. In university circles, the “Four Articles” were formulated to restore the Church and its further direction. This document is one of the most important pre-Luther requests for reform of the Church. The whole Catholic world, however, perceived the Czech development as heresy and wanted to stop it. That is why several unsuccessful Crusades to the “heretical” Czech lands were organized during the 15th century.

Nevertheless, the Hussites were disunited in their demands from the beginning, and consequently they were divided into Radicals and Moderates. The Radicals originated primarily from the poor class and pushed for true separation from the Catholic Church. They founded their own city of Tábor, where they applied their ideals on the proper order of society. They formed the core of the Hussite armies with their famous commanders Jan Žižka of Trocnov or Prokop Holý. The Moderates were represented more by scholars, intellectuals from the university or the burghers of Prague. They called for unity of the Church and wished to avoid conflicts with the surrounding world. Disputes between these two parties peaked in the fratricidal Battle of Lipany in 1434, where the moderate line prevailed.

After this battle, Zikmund of Luxembuourg was placed on the throne and officially accepted the Four Articles on the restoration of the Church in the Czech lands (within the so-called “Compacta”). The disgrace of heresy was removed from the Czechs and they were allowed to serve the communion under both kinds. Hereby they could officially present themselves as Utraquists without separation

from the Catholic Church or threat of heresy. In the following years, the first Utraquist King, George of Poděbrady, sometimes also called the “Hussite King”, was elected in 1458. He was the only Czech monarch that did not come from a royal dynasty but was elected due to the free will of the members of the aristocracy.

In addition to such developments, a new separated and independent evangelic Church – the Unity of Brethren – was established in this relaxed atmosphere on the territory of the Czech lands (1457). It is the oldest evangelic Church in existence today. Its spiritual father was Petr Chelčický, and the most famous bishop of the Unity, John Amos Comenius, is considered to be the father of modern education in Europe. Without a doubt, one of the most significant works of the Church is the publication of “the Bible of Kralice”, which was published in six volumes between 1579 and 1593. It concerns the first Czech translation of the Scripture from the original Bible languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), as the previous translations were based on the Latin versions. The initiator of the preparation of the Bible of Kralice was a bishop of the Unity, Jan Blahoslav.

Soon after 1517, Luther’s Reformation reached the Czech lands. The radical Utraquism and the Unity of Brethren established varying contacts with this movement. Nevertheless, both parties were strong in their standpoint and kept their autonomy and self-identity. Luther’s Reformation thus spread mainly in Prague, Jihlava and other German towns, especially in North and Northwest Bohemia.

The situation of Utraquists and the evangelic Churches in the Czech lands began to deteriorate under the rule of the Catholic Hapsburgs. The Czech Utraquist noble classes felt threatened by the political developments in the country. Therefore, in 1618 a defenestration of the imperial officers from the windows of the Prague Castle took place (the Prague Defenestration). It was perceived as a signal of rebellion, which led to the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War (1618 – 1638). The war and its clashes between Protestants and Catholics affected almost all of Europe. However, the Czech reformed parties lost their main struggle when they were defeated at the Battle of White Mountain (1620) near Prague. This marked the definitive end of the extraordinary two-hundred-year denominational development in the Czech lands.

The Utraquists and members of the Unity of Brethren either had to leave the country or convert to the Catholic faith. Hundreds of thousands of noblemen and burghers preferred emigration (leading to a “brain drain”), while many of the reformed opted to stay and hide themselves. The Unity of Brethren thus essentially disappeared in Bohemia. The situation unfortunately did not improve even after Joseph II’s Patent of Tolerance (1781). The Evangelists from the Czech territories were only permitted to embrace the German Reformation, not the Brethren confession. So, it happened that the Czech evangelists were divided against their will between the German congregations, i.e. the Lutheran (Augsburg) and the Calvinist (Helvetian or Reformed).

This situation changed only when the independent Republic of Czechoslovakia was declared in 1918 after the dissolution of the Austrian empire. At that time, a merge of the Czech Lutheran and Calvinist Churches took place and a new independent Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren was formed. At the same time, some members of the Catholic Church of the new independent republic started to refer to the ideas of Jan Hus and a new Church, which is nowadays called the Czechoslovak

Hussite Church, was founded. Both these newly established Churches, just as the Catholic Church, have their own theological faculty at the famous Charles University in Prague.

Additionally, the Unity of Brethren, which had experienced remarkable development elsewhere in the world, returned in full force to independent Czechoslovakia. Only one group of the Brethren's exiles preserved their independence and did not merge with other evangelicals abroad, even after the dramatic developments of the 17th century. They were refugees from Moravia, hailing from the town of Fulnek (Moravian Brothers), who built their own village in Germany – Herrnhut (Ochranov) in 1722. They preserved the main ideas of the Brethren and, thanks to their actions, the renewed Unity of the Brethren could be established (the so- called Moravian Church or Unitas Fratrum in Latin).