

## FAITH AND HISTORY - HROMÁDKA'S PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Jindrich Halama, Jr.

*Dr. Jindrich Halama, Jr. has roots in the Unitas Fratrum and Ev. Church of Czech Brethren. He has been a pastor and dean of students at the earlier Comenius Faculty and is now Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics in the Protestant Faculty of Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. This paper was presented at the second (Debrecen, March 2004) consultation on public theology sponsored by Princeton's Center for Theological Inquiry. The entire proceedings are forthcoming.*

Josef Lukl Hromádka (1889-1969) is undoubtedly, together with recently deceased Jan Milič Lochman, the best known Czech theologian of the 20th century. For more than twenty years he was one of the outstanding figures of the ecumenical movement and he was definitely an orienting personality for at least two generations of Czech Protestant theologians. Being a systematic theologian, Hromádka devoted a great part of his studies and reflections to the place and role of Christians and Christian churches in public life. His option for a Socialist model of the social structure as the best acceptable for Christians from the existing ones made him a controversial figure. His views and attitudes were vigorously discussed not only during his life but have been discussed periodically till today.

The disputes concerning Hromádka that took place during his lifetime have been summarized by Dorothea Neumärker in her book.<sup>1</sup> Some of the later discussions were published around 1989, the 100th anniversary of Hromádka's birth.<sup>2</sup> As an introduction to this reflection on Hromádka's public theology I will use two contributions from this "anniversary harvest".

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<sup>1</sup>Neumärker, Dorothea. *Josef L. Hromádka. Theologie und Politik im Kontext des Zeitgeschehens*. Chr. Kaiser Verl., München 1974. "Josef L. Hromádka war und ist eine theologisch wie politisch umstrittene Gestalt. Seine Reden, Schriften und Aktivitäten lösten immer wieder heftige Reaktionen aus. Dies belegen Pressestimmen und Kommentare vor allem westlicher Theologen, die in den vergangenen zwanzig Jahren veröffentlicht wurden." (p. 13).

<sup>2</sup>In Czech there appeared the monographs by Milan Opočenský (1989), Pavel Filipi (1990) and Josef Smolík (1989) and the volume "Nepřeslechnutelná výzva" (A Challenge not to Be Overheard), OIKOUMENH : Praha 1990. Recent publications on Hromádka: Opočenský, M. (ed.). *From the Reformation to Tomorrow*. Geneva : WARC 1999; *Christian Existence in Dialogue: Doing Theology in All Seasons*. In Memory and Appreciation of Josef L. Hromádka. Geneva : WCC 1990; *Die Freiheit der Kirche Christi in der Geschichte: Symposium zum theologischen Erbe von J. L. Hromádka...* Benešov: EMAN 2002.

## Two Critical Appraisals of Hromádka's Work

Let me first introduce the view of Hromádka's younger colleague, the above mentioned J. M. Lochman.<sup>3</sup> In his article Lochman draws attention to the fact that Hromádka's theology still attracts theologians from Asia. Two of them wrote their PhD theses in Basel on Hromádka.<sup>4</sup> According to Lochman "they were attracted by what is his essential assertion: his stress on the liberating sovereignty of the gospel and in its strength the inspiration and challenge for us to take seriously the historical place in which we find ourselves. It is for this strong message in his legacy that J. L. Hromádka deserves our unbiased attention."<sup>5</sup>

Lochman stresses three important aspects of Hromádka's work. The first is the ecumenical dimension that started between the wars with his efforts for a new and just appraisal of the catholic tradition (in the 1920's) and re-discovering orthodoxy for Czech Christianity. It continued and reached a global dimension through his engagement in the WCC and World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) after World War II. Hromádka was an ecumenical theologian who showed a profound openness for crossing of confessional barriers in the search for the deepest uniting basis of the Christian life.

The second significant element is Hromádka's emphasis on the sovereignty of the Gospel. Time and again Hromádka stressed that the Kingdom of God cannot be identified with any temporal political or cultural system, that Jesus Christ, who descended into our human reality to be with us in the midst of our problems and struggles, is at the same time the Lord of the history and the judge of all our efforts and desires.

The last and crucial aspect is Hromádka's understanding of history, of the relevance of historical processes and developments for Christian social responsibility. Following the prophetic line of biblical thought Hromádka opted for the socialist vision of a more equal and just social order. He was persuaded about the 'humanistic core' of the communist social

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<sup>3</sup>Lochman, J. M. "Where I see the Validity of Hromádka's Legacy." In M. Opočenský (ed.), *From the Reformation to Tomorrow*. Geneva : WARC 1999, pp. 106-111.

<sup>4</sup>Meehyun Chung. *Karl Barth, Josef Lukl Hromádka, Korea : das Verständnis von Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken Karl Barths : ein Vergleich mit dem Offenbarungs- und Geschichtsverständnis Josef Lukl Hromádkas in Bezug auf ihre theologische und politische Tätigkeit*. Berlin : Alektor-Verl., 1995. 195 p. (PhD thesis, Basel 1993); Nishitani, Kosuke. *Niebuhr, Hromádka, Troeltsch, and Barth: the significance of theology of history for Christian social ethics*. New York: Lang, 1999. 400 p. (PhD thesis, Basel 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Lochman, op. cit., p. 111.

project. Lochman calls this the “Achilles heel of Hromádka’s theology of history”.<sup>6</sup> Hromádka refused to identify the justice of the Gospel with any social or political project and frequently warned against such a mistake but he “invested too much hope and trust in the Marxist-Leninist concept and practical politics, while underestimating the dehumanizing elements at the root of this ideology”.<sup>7</sup>

A second critical appraisal comes from Hromádka’s student Jakub S. Trojan who, together with a number of other students of Hromádka, developed his legacy into a critical attitude of dissent in the movement ‘Charta 77’. He now complains of a lack of interest in Hromádka within the younger generation and asks why: “...the voice of Hromádka has somehow fallen silent for the young generation of today. Is it simply because those who interpret Hromádka for the young generation of theologians... have passed over in silence the essential and often contradictory aspects of his work?”<sup>8</sup>

He identifies the concept and understanding of power structures as a weak point in Hromádka’s work and tries to analyze it. Hromádka dealt with the social role and responsibility of Christians from the very beginning of the existence of independent Czechoslovakia (1918). His attitude towards political structures was both positive and critical – he never abandoned his reservations that the temporal orders must never be identified or blended with the justice of the kingdom of God. The sovereignty of the Gospel does not allow compromising the freedom of Christian faith through any dependence on a state, nation or any other human community. At the same time Hromádka concentrated more and more on the responsibility for the weak and oppressed, on the Christian task to defend and to promote justice.

