

MODERNIST HERMENEUTICS IN OTTOKÁR PROHÁSZKA

by Leslie A. Muray

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Ottokár Prohászka (1858-1927), Catholic Archbishop of Szekesfehervár, was one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Hungary; his intellectual and political influence extended far beyond the confines of the church.

Hungary experienced an intellectual renaissance in the early 1900s up to the outbreak of World War I just as, paradoxically, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was undergoing protracted economic hardship, and ethnic tension was compounded by the temporary stifling of the nationalistic aspirations of its Slavic and Romanian populations. In this renaissance, Prohászka was a major figure. He contributed to the revitalization of the Hungarian language; profoundly influenced by Bergson, he wrote and lectured extensively on the relationship between science and religion, exercising not inconsiderable influence even on Budapest's secular intellectuals, and ultimately winding up with three of his works condemned for Modernism. He was also influential in politics as a leading Christian Socialist, an advocate of radical land reform, of peace during World War I. Although he did support the Horthy regime in the aftermath the short-lived Republic of Councils {Soviet Republic) and was a member of Parliament in the early 1920s, he never abandoned his reformist passion and condemned the White Terror. A puzzling, ambiguous, and tragic dimension of his historical legacy is his anti-Semitism.

Prohászka's most influential work is his *Meditations on the Gospels*. As the title implies, it is not a work in biblical scholarship in the strict sense but typifies the use of scripture in meditation. Prohászka certainly reads into scripture doctrines that were developed later. What is intriguing are traces of the Modernism for which some of his works were condemned: "irrationalism," his use of the intuitionism of Bergson. This paper explores whether there is an underlying, "hidden" Modernist hermeneutic as well as any possible use of Roman Catholic Modernist biblical scholarship (for which the Archbishop was not noted) in Prohászka's *Meditations on the Gospels*.

Among the most striking features of Prohászka's *Meditations on the Gospels* are his nearly poetic descriptions of the non-human natural world (reminiscent of such nineteenth century romantic poets as Sándor Petöfi). Describing the world in this fashion, he is expressing an unequivocal sense of the goodness of the world as god's creation.

The following are a sampling of Prohászka's descriptions of nature.

His [God's] first work is the beautiful, rich, and profound world of nature. Contact with it fertilizes our souls and minds, and from this seed develop science and art and the Faculty of enjoyment.¹

...we must develop, strengthen, and enjoy our natural capabilities according to the Divine conception, and base both art and culture upon nature. At the same time we are aware that God has created nature, maintaining it in existence through a continual action of His Will, and that all human life is derived from Him. We can say that we have our roots in Him, and that all existence is divine, in the sense that it springs from God...Let us then rejoice that our existence continually springs from God, and cultivate within ourselves the strength, reverence and joy which the realization of our origin entails. (From "A Meditation on Matt 3:2, 'For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.'")².

In a more poetic, exuberant vein, he writes:

"God is good, infinitely good; He has overwhelmed us with His bounty, and has warmed the earth at the fire of His love which He desires that we should feel. He wants us to realize that everything good comes from Him

¹ Ottokar Prohászka, *Meditations on the Gospels*, Volume I, translated M. de Pál (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1958) p. 42

² Ibid. pp. 42-43.

---life, strength, awakening the profound life within us, and the great and beautiful world without, which is intended to give our soul color and tone and beauty, to form and enrich and uplift it. All this comes from God, our loving Creator." (From "A Meditation on the Pre-eminence of Prayers of Thanksgiving").³

The whole world is an expression of God's love;⁴ everything is filled with the Divine spirit,⁵ every form of existence reveals God, for "...God is manifested in nature, in the flowers and in the sunset."⁶ And Christ, who is the divine self in human shape, the reflection of God as in a mirror,⁷ loves all of life⁸ and affirms all of nature.⁹

This unequivocal affirmation of the goodness of the world does not mean that there no ambiguity or evil in the world. As romantic as Prohászka can be in his descriptions of the non-human natural world, he also contended that nature as conceived by the creative Idea of God is characterized by struggle. Consequently, nature, while on the one hand expressive of the divine love, on the other, does not disclose a tender and feeling Parent.¹⁰ The struggle evident in the process of natural selection, nevertheless, should not be seen as a vindication of Social Darwinism.¹¹ In the foregoing, Prohászka has been attempting to reconcile his version of nature as one of "the books of God" in terms of the findings of the natural sciences of the time, namely the Darwinian theory of evolution, with the traditional attribute of divine omnipotence.¹² It goes without saying that in a book of meditations he would not treat the subject in a systematic manner nor provide a definitive answer.

In other places, the bishop seems much more ambivalent about unequivocally affirming the world. Although he affirms physical pleasures as vital parts of the goodness of creation, they need to be properly ordered in the Thomist sense, even to the

³ Ibid. p.160.

