

# POST-COMMUNIST DILEMMAS OF HUNGARIAN CHURCHES

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The independence of the churches achieved after the collapse of the communist system brought about the possibility of the assumption of their just place in society. The unshackling of the churches, and their freeing from superimposed state control, however, was not, and still is not, a smooth process. Both the churches and the state have to accommodate themselves to the changed conditions and have to learn to function in a society which wants to become a modern, pluralistic, democratic one, but which still carries the burden of its recent and remote past.

Neither the institutions of the state nor the churches themselves function under the conditions of modern democracies.

This is a sweeping statement which requires clarification and qualification. The historical development of Hungary, its late and incomplete arrival to capitalism and modern democracy, the trauma suffered by the Trianon peace treaties and the subsequent loss of two-thirds of the country's territory, the aborted bourgeois transformation, the archconservative regime of Regent Horthy, the totalitarian communist system's forty-odd year long rule did not allow the emergence of democratic state institutions. Nor did it foster the development of a strong civil society or civic consciousness. The members of the state did not become citizens, but by and large remained subjects.

When the social earthquake – the collapse of communism – did happen, neither society as a whole, nor the churches were prepared to assume their functions in new ways, under the given conditions, to accomplish rapidly the requirements of modernity. This statement does not seek to lay the blame on either party, although both the state and the churches could have done more, and more rapidly, to avail themselves of the opportunities opened up by the post-communist society.

*In principle*, the churches have a most favourable situation to revitalise themselves and their functions. Obviously, they suffered under communism, their institutions having been largely destroyed, their scope of activity severely restrained. Already in the last phase of communist rule, the reform-commu-

nists acknowledged that there cannot be a free society without freedom of conscience and that churches do have a place in the spiritual and cultural life of the society. The majority of citizens agreed with this, although only a minority amongst them approved of the political role of the churches.

There were no parties in the newly elected Parliament which would air antireligious or anticlericalist views. Indeed even the Hungarian Socialist Party has a Christian faction. Moreover, the parties of the governing coalition ever more frequently made references to the Christian traditions of the country (occasionally even with exclusionist overtones). Influential politicians often mention the Christian-national values as the beacons which ought to guide the nation and permeate its culture.

And still, *in practice*, the great revival of the churches did not follow. They still struggle to rebuild themselves and search for their place in the web of contemporary Hungarian society.

The reasons for this are complex and manifold. Obviously the persecution of churches under communism did not, could not, remain without lasting consequences. The leaders of the large Christian churches (cardinals Mindszenty and Grósz, bishops Ravasz and Ordass) were coerced out of their positions, sentenced on constructed charges and spent long years in jail.<sup>1</sup> The smaller Christian communities, with a few exceptions, were outlawed and persecuted. In sum, one can say the churches were decapitated and placed under state control. This was accomplished by among others, forcing on the churches leaders who were ready to collaborate with the state.

It would be easy to blame the collaborating church leaders for cowardice and unnecessary compromise, but it would also be somewhat unfair. Often one hears voices which compare the behaviour of Hungarian church leaders to that of Polish ones. True, there were occasions when, even with the benefit of hindsight, one could reproach certain church dignitaries for making needless compromises (e.g. the Catholic church's acquiescent stand on conscientious objectors or their complicity with the state in the case of small church communities – the case of Father Bulányi). None the less, the specificities of the Hungarian situation should make such hesitations and compromises easier to understand. What, however, was harmful for the churches, was some of their leaders' involvement in the party-state's political actions or even acceptance of political positions (e.g. Ernő Mihályfi, János Péter, Albert Bereczky). This was especially harmful when it was rationalised by theological considerations, e.g. the theology of the diakone advocated by bishop Zoltán Káldy of the Lutheran Church. Also, the involvement of parts of the clergy in the state sponsored "peace priests" movement or some bishops' participation in the state sponsored "Peace Council" reduced the authority of the church and gave

rise to voices that wanted to take to task those who were members of this movement or otherwise compromised themselves with the communist authorities.

Whatever the case, the churches did not emerge unscathed from the communist era. The post-communist churches had to renew their activities under conditions where their members were divided in judging the correctness of the leadership's past behaviour.

The social structure of the country, with the concomitant institutional and cultural changes, has been altered irrevocably. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the arrival of the post-communist era found a deeply different Hungary from the one of 1945 or even 1948. The class structure, the occupational structure, the level of industrialisation and urbanisation, of scholarisation, the type of culture—including the culture of everyday life—have been irreversibly changed.

