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TWO PROTESTANTS, THREE CHURCHES **CROATIAN PROTESTANTISM: CHURCHES, DENOMINATIONS, AND THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS**

By Lidija Matošević, Enoh Šeba, and Ruben Knežević

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Abstract

Using the existing data from the national census (2011 and 2021) and other available data sources, the authors present Croatian Protestantism on the national level as a fragmented minority. In search for possible historic reasons for this fragmentized mode of existence, they proceed with an overview of Protestant presence in the Croatian lands, starting from the early adoption of Protestant ideas, eradicated by the Catholic Counter-Reformation up to the ghettoization of the Protestant congregations during the Communist era (late 20th century). The establishment of an independent Croatian state and the subsequent war proved to be a significant turning point for the Croatian Protestants, although most of them had no tradition of socio-political engagement and were therefore ill-prepared for the profound changes that followed. The fostering of a common Protestant identity was to a certain extent, as the authors argue, encouraged by the signing of contracts with the Croatian government that provided a legislative framework for the existence of various Protestant denominations. The contracts also secured minimal financial support and allowed their access to the public arena. Apart from that, impulses towards a clearer articulation of their own confessional identity usually did not result in pro-active investment in the contextual expression of individual denominational identities as part of a broader Protestant identity. Furthermore, the relationship with the majority Church – the Roman Catholic Church – still presents a major challenge for many Protestant churches. Although there are examples of earnest cooperation, this ecumenical communion remains a serious challenge, especially in the light of the fact that some groups continue to maintain a very exclusivist attitude towards the majority Church. As for the divisive issues in the contemporary Croatian society, the Protestant churches either ignore them or comply uncritically with the stance of one of the polarized parties. Finally, the present condition of Protestant theological institutions shows that a non-systematic approach to their development needs to be adjusted if the existing theological potential is to be unlocked for the benefit of Protestant churches and their integration into the Croatian society.

Keywords: Croatian Protestantism, Croatian Protestant theological institutions

Croatian Protestantism – A Fragmented Minority

The picture of Protestant minority in contemporary Croatia does not seem particularly encouraging. According to the Census of 2011, Protestant minorities count 14,563 members in total, which makes up 0.34 percent of the total Croatian population.¹ Relatively larger denominations are the Evangelicals (Lutherans), Reformed, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists,² all with about 2,000 to 4,000 members per denomination.³

¹ Ivana Buršić, *Popis stanovništva, kućanstava i stanova 2011. Stanovništvo prema državljanstvu, narodnosti, vjeri i materinskom jeziku* [Census of the population, households and dwellings 2011: Population by citizenship, ethnicity, religion, and mother tongue], *Statistička izvješća* [Statistical Reports], No 1469 (Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske, 2013), p. 12.

² In the 2011 Census, the Adventists were not counted as “Protestants”, but as “other Christians”.

³ Darko Hudelist, “Tko su hrvatski nasljednici Martina Luthera, Zajednica u kojoj je više netrpeljivosti prema srodnim crkvama nego prema katolicizmu” [Who are the Croatian successors of Martin Luther, a community in which there is more intolerance towards the related churches than towards Catholicism?], *Globus*, May 21, 2017, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/politika/specijal-globusa-tko-su-hrvatski-nasljednici-martina-luthera->

According to the 2021 Census, the results of which were published shortly before the conclusion of this paper,⁴ Protestants have a total of 9,956 members (0.26% of the population) with the addition of a certain number of members who declared themselves as “other Christians” or did not specifically identify themselves. Therefore, their share in the total population can be roughly determined at a total of around 0.30%. It should also be noted that the total population of Croatia has decreased by 9.64% compared to the 2011 Census.

Of course, these low numbers do not automatically indicate qualitative deficiencies of any sort. Yet, a closer look at the situation reveals that, in reality, the Protestant denominations are heavily fragmented in themselves. Almost every single denomination is represented by more than one organizational unit or entity. For instance, a Reformed Christian can be a member of one of the three different umbrella organizations (Reformed Christian Calvinist Church in Croatia, Protestant Reformed Christian Church in the Republic of Croatia, and Reformed Christian Church of Hungarians in Croatia).⁵ Between 1996 and 2005, the Lutherans (Evangelical Church in the Republic of Croatia) had two competing denominational bodies and while this split has finally been resolved, the most important parish, the one in Zagreb, the Croatian capital, continued to function as a divided congregation until the Synod held on May 7, 2022, when “the healing of wounds that divided the single body of Evangelical believers in the Republic of Croatia” was proclaimed.⁶ As for around three thousands Pentecostals and Protestant charismatics, they can be identified as members of the local congregations affiliated to one of ten different registered denominational bodies. And even among the Adventists, known for their neat structure and tight organizational unity, there is a separate denomination called and registered as the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement. The only Protestant denomination gathered under a single organizational entity is the Baptist Union of Croatia. However, in recent years,

zajednica-u-kojoj-je-vise-netrpeljivosti-prema-srodnim-crkvama-nego-prema-katolicizmu-6101283 (last accessed on September 22, 2022).

⁴ DRŽAVNI ZAVOD ZA STATISTIKU / CROTIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, *Popis 2021, Konačni rezultati / 2021 Census, Final Results* (Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku, 2022), https://dzs.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Press%20Corner/Prezentacije/Popis%202021._kona%C4%8Dni%20rezultati.pdf (last accessed on September 22, 2022).

⁵ “Evidencija vjerskih zajednica u Republici Hrvatskoj,” Republika Hrvatska, Ministarstvo pravosuđa i uprave (Registar) [Records of religious communities in the Republic of Croatia. Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Justice and Administration (Registry)], <https://registri.uprava.hr/#!vjerske-zajednice> (last accessed on September 7, 2022).

⁶ At that Synod, the Zagreb Evangelical Church expressed its will and readiness for reconciliation and continued its activities in unity and as part of the Evangelical Church in Croatia, cf. “Održana sinoda Evangeličke Crkve u Hrvatskoj” [A synod of the Evangelical Church in Croatia held], https://ecrh.hr/2022/05/09/odrzana-sinoda-evangelicke-crkve-u-hrvatskoj/?fbclid=IwAR1f2sXf10qB7rwbPxe9BLtRTfUZ0j8MA7JGKgD0uJImPx47QH09vFnF_Wk (last accessed on October 8, 2022).

American missionaries from the King James Only movement have founded several new independent Baptist churches that operate outside the Baptist Union of Croatia.⁷ There are also the Churches of Christ, formally organized into one denominational body. They consist, however, of churches from two denominational backgrounds, including the Brethren churches (Plymouth Brethren tradition), as well as the ones that arose from the Restoration movement in USA at the beginning of the 19th century (Stone-Campbell heritage).

Although there is no exhaustive database of all local active Protestant congregations, the Croatian Ministry of Justice and Administration keeps records of religious communities in the Republic of Croatia, that is, a registry of officially documented religious communities or churches active in Croatia. Enoh Šeba has used this set of data and employed the snowballing technique to create a sampling frame for another research. According to the preliminary results of that process, there are well over 300 local congregations and religious groups (some of them are not officially recognized by the government, but still meet the criteria for being identified as a local religious community⁸), while it is reasonable to assume that a significant number of them consist of only a handful of members. Similar diffusion is easily observed within theological education; even though the proportion of Protestants in the entire Croatian population (3.87 million in 2021) is only about 0.30%, they still run several theological institutions, providing various levels of both formal and informal education. At this moment, out of six such institutions, two offer courses accredited and acknowledged by the Ministry of Education.

The above 0.30% proportion of Protestants in the entire Croatian population has been roughly estimated through official statistical data. In the 2011 National Census, the question about belonging to a particular religious community/church within the Protestant denomination was not asked (the census reporting methodology did not specify individual, denominational affiliations, such as “Baptist,” “Pentecostal,” “Lutheran,” etc.), but a smaller part of the population declared that they belonged to a certain religious community, according to the name by which members of a particular religious community called themselves. Therefore, the data on the number of members of a particular religious community had to be taken as the minimum data, i.e. the minimum number of members according to the individual

⁷ Ruben Knežević, *Hrvatski bezimprimaturni biblijski prijevodi* [Croatian Bible translations without an imprimatur] (Zagreb: Teološki fakultet Matija Vlačić Ilirik, 2019), p. 265f.