⁴ Ibid.p.175.

⁵ Ibid. Vol. II p. 63.

⁶ Ibid. p. 109.

⁷ Ibid. Vol. I p.3.

⁸ Ibid. Vol. II p. 55.

⁹ Ibid. Vol. I p.101

¹⁰ Ibid. Vol. I p.68.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. Vol. II p. 18.

point of suggesting a disparagement of such pleasures.¹³ In a manner that, again in Thomistic fashion, parallels this view of the proper relations between different dimensions of the individual soul, so the world of nature is insufficient and incomplete by itself; it needs to be complemented by the world of "supernature."¹⁴

In spite of some of the historical ambiguities of the "natural-supernatural" distinction, namely the disparagement of the relative importance of the world of nature and the exaltation of the world of supernature, although admittedly probably not what Thomas Aquinas had in mind, that Prohászka's allusions bring to mind, this does not seem to be the meaning of the way he uses these words. His lively, romantic images and metaphors to describe the natural world suggest a much more fluid and dynamic view of nature than that of traditional Thomism or, for that matter, the mechanistic vision of most of the sciences current during the lifetime of the Archbishop. Moreover, the manner in which he combines his use of the Hungarian word for "supernatural" with these images and metaphors suggest a living, throbbing, dynamic, creative world in which the actualities that comprise it are ever seeking to transcend themselves ---*within* the natural world, as caught by the image of the bird flying in the air, soaring "upwards" but not out of this world. Prohászka's usage of the notion of "supernature" does not have the dualistic connotations it has in English or in the Western philosophical tradition. Instead, the mysteries of nature point to a mystery beyond and of which they are parts *within* a dynamic and creative self-transcending world.

Prohászka is clearly using the traditional categories of natural ("the book of nature") and revealed theology (scripture and tradition, as interpreted by the magisterium). In this regard, very much a part of "the book of nature," of our "natural" knowledge of God, are the ongoing findings of science.¹⁵ But by themselves, modern science, philosophy, and theology are inadequate and incomplete.¹⁶

With this claim Prohászka is not attempting to provide a prolegomenon for apologia on behalf of supernatural revelation. Rather, he suggests in a number of ways

¹³ Ibid. Vol p. 15; Ibid. Val. II p. 18.

¹⁴ Ibid. Vol. pp. 9, 221-222.

¹⁵ Ibid. Vol. pp.52; Ibid. Vol. II pp. 45-46

¹⁶ Ibid. Vol. I pp. 128-129, 195.

and places, that only through intuition can we gain any kind of understanding of the world and God. For example, he asserts that in meditation we need to work with our hearts as well as our heads; that it is crucial to cultivate our capacity for feeling every step of the way; and that,, in spite of the indispensability of intellectual labor, the work of the intellect is in need of transformation, an opportunity for which is provided by meditation and the concomitant cultivation of the capacity to feel intensely.¹⁷ And, commenting on Mark 1 :22, which describes Jesus as teaching with authority, he writes in a manner reminiscent of Bergson: "The strength of Jesus is the mind filled with reality, truth, intuition, and conviction ---the heat and crystal purity of feeling---the beauty of disposition pervaded by God."¹⁸ His meditation on John 4:48, the conclusion of which he translates as "The ruler saith to him: Lord, come down before that my son die" and the theme of which he summarizes as "the necessity of Faith," describes that faith not in terms of intellectual assent but as a.) a strong force, b.) a warm and ardent emotion, and c.) as a strong disposition, cultivated by ongoing intuition and insight.¹⁹

All of the foregoing are reminiscent of others of Prohászka's works in which he is quite emphatic about the importance of intuition, the influence of Bergson once again being quite ardent, in contrast to the arid rationalism of scholasticism.²⁰ Indeed the official charge for the condemnation of three of his works, "Modern Katolicismus" (1907), "Az intellektualizmus tulhajtásai" 1910), and "Több békesseget" (1910), was that of irrationalism, that is to say his intuitionism.²¹ Unofficially, there has always been speculation that his condemnation was the result of his distribution of some of the church's vast feudal estates among landless peasants and for his rather radical Christian Socialist views. ²² In this context, I want to mention that in spite of sounding at times like a forerunner of contemporary ecotheologians, his thought is anthropocentric; his view of the relation between the human and the non-human natural world is dualistic.

¹⁷ Ibid. Vol. I pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ Ibid. Vol. II p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 32-34.

²⁰ Prohászka, Ottokár, szerkesztete: Koncz Lajos, *Modern Katolicizmus: Válogatás Prohászka műveiből* (Budapest: Az Aposoli Szentszek Konyvkiadója, 1990) pp. 52, 409,419.

²¹ Ibid. p. 52.

²² Ibid. p. 65.