Hromádka saw a poignant example of a church falling into dependency on human programs and structures in the German church under the Nazi regime. He clearly formulated the nature of the ‘guard duty’ of the Christian church: “The church which does not allow itself to be deafened by public opinion, which is not under the control of the passions of national and state life, which perhaps as a consequence loses popularity and is persecuted, is never in such great danger as the church which lends its blessing to everything that happens,

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<sup>6</sup>Lochman, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>8</sup>Trojan, Jakub S. “Hromádka and Aspects of Power in Our Civilisation.” *Religion, State and Society* Vol. 21, No. 2, 1993, p. 152.

accompanied by bells, hymns, robes and the sound of the organ. If it is not to falter in its duty of remaining on the watch, the church requires tremendous spiritual strength and courage. A church which loses this courage ceases to be a church of the Lord and becomes a servant of Antichrist.”<sup>9</sup>

The duty to be on the watch for the whole society is one of the central tasks of the church for Hromádka. Christians must defend others against injustice and wrongs and they must do it unconditionally and regardless of possible dangers.

After the disaster of the Munich agreement in 1938, Hromádka left for the USA with the feeling that the safeguards of the present social order broke down and failed. The western democracies left the field open to chaos and brute violence. Following the attack of Germany on the Soviet Union in 1941 he gradually directed his attention to Moscow. “He increasingly came to see the way out of this crisis as lying in a postwar alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union.”<sup>10</sup> During three post-war years, however, such a hope proved to be an illusion.

Hromádka’s solution was on the one hand, an effort to interpret positively the revolutionary changes in society, and on the other hand, to attempt to persuade the new regime that Christian faith is indispensable for the process of constructing a new society. It is here that Hromádka made a serious mistake, says Trojan, when he proclaimed a moratorium on criticism towards the new regime. He did so with respect to the international situation, hoping that reducing the points of conflict would allow an internal dialogue to develop. Trojan here identifies two important agents that may have contributed to this mistake: a) underestimating the temptation of power and its corrupting influence on its holders; b) overestimating the positive motives in the new orientation – the desire for social justice and more dignified human life. Moreover, Trojan detects excessive tolerance and confidence towards the powerful in Hromádka’s attitudes and attributes it to his Lutheran background.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the 1960’s Hromádka arrived at the conviction that the socialist society is already well established and its further development will be less turbulent and more

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<sup>9</sup>Hromádka, J. L. „Církev ve zmatku.“ In *Theologie a církev*. Praha 1949, p. 96. Quoted by Trojan, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>Trojan, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>11</sup>“This is a shortcoming which evidently has deep roots in his Lutheran tradition.” Trojan, op. cit., p. 165. (‘evidently’ is not the best translation of the Czech original, ‘probably’ would be better).

differentiated.<sup>12</sup> At this stage of the process Christians can contribute to society by their witness to the true nature of the human being, its sinfulness and the need for repentance and forgiveness, as well as the uniqueness and immense value of each individual. A synthesis is not possible but a peaceful co-existence in mutual dialogue can be expected and developed.

This view, however, presents us with some problems as well, states Trojan.

a) Hromádka's concept of dialogue is limited. He contented himself with a limited scope of official representatives' dialogue, other critical voices were not allowed to enter.

b) It is not clear from Hromádka's concept how the contribution of the Christian message should be effective in the new society. It remains on the level of a proclamation.

Moreover, Hromádka did not consider the possibility that the whole construction of the new society could be faulty. That was demonstrated in a tragic way in 1968. This event broke Hromádka's socio-political concept of Christian engagement literally to pieces and it broke him personally, too.

### **The Problem of History as the Kernel of the Controversy**

Having reviewed some of the recent interpretations of Hromádka's theology and his public engagement, I want to offer my reflections on some of its aspects. The most frequent objection against Hromádka was his concept of history, its nature and significance from the Christian perspective – his philosophy or theology of history, as it was named. Hromádka was well aware of it and reflected this criticism. He stated publicly more than once that he was serious in considering it:

“I personally used to be reproached for building my theology on a false philosophy of history. I must take these reproaches seriously but I think that the present Christianity is not yet free from the old concept of the so called Christian civilisation... Not only that I do not want to build upon some new historical facts but I keep asking: Is my faith and theology strong enough to understand what is really going on and to cope with it?”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*On the Threshold of Dialogue*. Published in 1964. English in *Christian Existence in Dialogue...*, pp. 62-109.

<sup>13</sup>“Naše dnešní teologie a církevní situace.” [Our Today's Theology and the Situation of the Church] In *KJ* 1957, Nr. 35.

If I read it correctly, in 1957, after about a decade of having been criticized for this attitude, Hromádka felt misunderstood by the critics, probably because of their being captured in “the old concept of the so called Christian civilization”. Hromádka maintained his position in spite of the criticism from both his adversaries and friends, until the end of his days – even after the Soviet invasion in 1968.<sup>14</sup>

Since the controversial aspect of Hromádka’s life and work is apparently connected with his concept of history, its meaning and relevance from the Christian point of view, let us try to analyze this aspect. I propose to do it in four steps in which we would inquire into Hromádka’s understanding: a) of the nature of history; b) of the historical processes and their interpretation; c) of the place and role of Christians in the society; d) of particular historical events and their meaning.