⁸ Marc Chaves defines these as “(...) social institution(s) in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering.” Marc Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 1f.

category. These data were included in a table that was not published in the official statistical report, but was officially sent for information to some religious communities:

Protestants – total	14,653
Protestants	2,240
Lutherans	138
Evangelicals (Lutherans)	2,576
Methodists	8
Reformed / Calvinists / Reformed churches	3,725
Baptists	2,266
Pentecostals/ Pentecostal churches	2,367
The Churches of Christ	415
Full Gospel Church	50
Christian Prophetic Church	26
“Word of Life” – Network of churches	842
Other Christians – total	12,961
Old Catholic Church	588
Free Catholic Church	19
Nazarene religious community	147
Jehovah’s Witnesses	6,479
The Church of Glad Tidings	67
Adventists	2,678
Seventh Day Adventists	265
Evangelical Christians	95
Anglicans	54
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	112
New Apostolic Church	58
Early Christians	75
Christians	2,324

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (from the document submitted to the General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Croatia)

The table presents two groups of members of religious communities: Protestants (0.34% of the population) and “other Christians” – those not belonging explicitly to the Roman-Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant churches (0.30% of the population). Among the latter group, there were still some Protestants (Adventists, Nazarenes, various Pentecostal groups), as well as an unspecified segment of the population that called themselves only “Protestants” or “Christians.” Therefore, according to the 2011 Census, the share of Protestants in the total population could be roughly estimated at around 0.50%. As for the results of the 2021 Census, such detailed information is not yet available, but the share of Protestants in the total population has decreased and amounts to about 0.30%, as mentioned before.

Such fragmentation of Croatian Protestantism should not be perceived necessarily as a negative phenomenon. Its main problem, however, is that it rarely results from a systematic and planned effort to improve the quality of church life or from an attempt to foster stronger social engagement in religious communities. Most often, experience and observation tell us that it results from a myriad of other circumstances. Frustration, for example, is a powerful motive toward change, especially for churches undergoing some internal congregational situation. Fragmentation also occurs when there is an absence of established processes for conflict resolution. Leaders with inadequate theological education, but with a strong sense of divine “calling” thwart church growth as does inconsistent transparency with foreign mission organizations regarding spiritual and financial influences. Doctrinal fundamentalism, various forms of religious fanaticism, and conflicts and struggles motivated by petty self-interests similarly impact church vitality. Finally, but quite significantly, Croatian churches are separated when lay believers are disoriented due to relatively deficient formation, deprived of any implementation of the biblical and Reformation concept of the “priesthood of all believers.” It is, then, no wonder that the observing outsider may occasionally get an impression that Croatian Protestantism is a “small, peculiar and detached world,” characterized by instability, fragility, and unpredictability.

Historical Causes of the Fragmentation of Croatian Protestantism

Of course, this situation cannot be properly understood or explained without considering its specific historical causes; let us therefore briefly consider some of them.

At the time when Reformation began spreading across Europe, ethnic Croatian territory included only the remnants of the former kingdom (lat. *reliquiae reliquiarum olim*

magni et inclyti regni Croatiae), whose significant parts had fallen under Ottoman rule.⁹ Other parts were incorporated into the Habsburg Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Venetian Republic.

Nevertheless, the beginnings of Croatian Protestantism were marked by determination and a clear, ambitious vision. The Protestant movement that spread from Germany reached the Slovenian and Croatian lands relatively quickly.¹⁰ Although before the mid-16th century it was barely possible to draw a clear demarcation line between reformatory efforts within the “old” church and those belonging to the Reformation,¹¹ it is still plausible to maintain that the Reformation ideas had been embraced in the Slovenian and Croatian ethnic areas by the late 1520s.¹² However, due to the swift response of Catholic Counter-Reformation, Croatian and Slovenian Protestants were forced to leave the Croatian lands in the 1530s, and by the mid-16th century the Protestant movement had already been completely eradicated.¹³

However, this short-lived Croatian Protestantism contributed to the Croatian culture, language, and Church in unparalleled and incredible ways, and under extremely difficult circumstances.¹⁴ In this respect, one should particularly mention the Bible translation activity of the Biblical Institute at Urach, which gave the Croatian people (and not only them, since in the wider area of the Balkans there were obviously other Slavic Christians who lived under the Ottoman rule)¹⁵ the first complete New Testament in the Croatian language. When the wider European context is taken into account, this means that the Croats had the Bible in

⁹ The Croatian kingdom was founded in 925, and from 1102 to 1527 Croatia was in a personal union with Hungary. After the defeat of the Croatian-Hungarian army in the battle against the Ottomans on the Field of Mohács in 1526, the Croatian nobility decided in 1527 to recognize Ferdinand I of Habsburg as their king. The Croats remained for the next four centuries in that new state union, sharing its political destiny. For a brief overview of Croatian history, see: “History of Croatia,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Croatia/History> (last accessed on September 22, 2022).

¹⁰ Along with some parts of central Croatia and the Military Frontier, the Croatian lands of Istria, Medjmurje, and Slavonia were particularly affected by the Reformation.

¹¹ Raymund Kottje and Bernd Moeller, *Ekumenska povijest Crkve 2, Srednji vijek i reformacija* [Ecumenical Church History 2: The Middle Ages and the Reformation], trans. Marina Miladinov (Zagreb: Teološki fakultet “Matija Vlačić Ilirik”, 2008), pp. 234-239.

¹² Vjekoslav Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata, Knjiga peta* [The history of Croats, volume five] (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod MH, 1985), p. 659f.

¹³ Nikola Crnković, “Protestantizam u južnoslavenskim zemljama” [Protestantism in South Slavic countries], in: *Jean Boisset, Kratka povijest protestantizma* [A short history of Protestantism] (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1985), p. 182.

¹⁴ It should not be forgotten that the remnants of the Croatian ethnic territory were at that time bordered upon the Ottoman Empire and as such constantly exposed to Ottoman incursions.

¹⁵ Alojz Jembrih, *Pogovor uz pretpisak glagoljičkoga Novoga testamenta (1562./1563.)* [Afterword to the reprint of the Glagolitic New Testament (1562/1563)] (Zagreb: Teološki fakultet “Matija Vlačić Ilirik”, 2016), p. 109.

their language very early.¹⁶ Also, it must not be forgotten that Luther's most fervent follower in Wittenberg, Matthias Flacius Illyricus (Croat. Matija Vlačić Ilirik, 1520-1575), founder of modern hermeneutics¹⁷ and critical church historiography, was born in the Croatian ethnic area (Istria).¹⁸

Unfortunately, most books from the Urach production never actually arrived at their destinations, as they were confiscated by the border control in Graz. As for the books that could be (secretly) delivered, many were later destroyed by the Inquisition.¹⁹

Such radical extermination, de facto completed by the decision of the Croatian Parliament to ban Protestantism in 1604,²⁰ had severe consequences for the Croatian people, as they had to wait almost another 300 years to receive the Bible in their language.²¹ Also,

¹⁶ In addition to the translation of the New Testament, published in 1562/63, parts of the Old Testament were translated, but only the Prophets (1564) were published, because with the death of the founder of the Biblical Institute, Ivan Ungnad (1493-1564), the printing house ceased to function. Nevertheless, in less than five years of its activity (1561-1565), about thirty titles of various religious books (Bible translations, children's books, catechisms, catechetical and didactic writings, sermons, theological treatises, and liturgical handbooks) were published, in a total circulation of about 30,000 copies. Ibid., pp. 54, 162-163.

¹⁷ According to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, cf. *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik*, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gottfried Boehm (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 18.

¹⁸ In 1563, during his stay in Regensburg, Flacius tried to found a small university in Regensburg or Klagenfurt (Celovec) for students from the South Slavic area, but these efforts remained unsuccessful. Mijo Mirković, *Pokušaj Matije Vlačića Ilirika da osnuje sveučilište u Regensburgu i u Celovcu* [Matthias Flacius Illyricus' attempt to found a university in Regensburg and in Celovec (Klagenfurt)], *Rad JAZU* 300 (Zagreb: Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1954), pp. 535-573; and more recently: Luka Ilić, *Theologian of Sin and Grace: The Process of Radicalization in the Theology of Matthias Flacius Illyricus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 163-166.

¹⁹ For centuries, their copies have been scattered across European libraries, including some copies in ex-Yugoslav libraries that were not in good condition. Out of the total of about 30,000 books, only about 300 copies have been preserved until today. A well-preserved copy of the Glagolitic New Testament in two volumes (1562/1563) ended in the USA and was in 1956 donated to the National and University Library in Zagreb by the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito (Zvonimir Bartolić, "Književni rad Stipana Konzula i krug hrvatskih protestantskih pisaca" [The literary work of Stipan Konzul and the circle of Croatian Protestant writers], in: *Sjevernohrvatske teme*, book 1 (Čakovec: Zrinski, 1980), p. 54). The contribution of Protestant literature to Croatian culture has been suppressed and neglected in scholarship for centuries and has only recently received the attention it deserves. The publication of reprints of the Croatian New Testament in the Glagolitic (1562/1563) and Cyrillic scripts (1563), which were prepared in 2007 and 2008 by the Protestant Theological Faculty "Matthias Flacius Illyricus" in cooperation with scholarly libraries in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Basel, certainly helped to "return" this valuable Protestant heritage to Croatia.

