

Christian Community in a Hostile World? (the example of the Czech Brethren)

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The aim of this lecture is to show different Christian attitudes to the society at large and to consider interdependence of the inner and outer aspects influencing the development of the relationship between church and society.

When thinking about community and especially Christian community in Europe today we still share some basic presupposition (maybe subconsciously) that we live in a Christian world. How far this may be the case is a big question that I do not want to discuss now. Historically the understanding of church or Christian community and state or political community was changing massively. We can find different views of this relationship even in the New Testament.

So e. g. French biblical scholar Francois Vouga (The Theology of the NT) identifies three different attitudes of the Christian community to the political community – the state - in the writing of the NT.

1. cooperation between church and society. Christians adjust to some degree to the general culture what brings them recognition and certain protection from the side of the society. It requires some measure of compromise in things that do not seem to be vital to the church. The critique of the rulers and public offices is to be weakened or stopped and aspects that should prove that Christians are useful members of the society are to be emphasised. This is the attitude of the Lukan writings (the gospel and the Acts) and of the pastoral epistles (Timothy, Titus). You may recall how fervently Pilate in the passion story defends that Jesus is innocent - there is nothing wrong with him. Christ is O.K. from the governor's point of view. And in the Acts another governor declares practically the same about Paul - this Christian is politically acceptable.

To sum it up – part of the NT tries to suggest that Christians do not need to be apparently different from the society, they can form a part of any decent political structure and live in it without major conflicts.

2. critical opposition towards society. Christian community is and must remain different from the political society because there is a profound discrepancy between their perspectives. This becomes very clear if the state has explicit or implicit religious ambition (see the book of Revelation) but it applies to any situation even in a secular state.

Christians are different because their citizenship is not from this world. They cannot be fully loyal to political community because the life in the Spirit clashes with the power of sin and evil. Therefore Christian community cannot be popular in the society, on the contrary, it must cause conflicts because of its otherness and therefore persecution is one of the signs of a true church.

3. separation between church and society. Christians are called to witness quietly and humbly to the gospel of Jesus Christ and should not involve into political discourse (1 Peter). We are supposed to be good people, good neighbours and professionals and our task is to witness personally and bring individual people to Christ, not to reform society.

When we follow these types of approach through the history of Christianity we find a long row of examples how the Christian community changes its views according to the changing conditions. And we find some regularities.

A peaceful and relatively just political order (no matter if monarchy or democracy) usually tempts the church to conclude that there is no fundamental conflict between church and society, that the society is actually more or less Christian and needs just some minor corrections but we can live with it (this happens on a massive scale whenever a favourable political situation lasts for several generations).

Revolutionary violence, ideological terror or any sharp social crisis bring the Christian community to the discovery that there is a difference, there is a conflict in perspectives and maybe even the state is a beast and Christians must oppose it either actively (prophetic speech, violent opposition) or passively (they run away, hide to escape direct contact with the situation).

We are in Prague so I decided to take a historical example from the Czech context – the Unity of Czech Brethren (or Unitas fratrum). They came to being around 1460, at the end of the Hussite revolution and their first perspective was the apocalyptic one. The world is basically a hostile place for Christians. The idea of Christian world is a huge deception of Antichrist. The world is not Christian, it never were Christian and never will be. The church is a community that was from the beginning different from the society, Christians were from the very beginning "the third party", next to the Romans and Jews. They were organized differently from the political community, according to the **law of love**. Christians who deserve this name do not organize their affairs through human institutions and offices. The basic rule of the Christian way of life is serving, not ruling.

Therefore Christian community is a parallel structure, different from the rest of the society and it can help and serve people only by winning them for this alternative way of life. The society is hostile to those who live by the Spirit and the only possibility of salvation consists in leaving the majority society and joining the alternative community of Christians.

Now, in 1485 religious peace was introduced in the Czech kingdom, similar to that of Augsburg 1555. And when we look at the Brethren' views after 1500 we find out that they came to the point of accepting responsibility for the political community no matter how different Christians may be from the rest of the society. They must be critical but they have their share of responsibility for what happens in the political community and they cannot escape it.