#### *a) The Nature of History*

What is Hromádka’s concept of history? There is no easy answer to this question because he never gave a systematic definition of his understanding.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we can try to reconstruct his view from numerous remarks in his texts. It is clear that his view of history is christological (incarnation is the starting point for any historical interpretation) and eschatological:

“...there are many critical theologians who have the courage to draw radical theses and conclusions in scholarly terms but they remain standing with eyes closed before the historical turning points and upheavals... But a theology that does not do justice to the objective course of God’s events in the history, from Jesus of Nazareth back to Moses and Abraham and into the future to his final victory, such a theology easily becomes an escape and loses effectiveness, urgency, intelligibility and hopefulness for the presence and future.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Hromádka expressed his continuing, no matter how shattered, hope in the historical future of a democratic socialism in his Memorandum for the CPC in the fall of 1968. P. Filipi in his book about JLH (*Do nejhlubších hlubin*. Praha : Kalich 1990, p. 67) rejects the view that Hromádka changed his mind completely in the last year of his life.

<sup>15</sup>“...er, soweit ich weiss, nie genau definierte, was er mit ‘Geschichte’ meint, und diesen Begriff häufig simultan auf mehreren Ebenen benutzt.“ Filipi, Pavel. „Texte und Kontexte – Zur Interpretation von J. L. Hromádka.“ In *Die Freiheit der Kirche Christi in der Geschichte...*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup>“Odpovědnost a naděje theologova.“ *KR* 1963, p. 103.

It is Jesus who provides the meaning of history for human understanding. He is the key to the past and future history; he can help us to understand “the objective course of God’s events”. It is notable that this understanding comes in moments of crisis – at historical turning points and in the upheavals. This course of events takes place in the history and beyond history, it is a hidden but decisive force: “...the hidden force of the prophetic and apostolic message fertilized the ground for all the powerful social and political upheavals...”<sup>17</sup> Hromádka is convinced that we cannot understand history from history itself, even the Marxist concept of history must have a ‘transcendent’ dimension:

“... Marx and his best followers may have presented the evolution of history by means of the dialectical, materialistic method, but they directed the historical process thus brought to light... towards an aim which they have derived in a secularized form from the message of the prophets and the Gospel. Their philosophical method was adequate for them to explain the world; but in order to transform it they needed something what they could only find in the living tradition of the faith.”<sup>18</sup>

After 1948 Hromádka uses more the motif of God’s judgments in his interpretation of history. “Even today the judgments of the Lord take place, even today the word of the Lord comes unto us. The word of the Lord is not an idea, not a thought but an event that shatters the nations and the history...”<sup>19</sup>

This is, however, not a new note in Hromádka’s theology. It continues in the line of his reflections at the end of World War I where he stressed judgment before grace. First come the prophets and their message with the task “to break down, to destroy and to overthrow” – then the Gospel.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time we find evidence that Hromádka accepts the concept of history as having its inherent laws that can be recognized and used to influence the development. At the 40th anniversary of the October revolution (1957) he mentions the classless society as the

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<sup>17</sup>“Communism and Christianity.” (written in 1946) In *Looking History in the Face*. The Christian Literature Society, Madras, India 1982, pp. 28-61. Quotation p. 46.

<sup>18</sup>Op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>19</sup>“Hlína v ruce hrnčířově” [The Clay in the Potter’s Hand]. A sermon from 1950 based on Hromádka’s favourite prophet Jeremiah. KR 1950, p. 236. The motif of God’s judgment appears even in Hromádka’s statement on the Hungarian events in 1956: „Die Zeit der Gerichte Gottes ist auch die Zeit grosser Verheissungen.“ M. Stöhr (ed.). *Der Geschichte ins Gesicht sehen*. Kaiser : München 1977, p. 250.

<sup>20</sup>Zpět k prorokům! [Back to the prophets], 1918. In P. Filipi. *Do nejhlubších hlubin*. Praha : Kalich 1990, p. 96-101.

fulfillment of “all the desires of the greatest spirits in the history, who could not reach it, however, before the natural laws and especially the laws of the historical and social development were discovered.”<sup>21</sup> Does it mean that when we recognize the laws of the historical development we can use it to achieve the desired aims? We must ask how the concept of the “objective course of God’s events” fits into this view. How the sovereign word of God’s judgment over all our human history can be bound to the course of this history that is recognizable and foreseeable.

Perhaps the most detailed exposition concerning the nature of history can be found in Hromádka’s text from 1946 (Communism and Christianity):

“... true Christianity, i. e. a living faith in the Gospel, is constantly at work as a hidden source of strength behind historical life: its judgment is helpful in order to set human work free from the plague of egoism... Faith as we know it from the prophets and apostles always preserves the pure inheritance of the truth gathered by past generations...

This faith also continues to have its hidden effect behind the major changes brought about by Communism. ‘People, repent,’ calls faith, ‘because you have heaped up wrong and injustice by the obstinacy and impotence of your hearts so that the framework of your social order has collapsed.’ ‘Beware of new wrongs,’ it calls to the revolutionaries, ‘because the wrath of the holy Lord will also fall on you and your children if you trample wantonly and willfully on the eternally valid laws of justice and truth.’ ‘Do not boast so much about your victory!’ it reminds the victorious revolutionaries. ‘Do not consider yourselves greater than this: - you are the servants of the people! And, above all, do not imagine that your revolution is the final stage in human history! The Lord of hosts is also the Lord over Communism and is already preparing new expressions of the life of society so that they can go far beyond even the best that Communism has to offer’.<sup>22</sup>

Here again the concept of faith as a hidden source behind history is presented, having effect upon particular historical events and opening a hopeful vision for God’s future. But this theologically unquestionable emphasis, calling to repentance and humbleness, and opening a perspective of hope through the interpretation of historical events, is accompanied by another tone. Not only that we can find a meaning for our lives in the historical events, these seem to have an objective meaning in themselves: “We see more and more clearly that the social changes are in progress and they will go forward irrepressibly because they are ripening

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<sup>21</sup>KR 1957, p. 8f.