²⁰ This law from 1604 received a royal sanction in 1608 and thus became a separate religious law, which recognized only the Catholic religion, calling it the "true faith" (*religio orthodoxa*). In its first article, it was determined that all heretics, especially itinerant (Protestant) preachers, should be expelled. Cf. Drago Roksandić, *Etnos, konfesija, tolerancija* [Ethnicity, confession, tolerance] (Zagreb: SKD "Prosvjeta", 2004), pp. 55-66; Klaić, op. cit., pp. 566-568.

²¹ That is, until 1831, which is the year of the publication of the Bible translation prepared by the Franciscan Matija Petar Katančić (1750-1825). The translation was actually printed the following year and published posthumously. It is considered the first Croatian Bible in print, because the translation included the complete Biblical text. An earlier translation of the entire Bible, edited by the Jesuit Bartol Kašić (1575-1650), remained in manuscript until 2000, when it was finally published as a bibliophile edition. In Croatian scholarly literature and textbooks, partial and complete Catholic Bible translations manuscript that preceded Katančić's are regularly mentioned, but the Protestant translation of the New Testament from 1562/1563 is usually omitted, a situation that has only recently started to change. Cf. Loretana Farkaš, "Prvi otisnuti prijevod Biblije u Hrvata" [The first printed Bible translation among the Croats], *Jezikoslovlje* 1 (1998), pp. 20-34.

this fierce elimination had almost fatal consequences for the future of Croatian Protestantism. Even though Croatian Protestantism in the sixteenth century was inspired by the ideas of the European Reformation, it was at the same time an authentic movement of the Croatian ethnic area, creatively building on the existing foundations of Croatian culture at large.²²

Yet, in the centuries after this ban, Croatian Protestantism was not in a position to attain a similar kind of creative incorporation into the Croatian ethnic space. Geographically, it remained limited to some enclaves that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries, when parts of the Croatian lands were—mainly due to economic reasons—colonized by Germans and Slovaks; this, in turn, prompted the formation of several Lutheran congregations in these areas.²³ However, the first Protestant communities among the indigenous Croatian population appeared only at the end of the 19th century. This process is usually associated with the emergence of the so-called “free churches,” the first among them being the Nazarenes²⁴ and the Baptists. In the beginnings and early development of the Baptist movement in Croatia, the work of Bible colporteurs of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the American Southern Baptist and German missionary organizations was particularly important. Non-South-Slavic Baptist congregations (mostly Slovak and Hungarian) also had a significant

²² The main translators in the Protestant Bible project in Urach were the Glagolitic priests Stipan Konzul (1521-ca. 1579) and Antun Dalmatin (early 16th century-1579). They were referred to as “Glagolitic priests” (*popovi glagoljaši*), because they used a special Slavic script (Glagolitic) in their private and public communication. The liturgy was celebrated in the Old Slavonic language of the Croatian redaction, which, for centuries, managed to preserve the vernacular language in ecclesiastical use, enabling the Glagolitic priests to maintain certain independence in relation to the official Church. In the Western Roman Church, they were the only group allowed to celebrate the liturgy in the vernacular. In Glagolitic Church books (missals, breviaries, and lectionaries) they already possessed a large part of the Bible in the vernacular. These Bible portions were one of the bases for preparing the Protestant translation of the New Testament. The connection between the Glagolitic priests and the common people was transposed to a similar attitude of the Croatian Protestants towards the people, which is particularly visible in prefaces to their biblical and other religious books.

²³ These congregations were created from 1770 onwards, depending on the legal regulations that partly made it possible. However, they experienced their full development only after 1859, when the Austrian emperor and Hungarian-Croatian king Francis Joseph I (1830-1916, reigned from 1848) proclaimed the Protestant Patent (*Protestantenpatent*), which guaranteed the Protestants freedom to establish Church municipalities in Austria-Hungary and allowed for the settlement of evangelicals of both religions, Lutherans (Augsburg Confession) and Calvinists (Helvetic Confession). Until the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Lutherans in Croatia operated within several Hungarian dioceses (seniorates), and they also had their own separate diocese, but included into one Hungarian Church district. The Reformed (Calvinists) were organized within the Hungarian dioceses and districts. This ecclesiastical legal framework was significantly changed only in the 1930s, when laws on evangelical (Lutheran) and Reformed (Calvinist) churches were passed in the newly established state (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). This new ecclesiastical and legal situation continued until the fall of socialist Yugoslavia, with the necessary adaptation to the new political circumstances. Cf. Korpiaho, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-26, 111-112; Jasmin Milić, *Povijesno-pravni razvoj reformiranih crkvenih općina u Hrvatskoj* [Historical and legal development of Reformed Church municipalities in Croatia] (Osijek: Kršćanski centar “Dobroga pastira”, 2014), p. 18.

²⁴ The Nazarene movement spread to the South Slavic regions from Hungary. The Nazarenes operated mainly in the territory of today’s Serbia, and to a lesser extent in eastern Croatia.

influence.²⁵ After World War I, a new stimulus was introduced by some returning individuals (former soldiers coming from Russia or Hungary or immigrants from the USA) who brought this new religion to their homeland.

Yet, this only meant that Protestantism was still perceived as something foreign, strange, and even undesirable,²⁶ while “being a Croat” was de facto equated with “being a Catholic.” This identification was additionally reinforced by the growing influence of the Catholic Church in Croatia during the process of establishing the Croatian state. That image of Protestantism as a foreign, somewhat strange, imported, and also fragmented minority was further aggravated by the situation after 1945, when several hundred thousand Germans were forced to leave the ethnic Croatian lands.²⁷ After that, only a few and fragmented Protestant minorities remained on the Croatian soil: namely, remnants of the Lutheran Church and a meager number of free churches (mostly members of the Baptist, Pentecostal, or Brethren Church).

This image of Protestantism as an imported and fragmented minority intensified even more under the Communist regime (1945-1990). Although religion in Tito’s Yugoslavia was not banned, its expression was limited to the private sphere and confined to the premises of worship places.²⁸

²⁵ Ruben Knežević, *Pregled povijesti baptizma na hrvatskom prostoru* [An overview of the history of Baptism on the Croatian soil] (Osijek: Savez baptističkih crkava u Republici Hrvatskoj – Baptistički institut, 2001), pp. 33, 37-62.

²⁶ The term *lutor* (coming from “Lutheran”) and similar terms also had negative connotations in folklore in some regions, in the sense of a rogue person, an unbeliever. Cf. Petar Skok, *Etimologijski rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika (K-poni)* [Etymological dictionary of the Croatian or Serbian language (K-poni)] (Zagreb: JAZU, 1972), p. 333.

²⁷ Demographers and historians have estimated the demographic loss of Germans in Yugoslavia during and after the Second World War (the total number of emigrants, deaths, and unborn), as more than 460,000 persons. Cf. Vladimir Geiger, “Nijemci i Austrijanci u Hrvatskoj od 1945. do danas” [Germans and Austrians in Croatia from 1945 until today], *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 28, no. 1-2 (1996), p. 229.

²⁸ Already the first Yugoslav Constitution from 1946 guaranteed citizens freedom of conscience and religion and expressly emphasized that “the church is separate from the state. Religious communities, whose teachings do not contradict the Constitution, are free in their religious affairs and in the performance of religious ceremonies. Religious schools for preparing priests are free, but they are under the general supervision of the state. Abuse of the church and religion for political purposes is prohibited as well as the existence of political organizations on a religious basis.” *Ustav Federativne Narodne Republike Jugoslavije* [Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia], Jan 31, 1946, Article 25. This type of legal regulation continued in the later constitutions and laws on the legal status of religious communities. The first such regulation was the federal *Law of the Legal Status of Religious Communities* of May 27, 1953, published later in a separate booklet (Beograd: Službeni list FNRJ, 1954, with a foreword by the Deputy Prime Minister A. Ranković. In that exposé, he particularly highlighted the negative attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Communist regime. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the new law was “essentially an elaboration of the already standardized constitutional principles” (p. 15), and its basic principles were freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state (p. 16). On the basis of this law, separate laws were later passed for individual Yugoslav republics (for Croatia, in 1978). However, the Catholic bishops—as A. Ranković emphasized—held the position that the relations between the Catholic Church and the state could not be resolved by this law, because

Given the fact that, due to the course of historical circumstances, Croatian Protestantism had until then existed mainly in isolated enclaves, largely disconnected both from the society and from each other, the opportunity to find its rightful place “under the Croatian sun” would be postponed for another 45 years. As a result, Protestant communities in Tito’s Yugoslavia continued to exist, but usually in small ghettos, often financially and heavily dependent on the alms of their members or (even more often) on support from various foreign mission organizations. Besides that, communication and cooperation between different denominations were typically rather loose and only occasional.²⁹ Although these churches were registered with the state, they had neither proper legal possibilities nor an actual interest or intention to influence anything but the dynamics of their internal existence.³⁰ However, it would certainly be unjustified to claim that these tiny, relatively isolated communities, indifferent to the problems of the society at large, were not places of true Christian proclamation, authentic Christian prayer and hope, and genuine Christian fellowship. There were also sincere ecumenical efforts, especially on the grassroots level, among enthusiastic and progressive individuals.³¹

Still, the decades of ghettoization under the Communist regime had some problematic consequences; one of them was a lack of critical self-understanding, as the people clung to identification as a special, “chosen people”.³² This notion effectively

it was unilateral, while the Vatican considered that the only solution was the conclusion of a special agreement—a concordat (p. 13).

