

Editorial

Observations from the World of Kafka, Schweik and Havel: The Delicate Credibility of the Church

Many surveys in European countries about the position of churches in society and the engagement of citizens in religious communities contain somewhat curious data about the relation between faith and active participation in these communities. A significant number (sometimes more than half) of those, who say they are a member of a church community, identify themselves also as not being religious. At first sight this is confusing: How can someone who participates in church life also understand themselves as non-religious? Does it mean that many members of church communities do have doubts about Christian faith to such an extent that they can't identify themselves with it? Or does it mean that the practical life of Christian communities, public statements by church representatives (or the absence thereof), engagement of church leaders in public affairs are the cause of hesitation and doubt, whether these are expressions of Christian faith they would like to consider as their own? Is the discrepancy between engagement in a religious community and the inner conviction concerning the foundation of the community connected to the content of faith or to the role of the community in the wider circle of society? In any case, these statistics seem to indicate a lingering crisis about the credibility of Christian churches in Europe, their role in society, the way they express their faith, the way they function as a community and provide guidance to their members.

Credibility is a complex notion as it is not something one can easily obtain or eventually regain. It is based on a pattern of actions related to the declared aim or identity of the actor. A consistency between the two will strengthen the credibility of the actor, whereas a perceived contradiction will lead to a loss of it. Building credibility is a delicate process which requires time and patience, but damaging it is done rather quickly and easily.

The swift change in view of religion and church in Czech society of the first half of the 1990s could serve as an example of the sensitive nature of credibility of churches. During the 1980s especially the Czech Roman Catholic Church went through an inner renewal which were partly encouraged by the new course of the Vatican under pope John Paul II. Many informal groups started to organize themselves, composed of a mix of lay people and clergy, meeting on a regular basis for spiritual and practical activities. On the level of the leadership of the church, archbishop Tomášek initiated an informal group of advisors with experiences from imprisonment, from the underground church and from dissident circles around Václav Havel. The emancipation process that emerged out of this development resulted in a significant increase in credibility at the moment of the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. The Roman Catholic Church under the leadership of an old and fragile archbishop had identified itself with the needs of Czech(oslovak) society for freedom and had shown that it was able not only to speak for itself, but also for the wider context it was living in.

As a result, interest in religion and in church in the Czech society of the early 1990s reached high levels. Visits of the John Paul II, explicitly invited by Václav Havel in his role as president, in which the Polish pope addressed central traumata of Czech religious history, underlined the congruence of the largest Christian denomination with the moment of national history at the time.

This didn't last, however. Soon after the initial steps to a democratic political system and an open society were taken, the issue of restitution of property confiscated by the communist regime occurred on the political agenda. Also the Roman Catholic Church, which had been deprived of most of the buildings and land it had owned, issued demands for a reversal of the confiscations. Material interests pushed by the church – however they might have been legitimate in the light of a reversal of injustice – became counterproductive for the credibility the church had enjoyed during the previous period. Political opponents depicted the church as an antidemocratic institution hungry for power and property. In the eyes of the secular public it seemed that the church was not different from a significant part of society preoccupied with property in the transition to a capitalist economy. The overall message was that the church didn't offer other, better or higher values to society than those determining public life at that moment. Consequently, its credibility was seriously damaged and would never return to the levels of

the early 1990s. In the following period many left the churches, partly out of disillusionment, partly due to the discovery that churches did not offer relevant guidance in modern questions. The article of Tomáš Petráček in this issue of *Communio Viatorum* gives further insights in the developments of the Czech Roman Catholic Church.