True, all these processes were carried out under communist rule and in correspondence with the communist ideal of a future, "perfect" society. The result was that no real modernisation took place and despite urbanisation and industrialisation, the ingrained habits, behavioral patterns and cultural norms of the past remained firmly entrenched.

Nevertheless, a measurable secularisation process also took place, which changed the scope and type of religiosity. Part of the secularisation process was enforced: the restrictions placed on religious instruction, the abolition of religious instruction in the public schools (and after the nationalisation of ecclesiastic schools in 1948 there remained only a handful of church-run schools in Hungary<sup>2</sup>), and the officially endorsed anti-religious attitude in public life resulted in an observable diminishment of religious activity. Whether this was a genuine abandonment of religious belief and practices or simply a survival tactic is subject to discussion. One cannot exclude the possibility that there emerged a "bedroom religiosity", that is a survival of religious beliefs and some practice (e.g. prayer) which, however, did not find public expression.

But the other possibility, namely that a real secularisation took place, is substantiated by sociological research. Miklós Tomka in his book *Magyar katolicizmus 1991* (Hungarian Catholicism 1991) publishes some revealing data which indicate a rather large-scale secularisation.<sup>3</sup> He mentions, for example, that on any given Sunday only about 8–10% of Catholics participate in the holy mass (p. 16).

In many respects the decline in religiosity is quite understandable. In spite of the aforementioned distortions and inadequacies of the modernisation process, the massive urbanisation loosened the rather strict social control

mechanisms which existed in rural areas or small towns. This, coupled with the officially sponsored secular culture, contributed to the slackening of religious beliefs and practices.

At least two more features of Soviet type societies ought to be mentioned here. The first is the enforced and artificial community-building. The authorities realised that spontaneously formed communities endanger the working of the system because these would not lend themselves to strict party-state control. While religious communities did exist, they were marginal and/or illegal. The communist sponsored quasi-communities were for the most part substitutions and often attended because of the lack of any other solution. The second is that for a long time the churches were the only tolerated seats of civil society – if we understand civil society as that sphere of human life and activity where people come together spontaneously and pursue their own interests (material or spiritual) – without state intervention.

However, as far as the second feature is concerned, the gradual reforms introduced by the party-state from the late seventies on – and especially in the eighties allowed the individual to pursue his economic interests in a much less restricted way. This expanded the sphere of civil society but also carried negative consequences for society and the individual. People engaged in the so-called “second economy” exploited themselves by working double shifts, giving up their annual vacations and this resulted in a dramatic increase in heart disease, deaths caused by cardio-vascular disease, suicide and alcoholism. It is understandable that this life-style did not leave (much) time to be engaged in church activities or satisfy spiritual needs. Paradoxically, communism, which espoused a collectivist ideology, opened up the way to a rampant individualism and materialism.<sup>4</sup>

Broadly speaking, this was the condition in which the churches found themselves at the beginning of the system-change. Already before the declared collapse of the Soviet type systems, in the period of the latent, and later not so latent, decomposition of the communist regime, they ceased to function as the sole field of civil society, even in the political sphere. The emerging oppositional movements and their growth in the late 1980s made it possible, for those who wished and dared to engage themselves in political activity, to find organisational forms for their activity. Meanwhile the largest Catholic “oppositional” movement refrained from direct political engagement and aimed rather at a spiritual renaissance.

In different periods the individual churches had been allowed different access to international communication (attendance of the meetings of the World Council of Churches, communication with the Vatican, etc.). These were under strict state control exercised through the State Office for Church Affairs. (The existence, and especially the mode of functioning of this Office

was, strictly speaking, unconstitutional because the communist constitution of the country declared the separation of church and state.) The Roman Catholic church was in a particularly difficult situation because the Kádár regime preferred to ignore the Hungarian hierarchy and conducted direct negotiations with the Vatican in trying to solve the Mindszenty problem. And in many instances the treatment of the Hungarian church depended on the progress of those negotiations.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the restrictions placed on international contacts the Catholic church had few chances to adapt itself to the spirit and resolutions of the second Vatican council. As Tamás Nyíri, the renowned professor of the Catholic Theological Academy stated, the Catholic churches in the region, i.e. the Hungarian, the Croatian, the Slovak, the Czech, and the Polish, lagged 40–45 years behind the development of the Western churches.<sup>6</sup> The *aggiornamento* (adaptation to the modern and rapidly changing world) propounded by Pope John XXIII is, of course, a controversial project. On the one hand, it was necessary to draw the church nearer to the realities of the contemporary world and thus enable the Catholic church to carry out its mission under radically changed conditions. Vatican II introduced a certain degree of democracy in the working of the hierarchy, gave greater power of decision to the national bishops' conferences, opened up the way to the greater involvement of laypeople in the work of the church and introduced important theological changes. Also, the second Vatican council introduced a more ecumenical attitude towards other Christian churches, a greater understanding with Jews, with non-Christian believers, and even with humanist non-believers.