²⁹ Further observations on the nature of church existence under the “ghetto” paradigm can be found in Enoch Šeba, “Geto, kolonija ili narod na putu? Uloga baptista u hrvatskom društvu s posebnim osvrtom na radove Stanleya Hauerwasa i njegovih kritičara” [Ghetto, colony, or a journeying people? The Baptists’ role in the Croatian society, with a special reference to the work of Stanley Hauerwas and his critics], *Nova prisutnost: časopis za intelektualna i duhovna pitanja* 10, no. 2 (2012), pp. 249-261; Lidija Matošević, “Flourishing in Tito’s Yugoslavia. Miroslav Volf—a Theologian in the Evangelical-Pentecostal World of Tito’s Yugoslavia,” in: Matthew Croasmun et al., eds., *Envisioning the Good Life: Essays on God, Christ, and Human Flourishing in Honor of Miroslav Volf* (Oregon, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), pp. 181-207.

³⁰ The Baptists, for example, who have been active in Croatia since 1872, only made the first major step “outside the church walls” in 1967, organizing (see below) public evangelistic meetings of Billy Graham in Zagreb.

³¹ One such example is the visit of the Baptist preacher and world-famous evangelist Billy Graham (1918-2018), who held several public meetings in Zagreb in July 1967. It was his first visit to a European Communist country. The visit took place at the initiative of Josip Horak, President of the Baptist Union of Yugoslavia. Several Protestant denominations in Zagreb were involved in organization, especially the Lutherans, in who’s church one of the worship services was held. The meetings were also attended by representatives of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The latter helped the organizers and offered their space to hold two public outdoor religious meetings. Also, extensive reviews of this event appeared in the Catholic and Orthodox religious press. Read more in: Ruben Knežević, “Pedesetgodišnjica posjeta Billyja Grahama Zagrebu (1967.-2017.)” [The fiftieth anniversary of Billy Graham’s visit to Zagreb (1967-2017)], *Glas Crkve* 22, no. 55 (2017), pp. 32-35.

³² This attitude is observed mostly in church sermons delivered in free Protestant churches. Such topics are often based on biblical quotations from 1 Pt 2:9-10 and Titus 2:14, but also on numerous Old Testament quotes about Israel as God’s chosen people. This is also explicitly expressed in scholarly theological articles by authors with a Protestant background, cf. Stanko Jambrek, “Church Models for the 21st Century,” *Kairos: Evangelical*

hampered the nurturing of ecumenical relations, both among the Protestant denominations and in their attitude towards the majority Church.³³ In some congregations, the ghettoization contributed to the formation of a problematic profile of congregational leaders, who served as the only “communication channels” toward the state and (possibly) toward other congregations and organizations abroad, occasionally gaining enormous power and influence in their small ghettos. As a result, the critical potential of believers contained in the biblical teaching on the “priesthood of all believers” (strongly advocated and developed by the Reformers)³⁴ simply ended up crippled.

Finally, ghettoization almost completely anaesthetized Croatian Protestantism in terms of its sociopolitical engagement.³⁵ However, Croatian Protestantism never gave up on its responsibility for involvement in various social and political activities. Unlike the Catholic Church which, thanks to its longstanding tradition of providing support and influencing the Croatian people, never gave up on its responsibility for involvement in various social and political activities. While the Catholic Church remained in silent opposition throughout the Communist era³⁶ in the Protestant churches, thanksgiving was regularly offered to God for

Journal of Theology 13, no. 1 (2019), pp. 53-59, <https://doi.org/10.32862/k.13.1.2> (last accessed on September 22, 2022). In the summary, the author states: “The New Testament picture of the Church as God’s people points to a community of believers who are owned by God, who need to be separated from the world, whom God will abide in... It’s all those who have been sanctified in Christ, whom God has chosen, called, and made holy...” (Ibid., p. 59).

³³ There were, however, notable exceptions. These were usually dedicated individuals who, mostly on their own private initiative, undertook important projects that were steps forward into ecumenical cooperation and opening to the public, which continue to this day. Prominent examples are the Baptists Branko Lovrec and Josip Horak, and the Lutheran Vlado L. Deutsch, Bishop of Evangelical Church in Zagreb. In the mid-1960s, B. Lovrec began publishing Christian literature that was not limited by a strict denominational framework and was acceptable to other Protestant churches as well as to Catholics. His work developed over time within the publishing house “Duhovna stvarnost” [Spiritual Reality]. Their numerous editions of Christian theology, essays, and fiction could be found in secular bookstores as early as the 1980s. J. Horak and V. Deutsch were the main initiators in founding the Theological Faculty “Matthias Flacius Illyricus,” which has been operating in Zagreb since 1976. Cf. Knežević, *Pregled., op. cit.*, p. 109.

³⁴ This teaching is explicitly stated in the documents of some Protestant churches in Croatia. Thus, in the book *Naučavanje, vjerovanje i život vjernika Evanđeoske pentekostne crkve, Drugo izdanje* [Teaching, belief and life of Evangelical Pentecostal Church believers, second edition] (Zagreb: Evangelical Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Croatia, 2019), it is stated: “The priesthood of all believers—in evangelical communities every believer has priestly rights and duties, and a general call from God for service in the community; some believers have a special call from God for certain ministries: apostles, evangelists, teachers, elders, administrators, deacons.” (p. 217)

³⁵ Croatian Protestants started to become more socially engaged in humanitarian work only during the Croatian Independence War (from 1991). Thus, the first Croatian Baptist humanitarian organizations, which provided material and spiritual aid to people injured or exiled in the war, operated from 1991 and 1992 (cf. Knežević, *Pregled., op. cit.*, p. 120.). When Croatia gained independence, which resulted in new social circumstances legal regulations, the formal circumstances that had led believers to ghettoization were removed and the door was opened to a wider appearance of Protestants in public space.

³⁶ On the other hand, the Croatian Catholics who had fled to Western countries after the Second World War and operated from the diaspora openly opposed the Yugoslav political regime, mostly through various types of printed matter. In the preface to Archbishop Šarić’s translation of the New Testament, published in Madrid in 1953, it is written: “God willing, may this work serve to the fullest extent to strengthen the Catholic faith... May

the secular authorities because they provided for the “earthly needs” of the believers, thus enabling them to prepare for their “heavenly homeland.”³⁷

The Slow (Re)Definition of Protestant Identity in Modern-Day Croatia: Cautious Unloading of the Burden of the Past and Struggle to Find a Suitable “Place Under The Sun”

After the establishment of an independent Croatian state, the situation changed for all religious communities. Yet not all religious communities were equally prepared for this change. The Catholic Church had never given up its aspiration to reclaim the influence over the society. It significantly contributed to the preservation and development of Croatian national identity, and therefore welcomed the new situation with full readiness. Protestant churches –without a tradition of socio-political engagement–were far less ready for these turbulent changes. All the more so because the establishment of an independent state was followed by a war to defend the newly acquired Croatian independence.

In this tense and extremely sensitive situation, during the following years the Croatian Protestantism succeeded, with more or less difficulty, to obtain a legislative framework for its existence in the new state and to officially register with the government, which meant receiving the legal status of acknowledged religious communities.³⁸

it also be a powerful contribution from our side to the struggle of the Croatian people against godless communism, which today rampage in our homeland!” *Sveto pismo, Novi zavjet, preveo i bilješke priredio Dr. Ivan Evandelist Šarić* [Holy Scripture, New Testament, Translated and Notes prepared by Dr. Ivan Evandelist Šarić] (Madrid: Croatia Academica Catholica, 1953), p. [11].

³⁷ Cf. Matošević, *op. cit.*, 188-190. In some of these communities, the focus on the “heavenly homeland” and the neglecting of “worldly” administrative formalities was so pronounced that they even missed the first deadlines for registering their religious community. The majority of Protestant religious communities in Croatia were registered in the period 2003-2004, while the Nazarenes, for example, one of the oldest religious communities in the South Slavic area, were only registered in 2010 (the Nazarenes in this area originate from the movement founded by Samuel Heinrich Froehlich (1803-1857) in Switzerland and spread in the second half of the 19th century, especially to southern Hungary and northern Serbia. In the USA, they operate under the name Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarene) and should not be confused with the Church of the Nazarene in the USA, which has Methodist origins.