A discrepancy between message and practice appears to be a neuralgic point concerning credibility and the loss of it. This might apply to many institutions, it certainly does to churches. One of the fields we could observe this in especially protestant circles is connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the destruction of Gaza following the terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023. An increasing number of respectable international organizations in the field of human rights (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and in October 2025 also the special rapporteur of the United Nations on human rights in Palestine have come to the conclusion that the actions of Israel in Gaza surmount to genocidal action. According to the last agency, also Western countries bear responsibility for this situation: "The ongoing genocide in Gaza is a collective crime, sustained by the complicity of influential third states that have enabled longstanding systemic violations of international law by Israel. Framed by colonial narratives that dehumanize the Palestinians, this live-streamed atrocity has been facilitated through third states' direct support, material aid, diplomatic protection and, in some cases, active participation. It has exposed an unprecedented chasm between peoples and their governments, betraying the trust on which global peace and security rest" (<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/special-rapporteur-report-gaza-genocide-a-collective-crime-20oct25/>; see also the report of the United Nations' independent commission of inquiry: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf>).

Many European Protestant churches have been silent on these reports, which often might be a result of inner divisions within the membership on this issue as well as a lack of theological clarity how to react when Israel is mentioned as the one responsible for grave violations of human rights of Palestinians. At the background of this silence stands the development European churches went through after the Second World War. Reflections on the extermination of European Jewry during the war and the role of Christian theology in anti-Semitism led to a change in the view on the Jewish people and its relation to God. In many theological concepts after the holocaust

the Jewish people got a special position as those who have the older rights in God's relation to mankind. In the light of this understanding, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 became a legitimate and providential endeavour. Consequently, to criticize the state of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians was easily considered suspicious.

The silence of important European churches (or at least their leadership) on the development in Gaza falls in the category of what the report of the Special UN-Rapporteur called "chasm". The discrepancy between the stress on justice and human rights as theological values and the silence in case of grave violations of them by Israel evokes unease among pastors and church members. Pastors of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren issued their own critical statement because the church leadership is silent. Their colleagues in the Netherlands demonstrated in public against their leadership because of its inaction. At stake is the credibility of the churches, as they are not able to explain their position in one of the most urgent questions in the current political and theological field.

It is the more important that the general council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches of October 2025 issued a statement which addressed an important theological aspect of the protestant debate about Israel and Palestine. In it, the churches (among them many European churches) rejected so-called Christian Zionism, calling it a "misuse of theology": "While a recent ceasefire and peace framework are in place, the Palestinian people continue to endure ongoing destruction of land, displacement, dehumanisation, violence, genocide and apartheid. These actions violate their fundamental rights to freedom, dignity and self-determination. The Church recognises that true and lasting peace can only come through justice, not domination, occupation, or violence. [...] The misuse of theology to justify Zionism and colonialism further deepens the intergenerational trauma of both Palestinians and Israelis. The current global moral divide, shaped by many nations and Christians failing to uphold post-WWII values and international law, exacerbates this humanitarian crisis. Despite widespread condemnation, Western powers continue to support Israel with military aid and arms." The council urged to "discern and address the phenomenon of Christian Zionism in all its forms, which is understood as a political-theological ideology and distortion of the Biblical witness whenever it justifies violence or occupation in the name of God, while making a clear distinction between this and Judaism which is an ancient faith that shares with us the prophetic values of

justice and compassion. Rejecting Christian Zionism does not mean rejecting Judaism' rather, it expresses our commitment never to use faith to justify injustice, racism or violence" (<https://wcrc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/WCRC-Drafting-Decision-Session-8-20251022-Public-Witness-Session-8.pdf>). A part of the statement rejected also anti-Semitism, while acknowledging that the church's history of "anti-Jewish teaching and persecution" had played a role in it.

For churches, credibility is a delicate matter, as it is being formed in a relation with actors who identify themselves with faith communities because of the shared values and principles. However difficult it might be, people trusting their church expect leadership of it in difficult matters of personal and political life. The current development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is certainly one of them. Even when some prominent European churches are not able to formulate a meaningful guideline in this question, it is a hopeful sign that an ecumenical platform as the WCRC had the courage to express profound concern and found words for a clear and relevant message about one of the most burning issues of church and theology in current times.

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