<sup>22</sup> “Communism and Christianity”. In *Looking History in the Face*. p. 46f.

historically...”<sup>23</sup> The historical process has its own inner logic that cannot be changed. We must discover it and act in accordance with this logic. Not to respect it means to be swept away by the historical forces.

“Only do not want to restore what cannot be restored. Do not want to stop the march of the history and the changes in the social and political life that cannot be stopped! Do not try, for any personal or corporative selfishness, to harm the reforms that have become historically and morally necessary and that bring forward people of low rank who have lived at the outskirts of the national life so far. History cannot be stopped! Who wants to stop it will either become meaningless or will gather explosives that can destroy him and his nation.”<sup>24</sup>

One can encounter these two motifs in Hromádka’s concept of history alternately and sometimes together: on the one hand is the prophetic aspect, history as a limited phenomenon, fundamentally influenced by the hidden but powerful activity of God’s word, on the other hand history as an entity with its own inner logic and power that must be respected by everyone, what is basically a Marxian (and Hegelian) view. Hromádka is careful in his effort “to take history seriously” that he not lose the dynamics of human history, being at the same time the history of God’s salvific activities for us. He holds that “history is neither accidental nor fatal. We, believing Christians, know that there are also invisible traces of the sovereign Providence, God’s rule in the history...”<sup>25</sup> but he is inclined to visualize these invisible traces in terms of social conflicts, revolutions, political systems and movements. “The pure inheritance of truth” or the “eternally valid laws of justice and truth” that form the vital source of our civilization thus seem to be too closely connected with particular historical structures. Here is, in my view, the root of the controversy in Hromádka’s theology of the public.

#### *b) Historical Processes and Their Interpretation*

Hromádka developed a clear and consequent interpretation of modern history soon after 1945 but its roots reach as far back as the time of Hromádka’s chaplaincy in World War

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<sup>23</sup>KR 1949, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>“Klid v bouři”. KR 1948, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup>Address at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the October revolution. KJ 1967, Nr. 39.

I.<sup>26</sup> The Munich agreement became for Hromádka a proof of the breakdown of the Western world. The liberal capitalist world was in decline and a new social structure – socialist – was on the rise.

In 1946 Hromádka met the Russian philosopher Berdyaev and was apparently impressed by his view of the future:

“According to Berdyaev the main characteristics of the coming era of humankind will be a great spiritual struggle between the dialectic-materialist communism and a spiritual Christian communism. The world will not return to economic individualism and liberal capitalism.”<sup>27</sup>

In the conviction that liberal capitalism has failed Hromádka looks for a new historical force to carry on the struggle for justice, and he finds it in the communist movement as embodied in the Soviet Union:

“Today, Communism or, more precisely, the Russian Communist revolution of November 1917 constitutes the beginning of a new historical epoch, an event on which people throughout the world have to adopt some kind of stand. It is such a gigantic fact of history that we have not yet really come to terms with it...”<sup>28</sup>

Hromádka developed his understanding of the communist movement through studying the writings and came to the conclusion that this was the future course for the social organization of the world:

“Communism is something which cannot be stopped. Anyone who tries by whatever means to block this historical stream will be swept away... Catastrophes such as Munich and the second World War come about because humankind and nations grasp only too late what is historically inevitable and morally justified, and because they try with sophism, egotism or with blunt infatuation to reverse the flow of social life... With the eyes of faith we must identify the unavoidable realities which history has set before us. Let us not ignore that which cannot be ignored!”<sup>29</sup>

That was why he accepted the 1948 turnover in Czechoslovakia and supported the transformation of the society. In 1950 he initiated a document adopted by the synod of his church that declares: “Let us see through the eyes of faith... that today a hundred years old,

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<sup>26</sup>The abovementioned text “Back to the Prophets” (1918) shows awareness of imminent crisis as crisis of “Christian civilization”.

<sup>27</sup>*KR* 1946, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Communism and Christianity, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

even thousand years old injustice and insincerity of the old society is justly being sentenced and destroyed... ”<sup>30</sup>

Hromádka insisted that it is precisely the perspective of faith that shows the necessity of the social transformation of the world. Such a transformation is required by the prophetic message – justice for the poor and oppressed, for widows and orphans. To struggle for it should be an obvious Christian task and the present crisis may be the result of the failure of the churches to do so. Hromádka expressed his pity that the Western democracies, especially the social democrats, had not taken the lead in the process. The whole reconstruction could have retained much more from the traditional democratic character. But the so-called Christian world tried to defend the declining social system and made the whole crisis even worse: “The harshness of the changes is the fruit of the terrible mistakes made by the representatives and citizens of the dying epoch.”<sup>31</sup>

As the independence movements spread across different parts of the world, Hromádka was more and more convinced that the crisis was worldwide and a total social reconstruction of the world was inevitable. Two large camps had been formed: the Soviet, striving for the new social order, freedom and justice for all, and the conservative, led by the Vatican and the United States. The Cold War added pain and suffering to the situation, for it created in the communist camp a mentality of a besieged fortress where individual freedom and rights cannot flourish. But the attempt to stop communism is a tragic error:

“World War II resulted in the situation where the Soviet Union and its allies have taken over the historical initiative. Western bourgeoisie has still enormous economic and political means in its hands but historically it is declining.”<sup>32</sup>

His persuasion about the unchangeable course of history becomes vocal again. And it is even strengthened by stating that the Cold War through its consequences “...prevents the European and Asian people from opening their eyes and taking up their work on the spot where the

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<sup>30</sup>Poslání církve v dnešní době [The Mission of the Church in Today's Times]. KR 1950, p. 54. This perspective – a rehabilitation of thousand year old injustices – may lie at the root of one of Hromádka's most controversial statements, that places the October revolution as the second most important event in human history – next to incarnation (in 1967).