³⁸ This legal framework was formulated in the *Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities*, published in *Narodne novine* [Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia] 83 (July 16, 2002), the final version of which was still more acceptable in comparison to the first drafts, which, without a transparent public debate, tried to differentiate religious communities according to rather vague criteria about their historical existence in the past hundred years in the Croatian territory. In the end, however, the position was taken that, based on the submitted applications, all those religious communities that operated as legal entities on the date of entry into force of the law should be registered. Newly founded religious communities had to submit separate applications for registration. Considering the fact that the law was passed after the conclusion of a concordats with the Catholic Church (see below), the larger Protestant churches also requested the conclusion of a special contract with the Government of the Republic of Croatia in order to better regulate financing their religious and charitable activities from the national budget. The contract also regulated the issues of education and culture, as well as pastoral care for church members in prisons, hospitals, the police, and the army. Such contracts “on the issues of common interest” did not have the character of interstate agreements like those of the Vatican but were concluded with the government of the Republic of Croatia (not with the State!). All major Protestant churches

Additionally, the churches managed to sign agreements with the Croatian government that guaranteed them modest financial support.³⁹ However, this process was concluded no less than ten years after the majority Church got its legal and financial status regulated by concordats.⁴⁰

However, this legislative framework was only a skeleton that needed a breath of life-giving spirit. In other words, the Protestant identity still had to undergo a process of redefinition. The following interconnected aspects of this process can be discerned here: a) theological and practical articulation of individual confessional/denominational Protestant identities and building the awareness of their reciprocity; b) theological and practical articulation of the relationship to the majority church; and c) theological and practical articulation of relationships to the society at large.

A. Theological and Practical Articulation of Individual Confessional/Denominational Protestant Identities and Building the Awareness of their Reciprocity

Although from the outside Croatian Protestantism still leaves an impression of being fragmented, dispersed, uncoordinated, and variegated, a closer look at the situation reveals that along with that fragmentation, there are also trends toward better articulation of individual confessional/denominational identities that foster awareness of an essential

(Evangelical Church, Reformed Churches, Union of Baptist Churches, Pentecostal Churches, Church of God, Adventist Churches, Churches of Christ, Church of the Full Gospel, Pentecostal-Charismatic Union of Churches “Word of Life”) concluded these agreements between 2002 and 2014, and so did some larger non-Protestant religious communities (Orthodox, Jewish, Old Catholic, and Islamic).

³⁹ However, this is relatively modest compared to the funds that the Catholic Church receives from the national budget. There are elaborate data for the year 2016. Cf. Vjekoslav Bratić, “Financiranje vjerskih zajednica sredstvima državnog proračuna: Primjer Hrvatske” [Financing of religious communities from the state budget: Case of Croatia], *Ekonomski pregled* 71, no. 3 (2017), pp. 215-238 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.32910/ep.71.3.2> (last accessed on September 22, 2022), according to which the Catholic Church received budget funds in the amount of HRK 673,484,388.68 (USD 93.95 million according to the exchange rate as of December 31, 2016), and all Protestant churches together received HRK 16,684,083.12 (USD 2.33 million), so about 40 times more funds were allocated to the Catholic Church (pp. 230-231).

⁴⁰ There are four such “concordats,” “Vatican treaties” or “agreements”: agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on legal questions (1996) [establishes a basic legal framework for the Church and its institutions], on education and culture (1996) [about state subsidies for teachers in Catholic schools and Catholic religious education in state schools], on spiritual assistance [about military chaplains] (1996), and on financial questions (1998) [enables the return (restitution) of all Catholic Church property confiscated by the Communist regime after 1945 and provides for the financing of the Church through the national budget]. Cf. *Concordat Watch – Croatia*, <https://www.concordatwatch.eu/croatia--s890> (last accessed on October 7, 2022). These four treaties have the legal status of international treaties. In this way, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Article 141), they are placed above Croatian laws in terms of legal effects (cf. Frane Staničić, “Treba li nam revizija ugovora sa Svetom Stolicom?” [Do we need a revision of treaties with the Holy See?], *Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu* 68, 3-4 (2018), pp. 397-429). “The Vatican was the first ‘state’ to recognize Croatia. It offered this encouragement to the predominantly Catholic break-away state in 1992, shortly before Yugoslavia dissolved, while Croatia was still fighting a six-month-old war against the predominantly Eastern Orthodox, Serbian-led federal army. This early sponsorship quickly helped the Vatican truss up the new state with a bundle of concordats.” *Concordat Watch*, *ibid.*

correlation with other Protestant identities. These trends, similarly, to the history of ecumenism on a global scale, have not been driven solely by theological pastoral motives or initiated by the Protestant communities themselves.

An important drive behind these trends was the new Croatian government or the secular sector in the broadest sense. So, for example, a deliberate (or perhaps only tactless) statement by Jure Radić, at that time President of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, in an interview for the most prominent Croatian daily newspaper,⁴¹ saying that “the total number of adherents necessary for any one community in order to be considered as a religious community is still to be determined” (in a new law), mentioning the figures of 30,000 or 50,000 “in some countries,” provoked a joint reaction of member churches of the Protestant Evangelical Council, whose Secretary General specifically commented on such an inappropriate proposal in writing.⁴² Awareness of one’s particular identity as part of a wider Protestant tradition was also enhanced by the negotiations that preceded the signing of respective contracts between the Protestant churches and the Croatian government.⁴³

Fostering the self-understanding of certain Protestant confessional or denominational communities as part of a broader Protestant identity was further encouraged by the fact that the Croatian government had to “prove” its commitment to the democratic principles before the European Union. Those minority religious groups that had previously had no or minimal access to the public arena (some of them even consciously withdrawing from it, labeling it as the “sinful world”) were gradually given more opportunities to become

⁴¹ Jure Radić, “Dio poreza i za potrebe Crkve” [Part of the tax to be allocated the Church], *Večernji list* (June 3, 1995), p. 7.

⁴² Mladen Jovanović, “The Evangelical Perspective on Unity and the Contribution of the Protestant Evangelical Council to Christian Fellowship in Croatia,” *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (2008), pp. 85-86.

⁴³ During the preparation of the signing of “contracts on the issues of common interest” between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Protestant churches, it was decided that smaller Protestant communities would join in the contract with a related, more numerous Protestant community. In this way, such Protestant communities were indirectly directed to additional joint cooperation. So, for example, the Church of God and the Alliance of Pentecostal Churches of Christ were affiliated with the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement was affiliated with the Christian Adventist Church, and the Churches of Christ were affiliated with the Baptist Union of Croatia. Furthermore, the Government of the Republic of Croatia signed contracts with larger Protestant communities collectively, with a note in one contract that each of the signatory churches, although they were included in the joint contract, signed it “independently, individually and each for themselves.” In the end, three contracts “on the issues of common interest” were signed: 1) Contract between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church in the Republic of Croatia and the Reformed Christian Church in Croatia (July 4, 2003); 2) Contract between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Evangelical (Pentecostal) Church in the Republic of Croatia, the Christian Adventist Church in the Republic of Croatia, and the Union of Baptist Churches in the Republic of Croatia (July 4, 2003); Contract between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the “Word of Life” – Network of Churches, Church of the Full Gospel and the Protestant Reformed Christian Church in the Republic of Croatia (September 12, 2014).

present and visible outside the boundaries of their well-known turfs. Their representatives were allowed to appear in various forms of mass media, invited to important public events (such as celebrations in town halls, inaugurations or anniversary celebrations of major events in national or local history), and made aware that their congregations were now eligible to contribute to the common good. To be sure, many of these trends were sparked by the intention of the authorities to present evidence of their respect for the rights of religious minorities at various levels. Yet, these changes forced Protestant denominations to ask questions about their identities in terms of relations with the society at large as well as their mutual relations.

Of course, it can be argued that the decisive impulses towards a clearer articulation of their own confessional or denominational identity and its place within the wider Protestant context should have risen from the Protestant churches themselves and from institutions closely related to them. And indeed, there were significant developments that deserve to be mentioned in this context.

For instance, the Protestant Evangelical Council [Protestantsko evanđeosko vijeće – PEV] was founded in 1992 to continue the work of the Association of Religious Officials in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [Udruženje evanđeoskih vjerskih službenika]. This body was founded in 1987 and active during the period before Croatia claimed its independence. The primary role of the PEV was to act in an advisory capacity and gather churches of the Reformation heritage.⁴⁴ At first, its activities focused on matters such as religious rights and the official recognition of its member denominations. Later, the PEV continued to broaden the scope of religious freedoms and from time to time served as a platform for dialogue with the authorities. Occasionally, joint statements were published on certain crucial developments or questions. Public lectures and conferences were held, typically related to the Reformation Day. Also, the PEV served as a meeting point for several churches willing to develop resources for a common program of religious education.⁴⁵

However, some thirty years later, it seemed that the PEV had not managed to live up to its own goals. Very early after its foundation, the Reformed Church withdrew its membership from the PEV.⁴⁶ A significant part of Pentecostal congregations never joined the

⁴⁴ Jovanović, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83; PEV u RH [Protestant Evangelical Council in the Republic of Croatia], <https://pev.com.hr/pev-a-hr/> (last accessed on October 13, 2022).