For example, he claims that humans have no culture "until man breaks and conquers nature."²³ Prohászka's assertion is consistent with those of his other writings where he deals with this topic. It might be noted that, especially considering the time period in which he lived, the Hungarian bishop's anthropocentrism is hardly unusual; he is in continuity with most of the Western philosophical and theological traditions, including Roman Catholic Modernism and the philosophy of Bergson. What is striking, however, in spite of the affinity of their dualistic views regarding the relation between humanity and the non-human natural world, is the vast difference Prohászka's description of all of nature as living, dynamic, creative, and Bergson's view of matter as inert and lifeless.

There is no evidence that, at least as far as I can ascertain, Prohászka was either influenced by or utilized the tools of historical-literary criticism regarding the Bible in a way that typified much of Roman Catholic Modernism. Nevertheless, those of the bishop's illustrations that focus on the humanity of Jesus, as for example in the meditations on "The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem," are, in spite of his attempts to adhere to the "communicatio idiomatum," striking, especially in digressing from the dominant part of the inherited tradition that has tended to emphasize Jesus' divinity.²⁴ As I have mentioned, there is no evidence for the use of the methods and findings historical-literary criticism, as for example in the nineteenth, early twentieth centuries "search for the historical Jesus," in the Hungarian theologian's focus on Jesus' humanity. The focus seems to come from Prohászka himself and is quite consistent with those aspects of his thought that affirm the intrinsic goodness of the created world and with certain select aspects of popular Roman Catholicism in Hungary (other aspects emphasize the divinity, at times at the expense of the humanity). Although once again, there is no evidence of direct or indirect influence, Prohászka's views concerning dogma closely resemble those of another Modernist, Edouard Le Roy (18170-1954), who was also influenced by Henri Bergson. For Le Roy, dogma, subject to historical development, was not "...an integral structure of extrinsically imposed and interconnected truths demanding intellectual

²³ Prohászka, *Meditations on the Gospels*, Vol. II p. 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Vol. III pp. 1-3

assent from the believer."²⁵ Rather, "dogmas... have practical meaning: they can be understood only from the inner experience of living them."²⁶ In a similar vein, Prohászka writes that "...we desire to believe and to live in the Church, not merely to observe her laws and rites, but to enjoy the fullness of her inner life as well."²⁷ Referring to the historical development of dogma, he maintains that "we must learn to distinguish the transitory forms which develop in the course of different ages from the substance, the chaff from the wheat."²⁸ He urges his readers not to be scandalized by changes in rites and custom but instead to center on the ideas of Christ; not to desert Christ because of the sins of the past but to rejoice in the abandonment of those errors; and to understand that the expansion of our conceptions is not an abandonment of the past, of the tradition, but a condition of historical development.²⁹ Outside of a sense of divine solidarity with the joys and sorrows, sufferings and triumph of all creatures decisively expressed in the incarnation, which is in continuity with the love of God manifest in creation, there are no hints of Christian Socialism, a feature of some aspects of modernism,³⁰ in *Meditations on the Gospels*. And Prohászka's intuitive sense of this divine solidarity is profoundly shaped by a very distinguishable "Christ mysticism" as well as a no less distinguishable "Eucharistic mysticism" that marks all of his works.

In this paper, I have explored whether there is an underlying "hidden" modernist hermeneutic as well as the possible use of Roman Catholic Modernist biblical scholarship in *Meditations on the Gospels*, the most influential work of Ottokár Prohászka. There is no evidence, at least as far as I could determine, that the bishop used either the tools or finding of historical-literary criticism in his meditations. Nor is there a hint of the Christian Socialism that was supposedly one of the *real* reasons, along

²⁵ Gabriel Daly, "Modernism," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1983) p. 377.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Prohászka, *Meditations on the Gospels*, Vol. p.62.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 62-63.

³⁰ See, Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

with his distribution of church estates to landless peasants, for the condemnation of three of his works on the charge of Modernism.

Nevertheless, in my view there is a hidden modernist hermeneutic at work in Prohászka's meditations. I do not mean this in the sense of a self-conscious and deliberate hermeneutical scheme that provides an overarching framework of interpretation. Rather, out of a passion to make the gospel intelligible to contemporary women and men, he unequivocally accepted the findings of modern science and appropriated them into his understanding of the Christian faith. Finding the arid rationalism of Scholasticism, modern science, philosophy, and theology insufficient and inadequate by themselves, the intuitionism of Bergson provided the philosophical underpinnings for the unconscious hermeneutic that is nevertheless at work in his meditations.

If, as has often been said, Spinoza was the "God intoxicated" philosopher, Prohászka was the "Christ intoxicated" bishop-theologian, a "Christ intoxication" that was the main motivating factor in the whole of his endeavors in all their ambiguity.