<sup>31</sup>KR 1950, p. 138.

<sup>32</sup>KR 1951, p. 104.

history has placed them”.<sup>33</sup> It is history itself that gives us tasks, that presents us with problems to be solved. It functions almost as an autonomous subject. The role of faith is to help us to see the real image of the world, that is not to ignore what has happened and start working on the ruins of the old world. The new situation is a new chance for Christians because it has freed them from old dependency:

“November 7, 1917 broke through its consequences the framework that has held our church, religious and cultural life for generations, maybe for centuries... But due to the tremendous changes in the human historical building the Church was freed from the age old deposit that has obviously strained and pressed her...”<sup>34</sup>

Hromádka definitely understands communist society as the historical structure that helps to lay foundations for a better society, for a future, united and justly organized humankind.<sup>35</sup> He maintained this attitude not only during the “Prague spring” in 1968 (in an article in the Protestant weekly he stressed that the renewal comes from the inner struggle of the Communist party and that the aim is “not a turn away from socialism but a way towards a purified, genuine socialist effort...”)<sup>36</sup> but even after the invasion. In his Memorandum he stressed that the trust in socialist and communist development has been deeply and tragically shattered but he hoped for a continuation in the struggle for a democratic, humanistic socialism: “Socialism means progress in the socio-political development – its aim is to break the deadly power of capital for the good of the whole society and to form equal foundations of personal certainty and human dignity for all people, young, old and the oldest.”<sup>37</sup>

In his last years he mentioned several times the personal aspect of social reconstruction, as an aspect of crucial importance. The problem with the expected “new human being” that should have grown up in the new social environment – and demonstrably has not – should have been expected from the theological point of view. Hromádka states the problem as if surprised by the fact: “We can see more and more that to build a socialist or

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>He stressed this aspect in his address when accepting the Lenin peace prize in Moscow in 1958. KR 1958, p. 226.

<sup>36</sup>KJ 1968, Nr. 19.

<sup>37</sup>Memorandum of the President of the CPC after August 1968.

communist society is very difficult because socialism is, unlike capitalism, based on sympathy and love for human being...”<sup>38</sup>

A simplistic, naïve anthropology is the central problem of the whole socialist concept of society. As a theologian Hromádka knows the problem of human sinful nature but in spite of it he hopes in successful social reconstruction. The question about the source of his hope would need more detailed inquiry into the problem of his anthropology. In any case, it seems that he retained some portion of the liberal optimism. One cannot expect a successful transformation of the human society without trusting in human capacity to do good – and that was apparently Hromádka’s hope: “It will take a long time till the individuals learn to work really for the whole, for the good of the whole society and not just for their own profit, property gains, social rank...”<sup>39</sup> In the end, they will learn it, believes Hromádka. We can suspect here something of the passion and hope of religious socialism, whose leading figures, H. Kutter and L. Ragaz, young Hromádka helped to introduce into the Czech theological debate.

Towards the end of his life he once more emphasized the idea that the socialist structure of the society needs to integrate the concept of democratic humanity of T. G. Masaryk.<sup>40</sup> When the desired synthesis of the Eastern yearning for social justice and Western democratic tradition did not come true on a large scale, Hromádka hoped for a small-scale example of its possibility: Czech democratic socialism influenced by the humanistic ideals of its first president.<sup>41</sup>

“... what is in my view the most urgent task for us and what we have to reflect as believing Christians is, how to bring into socialist society the creative wealth of our past, of our Christian tradition in general and our Reformation

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<sup>38</sup>KJ 1967, Nr. 39. Similarly he writes in the spring of 1968: „The main question remains if it is the new socialist human being that lives in this building, one who understands the situation, grasps the aims of socialism and accepts full responsibility for tomorrow.“ (KJ 1968, Nr. 19.)

<sup>39</sup>KR 1949, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup>Hromádka really never stopped reminding of the importance of Masaryk’s legacy, but only in the atmosphere of liberalisation the hope increased that it could be taken seriously.

<sup>41</sup>About Hromádka’s relationship to the legacy of Masaryk see D. Neumärker, op. cit., Chapter 4. „Historisch-biographisch ist Hromádka’s Festhalten an Prinzipien und sein Interesse am Sozialismus vielmehr nicht zuletzt zurückzuführen auf den Einfluss T.G.Masaryks.“ (p. 147)

tradition in particular, and how to revive in an appropriate and persuasive way what T. G. Masaryk meant for the Czechoslovak people.”<sup>42</sup>

In spite of the tragic blow in 1968, Hromádka retained the hope for a democratic socialist society as a result of the development of the best traditions of human history, supported by the hidden power of the prophetic and apostolic message, of the Word of the sovereign God. Such a hope leads – needless to say – to an active and brave Christian social engagement.

*c) Christians in the Society*

We have mentioned above the strong emphasis on God’s sovereignty as a characteristic feature of Hromádka’s theology. His lifelong social engagement is accompanied by urgent awareness that the Church of Christ has only one unconditional loyalty – to its Lord. Any other possible loyalties can be only conditional, limited. Between the wars he more than once warned the church not to succumb to the current trends, not strive to be “progressive” or “national”. He kept emphasizing Christian freedom and the task to be on the watch, to fulfill a prophetic role in the society at all times and under all circumstances.

Hromádka’s favorite prophetic figures are Jeremiah, Augustine and Comenius,<sup>43</sup> the witnesses of the fall of the kingdom of Israel, of the Roman empire and of the Czech kingdom – prophetic personalities in the times of deepest crises in their societies. They all witness to the fact that social and political systems collapse but the church of Christ does not fall with them because it is not tied up with any social system.

“The church is by its substance free from all terrestrial powers. It is free in truth, in the faith in Christ Jesus, the sovereign Lord over heaven and earth. It is free as a messenger, free in its confession, teaching and preaching. There is no worldly ideology or authority that could impose its teaching on the church instead of the prophetic and apostolic message. The church is free... to utter its word of rebuke, critique, protest and resistance when the rights of Christ are trampled upon and when human being as God’s creature is treated unjustly... here the church of Christ does not yield ground.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>KJ 1968, Nr. 19.