On the other hand, the project of *aggiornamento* made the church more enmeshed in the social, political and economic problems of the contemporary world. (This inevitably forces the church to take stands on social and economic problems. Thus, even if its position is largely couched in moral considerations, it has to voice its position in temporary, this-worldly matters.)

True, in the modern world, since 1891 when Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the church has issued papal statements concerning the theological and moral assessment of the institutions of market-based capitalist society. Especially Pope John Paul II in his social encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Annus* criticised unfettered liberal capitalism and emphasised the need for developing “an ethically guided, mixed economy, solidary welfare capitalism – a capitalism with a human face.”<sup>7</sup> The challenge, and the dilemma, of the Hungarian Catholic church is how to adapt these teachings to the practice of present-day Hungary, where the emerging capitalism gives rise to extreme individualism and, leads to the economic polarisation of society.

So far the Hungarian churches have not addressed this problem. They are mainly preoccupied with their own reconstruction, with the resumption of their normal pastoral, caritative and educational activities, as well as with the reconstruction of their institutions: schools, monasteries, hospitals, and old people's homes. There is, understandably, an inward looking tendency in the present activities of the churches. After more than four decades of communist rule the "housecleaning" and "housekeeping" tasks took priority.

The past situation of the churches makes these tasks rather difficult. While the government emphasises historical continuity and wishes to bracket out a half century-long history of trying to (re)build institutions in a way that would (re)establish them on past patterns, the churches cannot follow that road. The renewal of the churches rests upon their ability to overcome the crippling effects of the decades of oppression; they have to overcome the discord, the lack of understanding, mistrust, insinuations, etc., and build a consensus within themselves. There are encouraging signs that this is slowly happening. Nevertheless the churches still have to accomplish reconciliation, as well as a critical confrontation with their past. A crucial question is whether, without changes in the church leadership, this could be accomplished. Short of this, the churches cannot gain widespread credibility and face up to modernity.<sup>8</sup>

Modernity, among many other things, means pluralism. Pluralism is often viewed in a superficial way as political pluralism alone, i.e. the presence of several political parties that vie for power and compete with their political programmes. However, pluralism in modernity also means the competition of world-views. Moreover, in post-modernity it is generally acknowledged that there is no more possibility for a discourse considered universally valid. There is no validity attributed to a world-view which claims to explain the substance and all substantive phenomena of nature, society and human beings. In modern times it was religion and Marxism which claimed this universality. Religion's greatest adversary, Marxism, has suffered a setback, not only because of the collapse of the Soviet type systems but rather because of its failure to prove the validity of its universal discourse. Religion, however, still maintains its claim to universal validity, to the representation of a transcendent truth.

The dilemma is how to make plausible this claim under the condition of pluralism as interpreted above, i.e. pluralism in culture and world-views. "Pluralism [...] impinges on human consciousness, on what takes place within our minds. [...] Cultural plurality is experienced by the individual, not just as something external [...] but as an internal reality, a set of options present in his mind."<sup>9</sup> In that sense, pluralism means for the individual a permanent uncertainty insofar as he or she has constantly to face and make choices, the

consequences of which are unknown or at least uncertain. Nevertheless, this feature of modern society is deeply entrenched and is also expressed by the institutional separation of different spheres of life (economy, politics, religion, etc.) whereby each of these spheres operates under different rules, which the individual has to learn in order to function successfully.

Under these conditions the churches have to compete with other world-views and have to make plausible their own ideas. The dilemma which emerges from this situation is that on the one hand religion claims to represent eternal truths, but on the other hand the church as a community of believers has to make these acceptable and obvious for the believers. The question is, among others, whether the churches are capable of reaching large segments of the population with ideas and methods that are not obviously attractive, especially for the young. (I am *not* thinking of superficial techniques like the introduction of rock music in service.)