⁴⁵ Anica Kerep, “Od religijske kulture do konfesionalnog vjeronauka” [From religious culture to confessional religious education], *Evanđeoski pokret – Zbornik radova sa znanstvenog skupa Protestantsko-evanđeoskog vijeća...* (Zagreb: Protestantsko-evanđeosko vijeće, 1997), pp. 97-107.

⁴⁶ The Reformed Christian Church in Croatia officially withdrew from PEV membership with a letter from Bishop Endre Langh dated November 23, 1998, addressed to the PEV Presidency. As one of main reasons, he

PEV in the first place,⁴⁷ and the same is true of the Lutheran Church.⁴⁸ Also, the nature of most activities launched by the PEV remained occasional or reactive.⁴⁹ A sense of systematic work and pro-active investment in the contextual articulation of individual confessional or denominational identities as part of a broader Protestant identity (on both global and national level) was still missing. Without it, these activities, however positive and well-meant in themselves, necessarily remained isolated initiatives with a limited scope and with no long-term effects on the participating churches. Thus, the PEV sometimes served only as a communicational channel, considered suitable for issuing a statement or proclaiming a set of beliefs. Once this was accomplished, the member denominations reverted to pursuing their own interests and goals without seriously questioning their confessional identity, let alone considering some sort of common Protestant identity.

The outcome of all these factors was that the Protestant communities quite often had inadequate knowledge of Christian faith in its all-encompassing breadth and inclusiveness. Without that deeper understanding, they seemed condemned to uncritical acceptance of the previously established and inherited attitudes, sometimes additionally reinforced by “decorative” use of the Bible, where its main function was to simply provide support of one’s own interpretation of Christianity.⁵⁰ Occasionally, these features were

noted their dissatisfaction with the attitude and statements of some PEV members about the Reformed Church and its leadership. He also mentioned that in the early years, the PEV had played a significant role in strengthening the social position of the Protestant churches, but that time had passed (Memorandum No. 26-9, II/98, Archives of the PEV).

⁴⁷ These were mostly congregations and alliances of a more conservative type, which looked suspiciously at any form of inter-church cooperation.

⁴⁸ During the 1990s, the Lutheran Church in Croatia experienced severe internal conflicts, which in 1996 led to an internal split. Thus, engaging in inter-Protestant cooperation was not their primary concern at the time. Cf. Bill Yoder, “When Will the Croatian Split End?,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 18, no. 5 (1998), <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol18/iss5/4> (last accessed on September 22, 2022). In addition, in some circles of the Lutheran Church, there was a prevailing opinion that they were the only original Protestants and had nothing in common with, for example, “a community that was created only in the 19th century.” Cf. Ljiljana W. Berić, “Različite su Evangelička i Evanđeoska Crkva” [Evangelical and “Evangelical” are two different churches], *Glas koncila* 33, no. 34 (August 21, 1994). In the Croatian language, the terms *evangelička* and *evanđeoska* are not semantically identical, although in English both are translated as “evangelical.” When it comes to churches, the term *evangelička* is associated exclusively with the Lutheran church, while *evanđeoska* is associated with free Protestant churches or with the Pentecostal Church, which has this adjective in its name.

⁴⁹ For instance, a symposium titled *Reformation among the Croats* was organized in 1997 to celebrate the 480th anniversary of the Reformation. The PEV also translated and published various statements produced by the World Evangelical Alliance, the Lausanne Movement, or other related organizations (for instance, the *Lausanne Covenant*, *The Manila Manifesto*, or *The Cape Town Commitment*).

⁵⁰ A similar approach is noticeable in some Croatian Protestant Bible translations, when certain terms are translated in the spirit of understanding that term in the theology of the congregation from which the Bible translator originates. Thus, one translation, made in the tradition of the Brethren Church, will prefer the term “assembly” instead of “church” when translating the Greek word *ekklesia*, while another, prepared in the tradition of prosperity gospel theology, will deliberately use the foreign word “prosper” in places where it is

backed by explicit or concealed theological exclusivism toward other and different Protestant Christians. Such discrimination usually targeted those groups that did not share the same or similar “spiritual experience.” Undoubtedly, no church can be said to be immune to such expressions of exclusivism, and yet, empirically speaking, they seem more likely to be found among the evangelical Christians.⁵¹

B. Theological and Practical Articulation of the Relationship to the Majority Church

Although some ecumenical relations with the majority Church were established during the Communist era, at that time they were mostly limited to personal relationships and cooperation.⁵² Within the new democratic order, a far broader framework for ecumenism has emerged. And when it comes to the dialogue among Protestants, an important impetus has been the new Croatian government itself, or the secular sector in the most general sense of the word. By granting all religious communities access to the public arena, the government has also created an entirely new ground for their mutual communication and added previously unexplored dimensions to their interaction.

Of course, for ecumenism to become the reality of life, the decisive impulses still have to arise from the churches themselves. Unfortunately, such initiatives have been rather rare. Regular ecumenical activities in which Protestant congregations participate are mainly reduced to annual prayer meetings for Christian unity.⁵³ Admittedly, in some areas, there have been attempts on the Protestants' side to move on from those annual prayer meetings and engage in more regular and more frequent activities.⁵⁴ But there are also Protestant groups that keep refusing to participate even in these common prayer meetings. Typically, these groups also advocate a very exclusivist attitude towards the majority Church.⁵⁵

possible to use a more appropriate Croatian term. Cf. Knežević, *Hrvatski bezimprimaturni...*, op. cit., pp. 155-156, 283.

⁵¹ Matošević, op. cit., p. 191.

⁵² Cf. note 32.

⁵³ The World Octave or the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an ecumenical initiative that began in 1908 and is now coordinated by the World Council of Churches. Representatives of various churches meet in January every year for a common prayer and a shorter devotional service. In Croatia, the traditional participants of this initiative include Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, Reformed, Baptists, and Pentecostals. However, individual Protestant churches within the aforementioned denominations are not united in their attitude towards participating in such gatherings.

⁵⁴ Such is the case, for example, in Rijeka, where there are several Protestant churches in addition to the Catholic and Orthodox churches. At the beginning of 1997, the Ecumenical Committee was established, which included representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical (Lutheran), Pentecostal, and Baptist Churches. In addition to annual prayer meetings, they used to hold various other religious gatherings, concerts, and initiatives, but in recent years this work has stopped as well.

⁵⁵ These are mostly individual churches from the Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, whose exclusivism partly stems from the almost century-old intolerance of the majority Church towards them, which is especially pronounced in northwestern Croatia. They are also joined by some charismatic Protestant churches, whose

Such extreme attitudes among Protestants are, not so infrequently, mirrored by similar attitudes of those in the majority Church towards the Protestants. Namely, although the ecumenical turn of the Second Vatican Council affected Croatia as well, with the “spirit of the Council” pervading among certain Catholic priests or theologians,⁵⁶ the work of these theologians (and some of them were participants of the Second Vatican Council) did not succeed in reaching out to the wider body of believers. As a result, they did not manage to inspire theological successors who would continue their work once they were gone. So, despite many and various opportunities that the Roman Catholic Church could have used to instruct and edify the Croatian people from the 1990s,⁵⁷ to this day common believers show poor knowledge of the content of Christian faith and inadequate understanding of the full scope of Catholicism.⁵⁸

At this point, it must be said that war was a serious obstacle to the ecumenical movement in the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Different war-related developments proved to be a strong burden to the theological-ecumenical discourse, prioritizing the unresolved national and political problems instead. In addition, one can observe the typical problems of a post-Communist society in transition.⁵⁹ At the end of the day, what is found

religious principles are incompatible with their understanding of the teachings of the majority Church. Cf. Damir Š. Alić, “Važnije razlike između nas i Rimokatoličke Crkve” [Some important differences between us and the Roman Catholic Church], <https://rijeczivota.hr/tv-emisija/vaznije-razlike-izmedu-nas-i-rimokatolicke-crkve/> (last accessed on October 17, 2022). The so-called independent Baptist churches of a recent date, created under the influence of missionaries from the King James Only movement, whose principles of belief emphasize separation “from all churches that deny the truth of the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints,” also belong to this group of exclusivists. Cf. “Naše vjerovanje” [What we believe], available at: <https://www.angelfire.com/oz/lesliesincroatia/nvjerovanje.html> (last accessed on October 17, 2022).