<sup>43</sup> M. T. Zikmund, „J. L. Hromádka im Bemühen um eine tragfähige Grundlage unserer Zivilisation.“ In *Die Freiheit der Kirche Christi in der Geschichte...*, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup>KR 1949, p. 232.

We find a number of similar statements in Hromádka's texts at different times. The task to stand for truth and justice, to protest against wrongs done to anyone, to defend the weak and oppressed is "unconditional" for Hromádka. However, the practical application of this principle is controversial. The critics of Hromádka point to his silence on most of the injustices and crimes of the regime in the 1950's and to the fact that he was awarded four times an order by the Czech government (1954, 1955, 1958, 1959) and the Lenin peace prize in Moscow 1958, while many Christians suffered in prisons and work camps. His advocates stress the numerous personal letters and successful interventions on behalf of individual people. In any case, Hromádka turned down the critical task of the church that he theoretically maintained and "by voluntarily abstaining from criticism he deprived the maxims of the gospel of their public effectiveness."<sup>45</sup>

No simple answer can be given to the question what causes this discrepancy. I want to suggest some agents that have contributed to it. The starting point for understanding the role of the church is again the historical situation for Hromádka: "Our present situation is historically quite exceptional. We must try eagerly to understand the way we are brought into it by the Lord of the history; to understand it not from any perspective of a philosophy of history but in the light of faith."<sup>46</sup>

The text gives no closer account of this light of faith, however, other documents seem to indicate a picture: "To identify the kingdom of God with the social and political development of human society is out of the question for a real theology. And yet, the deeper we enter the depth of the prophetic witness and apostolic message the more appropriately and positively we grasp the meaning of what we call socialist realism and dialectical materialism."<sup>47</sup> In other words, our faith shows us that socialism has a positive meaning. Christians should understand it and accept responsibly the new situation. Christian freedom receives a specific qualification sometimes: "Pure theology... liberates us also from our dependency on the worldly orders and the institutions of the capitalist world... So-called Christian civilization is the greatest temptation for the churches in this world..."<sup>48</sup> Hromádka's

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<sup>45</sup>Trojan, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>46</sup>KR 1950, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup>KR 1951, p. 229.

<sup>48</sup>KR 1953, p. 172.

concept of Christian liberty indicates to a large extent freedom from the past, from the liberal society and freedom for the socialist reconstruction. It is carried by his deep conviction “that the moral logic of the historical life is on our side. We are aware that the best present forces and the best longings of humankind that have shaped human life so far also speak for us.”<sup>49</sup> The whole world is subject to the sovereign word of God but it seems that its judgment falls predominantly on the side of the Western democracies. Socialism seems to be a tool of judgment and at the same time a movement that brings an opportunity for a new beginning.

No matter how we explain the great changes in world politics and the social structure “we should grasp by the eyes of faith a graceful opportunity in it, an opportunity we are given by the Holy Spirit... but we leave very reluctantly the penultimate station to go to the place where the living Jesus of Nazareth, Crucified and Risen, stands, and where the Holy Spirit does his revolutionary and liberating work.”<sup>50</sup> The contexts of these and some other statements speak clearly: the place of the Christian church is in the social reconstruction of the world, Christians should understand it and accept their responsibility for it. Biblical faith leads us to those places where “people falter in their sin and try to build on the ruins of the past something new”. This “new” is the socialist transformation and Christians are called to take part in it. They should witness by their extraordinary good professional work and by their openness to dialogue. Because they know God’s mercy and forgiveness they are qualified to create an atmosphere of understanding and mutual trust that can open the door for a real dialogue.

There is no question about the sincerity of this attitude of Hromádka. Unfortunately, being based on the logic of a liberal democratic society, it proves to be defective face to face with totalitarian ideology and structures.<sup>51</sup> Several problematic points can be identified in this respect:

a) The trust vis a vis the communist state is inadequate. Hromádka expresses his naïve expectations in the context of the new legislation concerning churches:

“We expect therefore that the state department for church affairs becomes a tool that will implement the good will of the builders of the state even to the

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<sup>49</sup>KJ 1954, Nr. 44. An address at the meeting of the Presidium of the National Front.

<sup>50</sup>KR 1963, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup>More detailed account see Trojan, *op. cit.*, p. 162f.

furthest places of the republic, that it will be quick to remove incompetence, misunderstandings, harshness and injustice...”<sup>52</sup>

This department, so hopefully welcome, became a tool of systematic control and oppression for exactly 40 years. Hromádka never stopped hoping that it was just a “childhood disease” that was to be overcome: “...it is up to us... to create such a human mutual understanding between the members of our congregations and the public officials...”<sup>53</sup>

b) The effort to evade conflicts leads to a limitation in the interpretation of some vital values, especially human rights. In 1954, the time of the most grievous human rights violations, we hear:

“We do not apply the human, civic or political categories of freedom in the church. Its freedom is in its service. Its glory is a glory in humbleness. Its noble independence consists in its identification with the poor, weak, abandoned, proscribed and forgotten people.”<sup>54</sup>

The practical interpretation of this statement could sound: we will not fight for political rights; we are ready to give up our rights – and the civil rights of others, too. That is what actually happened to a large extent.

c) The positive approach towards the new social order deliberately overrides serious problems and wrongs in the public sphere.

“...at the Comenius Faculty we have attempted... not only to take cognizance of the deep changes but to take conscious part in the historical development and to apply what we consider to be our highest mission in the building of the new society... We have not stumbled over what was done wrong or what was mistaken. Rather, we have asked for our own responsibility for the weaknesses and errors of the present life...”<sup>55</sup>

These considerations exemplify Hromádka’s principle to understand his partners or opponents *ad optimam partem*, i. e. according to their highest ideals, but at the same time it indicates that the determination to defend the communist ideals even against the communists was not very effective at this time.