Peter Berger, in his book, *A Far Glory*,<sup>10</sup> mentions the following survival strategies for the church under the conditions of pluralism: "cognitive bargaining", "cognitive surrender" and "cognitive retrenchment" – the latter in a defensive or offensive form. In other words, religion, *as interpreted by the different churches*, in order to maintain its plausibility and dynamism ought to develop a discourse and a strategy that would allow it to compete successfully with other world views. A "cognitive surrender", however, would mean for the church to *accommodate* itself to the prevailing secular discourses. It seems to me that the Christian churches in Hungary in the present phase of the country's and their own development are closest to the defensive "cognitive retrenchment" mixed with a dose of "cognitive surrender".

The reason for this is that, in my view, the churches in their theology and pastoral methods experience serious difficulties in adapting to the actual social and cultural conditions in Hungary. In spite of the favourable political conditions (the government's definitely positive attitude toward the churches has been manifested in legislating the return of nationalised church property, the already mentioned inclination of the governing coalition toward Christianity as the leading value system, etc.) the churches have to present themselves in a credible way as institutions capable of winning over the minds and souls of people, especially of the young.

A rather symptomatic indication of the Hungarian churches' reluctance, or inability, to adapt themselves to even an *ecclesiastic pluralism* is their overt or covert support of the bill presented to Parliament which would change the hitherto existing mode of financing of churches or religious organisations. Until now the churches or religious organisations received financial support from the state according to the size of their membership. The amendment

to restrict state support to churches which have existed for more than 200 years or have at least 10,000 registered members. This would reinstate the old distinction between "accepted" and "recognised" denominations, thus introducing a division between "first class" and "second class" churches or denominations. The sympathy of the established churches to this proposed amendment (the constitutionality of which is questionable) demonstrates their rejection of denominational pluralism and competition amongst religious organisations, which, however, is a feature of modernity.

The churches also have to accommodate themselves to the political aspects of pluralism. It is true that in Hungary, unlike in Poland, they cannot claim exclusivity in defining the morality and behaviour of the whole society.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, they face the dilemma, which is shared by the whole of the Western world, that they ought to accommodate themselves to a largely secularised society, representing their social and moral agenda and yet maintaining their reference to a reality that is held superior to the transient.

Thus, the greatest and most encompassing dilemma the churches face in present-day Hungary is whether they wish, and are able, to contribute to the modernisation of society while still upholding their fundamental doctrines as well as their moral authority in a credible, plausible and attractive manner.

### Notes

1. The exception was Bishop Ravasz who lived in the vicinity of Budapest, isolated and virtually under house arrest.
2. Only high schools were allowed to function. There remained eight Roman Catholic, four Calvinist and one Lutheran secondary schools.
3. Budapest: Országos Lelekipásztori Intézet, Katolikus társadalomtudományi akadémia, 1991, esp. 9, 15, 16, 19.
4. This is the feature of modern societies which has been denounced by Pope John Paul II. The Pope, however, did not take into consideration that crass materialism was widespread in the East-Central European countries.
5. Other political occurrences also influenced the state-church relationships. In 1977, for example, many priests were arrested and sentenced for anti-state activities. The most plausible interpretation is that the state security apparatus, which felt its position weakened, attempted to magnify the danger of "clerical reaction" and thus regain its power.
6. Cf. "168 óra" (168 Hours), III year, no. 30, July 30, 1991, Budapest. 10-11.
7. G. Baum, "Liberal Capitalism", in: Baum, Gregory-Robert Ellesberg (eds.), *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical "On Social Concern"*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1988, 88.
8. As far as the Roman Catholic church is concerned, Ferenc Tomka, in his book *Intézmény és karizma az Egyházban* (Institution and Charisma in the Church) Budapest, 1991, presents a comprehensive view of how the reassessment and modernisation ought to be accomplished.



While the original manuscript was written in 1973 and the confrontation with Marxism as one of the main preoccupations of the author, his views reflect one of the most thoroughly self-critical standpoints and could be expanded to non-Catholic Christian churches as well.

9. Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*. New York: The Free Press, 1992, 67. Berger, one of the most noted contemporary sociologists of religion, emphasises the burden modernity and pluralism place on the individual.
10. *Op. cit.* 41–46.
11. It is important to note that the Hungarian legislation concerning abortion and the decision of the Constitutional Court about neutrality in world-view of schools is significantly different from the Polish practice and legislation.