⁵⁶ These people were priests and theologians gathered around Kršćanska sadašnjost, Center for Council Research, Documentation, and Information, founded in 1968, which evolved into the most prominent Catholic publishing house in Croatia and the area of former Yugoslavia. They organized publication of theological and popular religious press and books, Bible translations, and various other media, and held well-attended theological forums that opened a dialogue between the Church and the Communist social environment of the time and discussed the role of the Church in the post-conciliar era. The Catholic theologians Vjekoslav Bajsić (1924-1994), Josip Turčinović (1933-1990), and Tomislav Šagi-Bunić (1923-1999) played a leading role in Kršćanska sadašnjost in the beginning, shaping its activities for the following decades.

⁵⁷ Notable examples of these opportunities included Catholic religious education being introduced to public elementary and secondary schools, access to media and establishment of Church-owned radio and TV stations, introduction of chaplaincy in military forces, and so on.

⁵⁸ This issue is often discussed in the Catholic circles. Thus, the website of a Croatian Catholic parish comments: “A sad but true fact, which is also present in our Croatian circumstances, is that the average Catholic knows little about his own religion. How is that possible? Despite 20 years of religious education in schools, parish catechesis, Sunday sermons? There is still so much ignorance in religious matters.” Anđelko Domazet, “Vjersko neznanje katolika – tužna, ali istinita činjenica” [The religious ignorance of Catholics – a sad but true fact], <https://zupa-kajzerica.com/index.php/2-naslovnica/299-vjersko-neznanje-katolika-tuzna-ali-istinita-cinjenica> (last accessed on October 17, 2022).

⁵⁹ The following should also be noted here: although this is not the official position of the Catholic Church, in some ecclesiastical and para-ecclesiastical circles, it is noticeable that Catholicism is turning in the direction of right-wing political options and ideologies, where the expression “a true Croat is a true Catholic” is considered as something self-evident and desirable, and a strict reference to traditional Catholic family and social values are

among the religious grassroots in Croatia is not only an “endangered” Protestant minority, but also an “endangered” Catholic majority. In all this, both “endangered” religious bases try to affirm their own identity mainly by “closing ranks” in order to “protect” themselves from those who are other and different.⁶⁰

C. Theological and Practical Articulation of the Attitude Towards Polarized Society

One of the defining features of the contemporary Croatian society is polarization. By definition, polarization always contains the greater or lesser potential for different conflicts—and in this case, it occurs in the form of various societal divisions. The scope of this paper allows us only to briefly list some of those: ideological divisions (i.e. polarization along the lines of political values), ethnic divisions, divisions between believers and unbelievers, division between believers belonging to the majority Church and those belonging to other Christian churches or other religions, divisions between Europhiles and Europhobes, economic divisions, and so on. All these polarizations are also noticeable in the public shaping of Croatian Protestant identity.

Relatively deficient articulation of particular Protestant confessional identities regarding both Protestant and more general Christian ecumenism is also reflected in the dynamics of public behavior of Croatian Protestantism in the broader context of the Croatian society. On the one hand, Protestant communities have shown exceptional readiness to act in emergencies from the very beginning of existence of the independent Croatian state. In this regard, mention should be made of both material and spiritual aid offered to the victims of

considered a feature of the true Croat and patriot. To this ideology—which is primarily a reaction to the contemporary trends in society, science, and politics—one should add a certain fundamentalist “Protestantization” of Catholicism, noticeable among the Catholic charismatic and populist church movements and organizations. Holders of such ideas (Catholic laymen and some clerics) operate in various associations (“U ime obitelji” [In the name of the family], <https://uimeobitelji.net/>; Vigilare, <http://www.vigilare.hr/>; “Udruga za promicanje obiteljskih vrijednosti–blaženi Alojzije Stepinac” [Association for the promotion of family values – Blessed Alojzije Stepinac], <https://udruga-bas.hr/>; and others) and through numerous web-portals, which, in today’s Internet age, are especially attractive to the younger generation. The official Church, which has a great influence in the society, does not sufficiently disclaim such ideas, and its “official silence” creates the impression that authentic Catholicism in Croatia is largely the one promoted in a fundamentalist spirit on various web portals and in the media. Unlike Catholicism, Protestant fundamentalism in Croatia is not strictly ethnocentric. It is rather limited to closed religious groups, although there are also actions towards a stronger media opening, with the Protestant charismatic community “Word of Life” leading the way with its own television programs on local TV stations as well as its YouTube channel “Word of Life”.

⁶⁰ However, Catholics and Protestants sometimes act together in public, especially on occasions when it is necessary to take a clear attitude towards some tendencies concerning social values that both groups find unacceptable. Thus, on November 12, 2013, representatives of several religious communities held a symposium on the preventive and curative aspects of preserving the institution of marriage and family in Croatia and adopted a joint statement on that issue. The statement was adopted by the Catholic Church, the Islamic and Jewish communities, and two Orthodox churches, as well as the Reformed, Baptist, and Pentecostal Church under the title “O braku i obitelji. Zajednička izjava” [On marriage and family: A joint statement], *Glas Crkve* 18, no. 45-46 (2013), p. 44.

war (refugees, displaced persons, and other groups) including additional care provided to vulnerable groups in the post-war period, as well as support distributed to the immigrants during the migrant crisis. All these actions were seen as being in accordance with the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace and offered to the needy regardless of their religious, ethnic, or worldview affiliation.⁶¹ However, this inclusiveness, so transparent in the readiness to meet the needs of diverse groups of people in their need, has not spilt over onto the level of theological-practical articulation of attitudes on current issues in the Croatian society, which remained burdened by the above-mentioned polarizations. Therefore, when it comes to social debates on the current problems in the Croatian society and to the constructive proposals to overcome them, the behavior of Protestant communities typically falls into two patterns. More often than not, these congregations act as if they have been anaesthetized concerning the current social debates. If they do get involved in some way, then it usually comes down to simply complying with one of the parties in social polarization and usually this is the “rightist” option to which the politically agile members of the majority Roman Catholic Church also adhere.⁶² In doing so, the articulated theological alternative that would constructively contribute to social dialogue is insufficiently heard, rarely visibly present, and most often limited to the occasional public appearances of individual Protestant intellectuals.⁶³

Perspectives for the Future of Croatian Protestantism

The question that logically arises from all of the above is that of the role of intellectual Protestant elites, especially theologians, in overcoming the consequences of unfavorable historical circumstances and in striving for the optimal development of Protestantism in modern Croatia. In this sense, it is important to note that out of an almost (statistically speaking) negligible number of Protestant communities in Croatia, about thirty

⁶¹ The work of numerous Croatian Protestant humanitarian associations, founded during the war in the former Yugoslavia, was directed to the needs of refugees and displaced persons in Croatia. Activities of these humanitarian associations were mostly financed by donations from foreign mission organizations, but the Croatian Protestants also invested their own human resources and funds in the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid.

⁶² On such occasions, ecumenically reserved Protestant evangelicals also adhere to the majority Church, especially when it comes to questions about banning abortion, attitude towards the LGBT population, and the like. But they do not follow it in ethnocentric or nationalist tendencies, because for them the national element is not an essential component of church identity.

⁶³ Notable Croatian Protestant intellectuals present in the secular press during the past twenty years include the Baptist Branko Lovrec (1932-2012), the long-term president of the Baptist Union of Croatia and founder of the Christian publishing house “Spiritual Reality,” and the Pentecostal Peter Kuzmič (b. 1946), theologian and Rector of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek. He has written numerous articles and several books on topics concerning the relations between Church and society. As individuals, but indirectly and on behalf of their churches, they have also expressed their views on the current issues in the Church and the society.

Doctors of Theology have emerged in the past five decades. This fact, no doubt, indicates that the Protestant communities, despite their small number and shortcomings in clearly articulating their religious attitudes towards Protestant and Christian ecumenism and the society at large, are at the same time communities that have proven capable of motivating a not so negligible number of individuals to become involved in an in-depth, critical study of the Christian tradition.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the influence of this, statistically speaking, not so negligible number of highly educated Croatian Protestant theologians on the religious base is almost negligible. Although there are certainly a number of reasons for this, the most important seems to be the chronic lack of quality higher education, that is, a scholarly institution that would bring together and enhance local theological potential. Namely, even though small in number seen from the outside, Croatian Protestantism has invested a relatively large amount of energy in the institutionalization of theological education, although the dispersion that is characteristic of the Protestant church base itself is also seen in the theological-educational institutes. Thus, presently there are six institutions in Croatia that offer theological education in one way or another.⁶⁵ The problem of such fragmentation—much like when it comes to the fragmentation of church life—is that it is rarely the result of a systematic and planned effort to achieve better articulation of one's faith in the ecumenical or