The Christian task in society is expressed poignantly: “The core of the Gospel message about the Crucified one does not separate believers from the people who work around

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<sup>52</sup>KR 1949, p. 263.

<sup>53</sup>KR 1961, p. 169.

<sup>54</sup>KJ 1954, Nr. 33.

<sup>55</sup>KR 1960, p. 293.

us, on the contrary, it drives them to the very places where the tasks, commitments, pains and needs of the human society are most urgent and tumultuous. By their message about the One who abandoned heavenly glory in order to become a servant (Philippians 2,7.8), by their service in love and mercy, by their zeal for truth and justice, by their desire for the new society, the believing members of the church of Christ bring to the new, nascent world something that no one else can bring.”<sup>56</sup>

he practical implementation of this program was defective, as we have indicated above, and we should try to say why, before we proceed to the next section. The hopes in creating an understanding atmosphere of co-operation between church and state were too optimistic, the limitations of the critical role of the church in the society were excessive, as well as the toleration of the vicissitudes of the state structures. An answer can be that Hromádka applied a personal, individual Christian attitude to the whole social sphere. Self-limitation, trust and high tolerance to the other, form a good Christian attitude in personal encounters, where we ourselves bear all the risks and possible costs. To apply the same attitude at the institutional level is a double fault. It neglects the difference between personal and institutional relationships (hence the naïve aspect of the attitude) and it indirectly imposes restrictions and claims to accept and bear suffering on other people.

#### *d) How to Understand Historical Events*

Today, it would be easy to show where Hromádka erred in his view of particular historical events, from the October revolution through the Korean War, development in China, Hungary 1956, the meaning of the GDR, the Cuban crisis and some others. But let us try to pose a more interesting and relevant question: why did he come to certain conclusions, what were the operative influences in his reasoning? How has his theological view interacted with his view of history and with the cultural and political situation?

I will try to sketch several motives that we can find expressed in different statements of Hromádka’s political attitudes.

*a) The laws of historical development.* We have touched this above so there is no need to expand on it. We find this argument at different times and different occasions. For example, the 1946 expropriation of large enterprises in Czechoslovakia is considered to be in accordance with the “unavoidable trend of historical development”, the building of the

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<sup>56</sup>KJ 1953, Nr. 49.

Bundeswehr some five years later represents “a senseless effort to stop the social and economic transformation of human society”, the Soviet peace proposals “surpass historically the proposals of the western powers”, the development in China represents “a historical development that can enhance the general standard of living”. The substantiation “historically” seems to indicate a better quality or even irreversibility of the respective process or event.

b) *Confidence in the positive role of Communism*. This is stressed most frequently in the case of China, Korea and Cuba. The changes in these lands represent “victory of work, devotion and interest for the poor, oppressed and exploited peasants and workers”, they “represent the creative forces of the Asian continent” and Christians “must accept these changes as God’s judgment over the old world and a pre-requisite for a new, more effective and devoted activity.”<sup>57</sup> The crisis of the modern world has an outcome – socialist transformation of the world, now represented by the communist states:

“Communism is also the dynamic which is hard to define in contemporary history, something that is in the air, something which – in human terms – feels like an uncontrollable striving to prevent the broken world from being built up on personal advantages, interests, profits and privileges, but rather on social equality, security and the collective cooperation of the masses of the people.”<sup>58</sup>

c) *The reality of class struggle*. Hromádka has his own understanding of this concept as “the terrible struggle between those who have power and wealth and those who are coming to new life...”<sup>59</sup> He stresses this fact especially strongly after the Cuban crisis: “it has shed light on the division of the world and brutally revealed... that we stand in the midst of world class struggle...”<sup>60</sup>

The problematic point is that in Hromádka’s statements the socialist states seem to be nearly identical with the poor and oppressed, who strive for a better world. On the one hand he declares that Christians are not to be revolutionaries or anti-revolutionaries but on the other

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<sup>57</sup>KR 1950, pp. 116 and 198.

<sup>58</sup>Communism and Christianity, p. 31.

<sup>59</sup>KJ 1966, Nr. 22.

<sup>60</sup>KJ 1962, Nr. 37.

hand he strongly rejects all that is seen as counter-revolution, whereby he clearly shows where his sympathy is.<sup>61</sup>

Here perhaps is the place to mention the well-known dispute between Barth and Hromádka concerning political attitudes. It is exactly this (even if conditioned) identification with one political camp that Barth criticized by Hromádka.<sup>62</sup> Hromádka's answer and further exchange on the issue does not bring sufficient clarification (see especially letters Nr. 72 and 73) and Barth's critique is not adequately refuted by it. The case of the poor and oppressed and the case of the communist countries seems not to be far from identification in Hromádka's view.

d) *The pastoral perspective.* Hromádka observes a lot of fears and uncertainty not only in the population generally but among the Christians as well and he systematically strives to help the Czech Protestants to find their orientation in the new situation. He complained immediately after his return from the United States that people are puzzled and do not find an effective way of acting. He mentions this aspect in a postscript to a booklet written by Hans Ruh: "Hopefully, readers will understand me when I say that my attempt to understand our situation in historical context belongs not so much to some sort of philosophy of history as to my pastoral theology."<sup>63</sup> This explanation, however, says little about the way of interpreting the historical events. It just explains why the interpretation is offered, not the particular orientation.

We should not lose from sight the basic conviction that stands behind Hromádka's entire struggle in politics. It is the conviction that the immense suffering of humankind in the two world wars is the consequence of our sins and the time has come for a new beginning:

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<sup>61</sup>That was the case with Hungary in 1956. Moreover, Hromádka apparently trusted Soviet propaganda concerning the events – see Balog, Zoltan. „Theologie-Geschichte-Politik bei J. L. Hromádka.“ In *Die Freiheit der Kirche Christi...*, pp. 12-20.