The world is no more seen as hostile. It is a complex reality and Christians must distinguish carefully between good and evil in the world. They can live in the society and hold even public offices while remaining true to the gospel.

So we see, in two generations a considerable shift took place in the perspective of the Unity. And it underwent further development towards more positive relationship to the political community in the contacts with the Lutheran and later Calvinist reformation. There remains a separation of the Christian community from the unbelieving society but the conflict is not dramatic and fundamental - the apocalyptic perspective of the rule of the Evil one (or Antichrist) in the world is weakened or disappears.

Finally, in 1575 the Czech Protestant churches submitted the Bohemian Confession to the emperor. The Unity has joined the large Utraquist church (mainly of a Melancthonian orientation) to declare that the Protestant communities (including the community of Brethren) are ready to live as loyal subjects in the society. So in 100 years the Brethren accomplished the journey from opposition to loyalty, biblically from Revelation to the gospel of Luke. From the view of the society as a mass of perdition under the rule of Antichrist they came to an agreement with

this society and to the acceptance of its order, even if with some reservations. This was the background of Comenius' concept of different Christian „unities” (Roman, Lutheran, Calvinist, Baptist...) working on their respective missions in the world.

On one hand, the scheme of opposition, separation or cooperation between the Christian community and the society is an oversimplification – the relationships are more complicated than this. On the other hand, there are just two extremes that the church repeatedly wrestles with: assimilation and separation. To conform to the society or to withdraw from it.

Of course it is easy to say we should evade the extremes. It is known since Aristotle. Christian community should not merge with the society and dissolve in it and it certainly should not withdraw from the society and create a closed mysterious structure unintelligible to anyone outside. But we can follow these tendencies through the whole history of Christianity again and again. Even today we meet many churches that consider the society to be basically in agreement with Christian perspective. And we find out with surprise that Christians found acceptable the Nazi regime between the wars and communist regimes in many countries – in former times they found acceptable societies with slave trade and torture as part of the legal system.

No wonder the protest against this takes the shape of rejection. Christians must be distinguished, different, they cannot share many of the common views. The price for a consequent rejection is unintelligibility. A community with its own language and lifestyle can be a justified form of protest – and maybe an example of an alternative (a strong theme of Stanley Hauerwas). But it runs the risk that less and less people will understand their witness.

Should the church take its share of responsibility for the society it cannot do so from the position of an exclusive community, separated from the rest of the society. The influence of Christians in the society is closely connected with our ability to explain our view of the world, of the meaning and aim of human existence. And any explanation presupposes some shared generally understandable concepts and values.

And here a few remarks to the values and expectations that form and hold together every human community. Christian community should be gathered and shaped by the power of the holy Spirit. So the confession. As was told by Johannes before lunch the reality is not that easy because any community of human beings is profoundly influenced by our nature.

The basic forming element of any community is common interest. It may be bound to some matter - hobby - sailing, gardening etc. - or it may be bound to person (our life partner). In Christianity the forming element is the relationship to Christ but any particular community must have some additional features and values to take a distinctive character - and to keep it!

Returning to the biblical message - what is significant for the Christian community - if you give to those only who would give you back - how are you different from the world? By the power of God's love Christian community should be mutually enriching and should have some potential to invest into activities, relationships without expecting the investment to return. We have been given already.

The model of the community – (Barth – concentric circles). What type of relationships? Just one firm point, one absolutely reliable - the logic is to build the community on this - but more imminent and touchable realities can attract our attention (and do - throughout the whole history).

The world we live in needs definitely a qualified and trustworthy critique. Christian community should offer this - and we are here and there quite good at critique. But at the same time a support and help or cooperation in the efforts to improve or to change different social relations is needed.

How the world is organized is a genuine object of theological reflections. The way how the societies around us develop is not indifferent. It has some relationship to the eschatological perspective - even if we do not see exactly what the nature of the relationship is. One of popular intellectual trends today is to refuse the modernity and liberalism as a mistaken project (e.g. A. MacIntyre; Stanley Hauerwas) - what leads to the separation model of the Christian self-understanding.

What we need, however, is a way how to develop positive solutions, to strengthen mutuality and to deliver plausibly the message that this world is God's world and we are not alone in the postmodern confusing search for meaning and peace.