⁶⁴ The possible reasons for this motivation behind studying theology, present among a relatively large number of members of Protestant religious communities, have not been studied in detail, with only a few studies that specifically deal with theological education among the Croatian Protestants. Cf. Davorin Peterlin, "Theological Education among Croatian Baptists to 2000: A Socio-Historical Survey," *The Baptist Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (2000), pp. 239-259, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.2000.11752098> (last accessed on September 22, 2022); Enoh Šeba, "Die theologische Fakultät 'Matija Vlačić Ilirik' (Matthias Flacius Illyricus) von 1976 bis in die Gegenwart" [Theological Faculty "Matija Vlačić Ilirik" (Matthias Flacius Illyricus) from 1976 to the present day], *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt* 56 (2009), pp. 131-150; Lidija Matošević, Marina Schumann, and Enoh Šeba, "Od privatnog crkvenog učilišta do sveučilišnog centra za protestantsku teologiju" [From a private church school to the University Centre for Protestant Theology], in: *500 godina protestantizma: Baština i otisci u hrvatskom društvu* [500 years of Protestantism: Heritage and impact in the Croatian society], ed. Ankica Marinović and Ivan Markešić (Zagreb: Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu and Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo, 2018), pp. 319-345). These, however, do not specifically deal with the motivation of candidates for theological studies. However, some motivational impulses can be discerned in the very nature of smaller Protestant religious communities, especially free churches. They are often of a semi-closed type, focused largely on building up their local church piety. This can be an incentive to the study of theology, in the sense of striving for a deeper knowledge of faith or for religious knowledge that is different and deeper than that of one's own religious community. Thus, several students from the University Center for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus have recently stated that their motives for studying theology include an inner longing to study theology, the challenge of acquiring a different type of knowledge than that found in the closed church environment, and a spiritual hunger for greater and firmly explained truth, because deeper knowledge opens up room for deeper faith. Cf. Ruben Knežević, "Razgovor s profesorima i studentima Sveučilišnog centra za protestantsku teologiju Matija Vlačić Ilirik" [Conversation with professors and students of the University Center for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus], *Glas Crkve* 26-27, no. 65-66 (2021-2022), p. 30.

⁶⁵ These are: University Center for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus (University of Zagreb), Evangelical Theological Faculty (Pentecostal), Biblical Institute in Zagreb (Churches of Christ), Adriatic Union College (Adventists), Theological Biblical Academy (conservative Baptist churches), and Protestant Theological School "Mihael Starin" [Protestant Reformed Christian Church]. There are also some other internal "Bible schools" in certain denominations.

wider social context. Instead, the establishment of definitely redundant theological schools occurs as a result of a number of other circumstances: the impact of different mission organizations, which in the zeal of implementing their own interpretation of Christianity do not care much for the specific situation of the religious communities in which they operate, and even less for the ecumenical and social setting in which these communities are situated; narrow biblical-fundamentalist or even narrower denominational views of individual Protestant groups, which then, mainly with the help of financial assistance from foreign mission organizations, establish theological schools whose primary and almost sole task is to faithfully reproduce and transmit the said views; and the need of individuals for self-promotion, which often goes hand-in-hand with a lack of will to cooperate on a broader Protestant basis.⁶⁶ The result of all this is that the theologians of Croatian origin, many of whom have studied at eminent secular universities, do not find the possibility of earning their living by teaching at Croatian Protestant theological schools, but are forced to look for work elsewhere, mostly at foreign theological faculties, where they almost regularly achieve brilliant careers. Even the two most promising theological institutions, Theological Faculty “Matthias Flacius Illyricus” Ilirik” (TFMVI) and Evangelical Theological Faculty (ETF), ultimately failed—for reasons that have not been fully clarified—in halting the continuous outflow of Croatian theologians.⁶⁷ It so happened that, although these theological schools

⁶⁶ These circumstances partly influenced the activities surrounding the process of establishing the Theological Faculty “Matthias Flacius Illyricus” in Zagreb. The Lutheran public was informed about this intention at the meetings of the National Committee of Lutheran Churches in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), held at the beginning of 1976. The leading persons from some Protestant churches in Yugoslavia (Vlado L. Deutsch from the Evangelical Church in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina, Josip Horak from the Baptist Union of Yugoslavia, and Peter Kuzmič from the Pentecostal Church in Yugoslavia) had been involved in that project for the previous two years, but the churches were not informed about the initiative. This realization was received with displeasure by Juraj Struharik, Bishop of the Slovak Evangelical Church, who, although he believed that such a faculty was necessary, saw the initiative primarily as a private project of V. Deutsch and J. Horak, and accused them of having brought the other Protestants “into the position of having to accept a fait accompli” (typescript of the report “Informacija o otvaranju protestantskog teološkog fakulteta u Zagrebu” [Report on the opening of the Protestant Theological Faculty in Zagreb] by Dragoslav Milosavljević, no. 13-302/1-76 of April 9, 1976, archival fond RS 002 F. 198/I, box 877, Fond Izvršnog veća Vojvodine, Arhiv Vojvodine, Novi Sad [Archival fond of the Executive Council of Vojvodina, Archives of Vojvodina, Novi Sad]). In the end, V. Deutsch and J. Horak were signed as founders of the Faculty on behalf of their churches, while P. Kuzmič withdrew and continued acting as the Head and professor at the Pentecostal Biblical Theological Institute, founded in 1972 in Zagreb, which was the predecessor of today’s Evangelical Theological Faculty in Osijek. Cf. Stanko Jambrek, “The Pentecostal Movement in Croatia 1907-2007,” *Kairos* 1, No. 2 (2007), pp. 215-216.

⁶⁷ Both institutions offered a promising perspective to their students, as their founders had in mind a vision of education that transcended narrow denominational frameworks. ETF was thus directed towards evangelical Christians, i.e. members of mostly free churches: “The vision of the Seminary is to be a leading Evangelical center for education and research in Christ-centered calling in Central and Eastern Europe and the world. The Seminary in Osijek is an international, inter-denominational, scientific and educational institution in the field of theology. The purpose of the Seminary is to provide theological education, nurture and promote theological scientific disciplines and similar activities to help God’s people in strengthening their faith. The Seminary is a place of higher theological education for pastors, priests, preachers, evangelists, religious teachers and others

encouraged and helped further theological training abroad of a certain number of their students,⁶⁸ they did not work at the same time on creating conditions for the employment of these same students and thus a solid institutional base around which future Croatian Protestant theologians could gather and from which they could act. Instead, at the same time as quality theological staff sought work abroad, teaching at these institutions mostly took place thanks to the engagement of individual missionaries,⁶⁹ associates from the Catholic Faculty of Theology,⁷⁰ or occasionally in the form of guest lectures held by Croatian Protestant theologians working abroad. Of course, this non-systematic and in the long run even chaotic approach to developing the potential of theological institutions has significantly contributed to the abovementioned problems that the Protestant church base faces in modern Croatia.

In recent times, Theological Faculty “Matthias Flacius Illyricus” has been successfully coming out of this “enchanted” situation. Overcoming enormous difficulties, the faculty managed to bring its programs to the highest academic level and integrate them into the University of Zagreb (2010). In 2017, establishing the University Center for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus has concluded this integration process.⁷¹ This has created the conditions for the development of this institution as a base that brings together primarily Croatian theological forces and fosters them in cooperation with foreign Protestant and Croatian ecumenical theological institutions and theologians, both in academic work and in their relationship with the Protestant church base. In this sense, it is possible to say that in the coming years, the Center is about to face a difficult task. On the one hand, it will have to fight for more space in the academic community, and on the other to raise awareness in the wider Protestant base about the need for better articulation of one’s faith and the relations with Protestant and wider Christian ecumenism, as well as the society at large.

Contemporary Croatian Protestantism, viewed in the national context, thus remains a fragmented minority. This is due both to various historical reasons and to the internal deficiencies of various Croatian Protestant denominations when it comes to understanding

ministering in the church.” Evangelical Theological Seminary, Mission and Vision, <http://www.evtos.hr/en/about/mission-and-vision> (last accessed on October 24, 2022). TFMVI had an even broader Protestant and ecumenical vision. In the beginning, not only future church workers of various Protestant churches from the wider region were educated there, but also students from other Christian confessions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Catholics...), as well as those of different religious affiliations and worldviews (cf. Matošević, Schumann, and Šeba, *Od privatnog...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-327)

⁶⁸ Such help included guidance and assistance in finding scholarships for theological studies (mainly doctoral studies) abroad.

⁶⁹ This applies mostly to ETF.

⁷⁰ This applies mostly to TFMVI.

⁷¹ Matošević, Schumann, and Šeba, *Od privatnog...*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

their roles in the church and the society at large. Vague articulations of confessional identification make it difficult to hone community potential for shaping Croatian religious and social life. Nevertheless, the newly evolved socio-political circumstances in contemporary Croatia have afforded Protestant religious communities with a legislative framework for their existence and activities; this is particularly evident through improved access to the public arena. This development has created a fertile ground for the establishment of Croatian Protestant theological institutions. Such learning and faith institutions undertake the critical task of forging a recognizable and cohesive Protestant identity as while maintaining particular denominational identities within the rich setting of Croatian Protestantism.