<sup>62</sup>Rohkrämer, Martin (ed.). *Freundschaft im Widerspruch. Der Briefwechsel zwischen Karl Barth, Josef L. Hromádka und Josef B. Souček.* Theologischer Verlag Zürich 1995. "...dass deine Stellungnahmen und, ihnen entsprechend, deine christlichen Ermahnungen durchweg bestimmt sind durch eine Geschichtsschau, die mit der des einen der heute um die Macht ringenden Leviathane in der Sache identisch ist..." (p. 215). On the context and some aspects of this exchange see Filipi, P. "K. Barth und J. Hromádka." Suda, Max J. (Hrsg.) *Prophetische Zeitgenossenschaft. Karl Barth und die Geschichte.* Veröffentlichungen der Ev. Akademie Wien, Nr. 7. Wien 1988. pp. 47-60.

<sup>63</sup>Ruh, Hans. "Geschichte und Theologie. Grundlinien der Theologie Hromadkas." *Theologische Studien*, Heft 69. Zürich 1963, p. 38. See also Filipi, Pavel., op. cit., p. 82.

“We do not see the future very well but we know that the time has come when nations cannot be just objects of political expansion and economic exploitation any more. Time has come when it is necessary to help, when the main aim is not the material profit gained from other people, but a service that will help the undeveloped people to real freedom and self-determination.”<sup>64</sup>

The main task for Christians in communist countries is first of all in persuading other Christians, particularly those from western countries, that the Gospel does not stand or fall with any political structure and that it can exist in different structures, even completely secular. Secondly, to persuade western Christianity that communism is not an incarnation of evil, rather a fruit of the desire for a better and more just society. As such, it needs to be helped to develop its best capacities and to recognize that its best intentions are not only in accordance with Christian views of social justice but impossible to achieve if not supported by a spiritual dimension. And thirdly, it is necessary to do away with the Cold War and take the course of peaceful co-existence and competition of different social systems in the world.

Hromádka's hope that the time of change will come and human society will be transformed into a more humane, just and caring community can be regarded as unrealistic but it certainly belongs to the perspective of faith. It can remind us of Comenius, one of orienting figures for Hromádka, who similarly hoped in an amendment of all human things in the ravaged Europe after the Thirty Years' War. The problem resides in the way in which the hope is connected with particular historical events and structures. Neither historical development, nor Marxian class analysis, nor humanistic ideals offer a reliable clue for a specific political analysis. Hromádka's attempts to identify some signs of hope in the present historical process are rooted in his understanding of incarnation as God's descent into our history, into the midst of our present struggles. Something like impatience in an effort to make the invisible hope more real and discernible leads Hromádka to lean on inappropriate tools. The result is that incarnation, the sovereign act of God's free mercy, seems to be close to being trapped in our history in some of his expositions. One of the most recent studies on Hromádka renders it in terms of history and revelation:

“... we cannot but judge that, in Hromádka, the factor of the immanent relation in that dialectical tension between revelation and history extends so far as to break the tension...”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>KJ 1960, Nr. 2.

<sup>65</sup>Nishitani, Kosuke., op. cit., p. 288f.

## Conclusion

When we follow Hromádka's struggles with the public dimension of Christian theology we cannot but confirm what many of his colleagues and friends expressed at different occasions: the relationship between his theology and his political attitudes is obscure at times.

We have repeatedly observed that two motives meet and struggle in Hromádka's concept of history: the prophetic aspect with its sharp social critique and with its awareness of the discontinuity between God and human history, and a socio-philosophical aspect that believes in an inherent meaning of history and in irreversibility of historical processes. We have suggested that Hromádka was still attached to the liberal concept to the extent that, in spite of preaching vigorously about the end of the Constantinian era, he needed a social structure that would carry on the meaning of the world's history. Charles West recognized this as early as 1958:

"In other words, behind the orthodox crisis theology of both Hromádka and the Hungarians, lurks a longing for a *kulturchristliche* unity of religion with social power..."<sup>66</sup>

The liberal roots of this phenomenon seem to be discernible in Hromádka. His post-war hopes for a synthesis of the eastern zeal for social transformation with the western democracy and humanistic tradition failed but he never really gave up this idea.<sup>67</sup> From this point of view his option for socialism in its socio-political dimension is not fully consequent. Even if he hoped to be able to humanize the socialist structures from within and to introduce the important values of humanistic democracy in this way, it does not explain his attitudes sufficiently.

Hromádka's passionate concern for transforming the social structures according to the prophetic and apostolic witness to justice remains a challenge for Christians, even decades after his death. His orientation and attitudes in the political sphere, the way he attempted to exercise his social and political responsibility, raised justifiable doubts and critique.<sup>68</sup> His

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<sup>66</sup>Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians*. S. C. M. Press, Philadelphia 1958, p. 77.

<sup>67</sup>Trojan asks if this call for a new synthesis does not show that "...theologians need to resort to the main emphases of liberal theology whenever they want to deal in a responsible way with public issues in all their aspects." Trojan, J. S., op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>68</sup>Karl Barth writes in his famous letter from December 1962: "...bist du dir denn gar nicht klar darüber, dass Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr und andere... mit derselben Methode und im derselben Stil nun eben ihre westliche Geschichtsschau begründen... dass du also im umgekehrten Sinn genauso kalten Krieg führst wie jene?" *Freundschaft im Widerspruch...*, p. 215.

understanding of the social responsibility of Christians remained liberal in some respect. But “the assumption of total responsibility for the whole direction of society is ... a temptation and not a call for the Christian.”<sup>69</sup>

The burning question remains after Hromádka as it was before: How can the social challenge of the Gospel be kept vivid and operational between two pitfalls: That of burning zeal tending to impatient identification of God’s purposes with some kind of human action (what is a theological justification of our pretension to know good and evil), and that of sceptical and resigned complacency with our sinful world (what is a theological justification of our selfishness). Our responsibility is to struggle – the answer is eschatological.

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<sup>69</sup>West, Charles., *op. cit.*, p. 368.