

THE CHURCH AND DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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At a conference on the Church and democracy held in Nitra (Slovakia) in March 1995, Cardinal Franz König, spoke very sharply and critically about the situation in western countries. He expressed support for those clerical circles in Slovakia, which "admonish to a reserved position against West, the Western Europe. He cautioned against decaying democratic society, cautioned against exaggerated subjectivism in questions of creed, church and against the liberal theology of West. The church will never comply with liberal understanding of vital values." In his opinion, currently the greatest enemy of church is western hedonism, namely, the exclusive sensual consumer society.¹

I fully appreciate the fact that such an introduction is not a very good "*captatio benevolentiae*" at this conference, nor do I agree with this opinion. The citation shows, however, that the relationship and interaction of church and democracy is not so obvious in Central Europe. Sometimes the priests and pastors consider democracy as the root of the problems of churches, and try to cover up the real problems of churches by damning the liberalism coming from the West. On the other hand, they often assume that democracy is the saviour of the church after the communist oppression. In fact, the church should be in good working order, irrespective of any form of state, or government, or politics as we can see from our own rich church history. Likewise, democracy can live without any church.

Church in Democratic Society or Democratic Church?

When speaking about the church and democracy, I want neither to define a church in relation to democracy, nor to vitalise democracy as a living space of the church. The conjunctive 'and' between 'church' and 'democracy' can denote two types of relationship: how the church exists in a democracy, or how democratic the churches are in Central Europe. Please note that my experiences on this theme are based on the life of the Reformed Church of Hungary. Surely here are statements, which are not quite appropriate for other countries and church organisations in Central Europe.

¹Ladislav Hubenák: Humanists in Slovakia and the European Integration (<http://www.jhm.sk/phuben.htm>)

"The Christian congregation does not live in heaven, but on earth, therefore a change in the form of the state may not be indifferent to her."² - claimed Karl Barth when lecturing in Budapest and Sárospatak (Hungary) in 1948. The Christian congregation together with her members is involved in every change of the form of state; meanwhile she must not forget to be able to remain a "Christian congregation" and has to remain that. That is, because she must keep in view the "change" which is more important than the changes of the form of state, this "change" is the death and glorious return of Jesus Christ. It may be that the holders of state power take no notice of the church, or they do not know what the role of church is within the world, but even in that case the church has to interest in politics.³

"Free Church in Free State"

Nevertheless, what is the function of the state and what is the political responsibility of the church? The slogan "free church in free state" often needs correction if we consider the interlocking aspects of the state and the church in a society. Where the state is interested in the church, we can usually identify one of two different attitudes.

On the one hand, the attitude of the state can be distrustful toward the church, an attitude that implies intolerance, persecution, and disregard of the values represented by the church. In such a case the church's response has usually been a form of esoterism, where it retreated into its own world, within the liturgical framework of the church service, and so the church tends to become a closed island in the world. This happened in the post-communist countries in Europe under the communist regime.⁴

On the other hand, the attitude of the state can be friendly to the church, which carries with it another danger, namely that the state tries to instrumentalise the church as a cultural-political factor of society. In this way, the church loses its critical function and moves toward integralism, where it seeks to christianize the world, to ecclesialize society, to clericalize politics.⁵ This attitude is the most evident temptation in democracy.

Critique About the Church: The Danger of Conformity

After the era of oppression, the church has received a lot of support from the state, namely the church got back its buildings, schools, etc.. The financial aid has also been significant in the form of tax allowances, as well as the support from western brothers and sisters. Beyond the blessing of this pleasing and necessary aid, a dreadful danger has arisen which may well cause greater trouble than the oppression of

²Karl Barth: Die christliche Gemeinde im Wechsel der Staatsordnungen. Vortrag, gehalten in Sárospatak and Budapest im März 1948. In: *Evangelische Theologie* 1/1948-49. 1-15.

³ Ibid. 4.

⁴S. Fazakas: "Új egyház felé?" Debrecen, 2000. p. 158.

⁵S. Fazakas, p. 160.

communism. This danger is the temptation to conformity. The church does not feel or does not want to confront with the pressing challenges of society, rather we delude ourselves with false hopes. Of course, there are congregations and church institutions where the preachers, workers and believers have to face the reality of the world. The problem of conformity is much rather distressing within the higher levels of the church structure, including the educational institutions of the churches.

Effectively, the church rarely participates in the social network. It should build more homes for orphans, should establish more foundations to help those in need. The church is also living from the goodwill of state; there are very few self-supported church organisations.

Why does the state support the churches in Central Europe? At first, the state had a bad conscience about the past. The state tried to compensate for the persecution and oppression of communism. Secondly, the state wants to use the church for its own good. In spite of the emphasized neutrality of the church, the preachers and priests have been agitating plainly or secretly during the periods of political campaigns. What is more, the political parties subtly distinguish the churches deemed positive for them. The Roman Catholic church and the old Protestant churches have become the so called “historical churches”, that are commonly conservative oriented, while the “non-historical churches” are liberal oriented in Hungary.

Extreme Views Beyond Democracy

In the post communist countries democracies were born without blood and civil wars except in Yugoslavia and Romania. The Soviet Union has collapsed in the best possible way: quietly and smoothly, therefore the changes of regimes were also quite peaceful in Central Europe. It seems to me that all passions, joys, suppressed emotions and wishes of the people have been forced into the framework of democracy. Nationalism, neo-communism, liberalism, racism, the principle of equality, and socialism must now work under the structure of acceptance of the parliamentary system. The Central European democracies are somewhat immature structures, the methods and procedures of articulating a divergent opinion are not well-formed yet.

Some politicians seem inclined to express their views in ultimate and absolute terms, and cannot make a distinction between their inner desires and reality. If a churchman is engaged in politics, then he or she can be more radical because of emotional commitment.⁶ One of the Reformed pastors now represents an extremist politics in Hungary.⁷ I think the church should be more careful about supporting or denying a political trend. This opinion is supported by a survey based on a questionnaire prepared by the Institute of

⁶Probably this can explain why churchman could be so successful and fascinating, see Kenneth W. Thompson: “Prophets and Politics”, *Christianity and Crisis* May 1995.

⁷Jr. Lóránt Hegedűs was brought to justice because of nationalist instigation. The teachers of Debrecen University of Reformed Theology formulated a stance in this case.

Sociology and Ethics, Debrecen University of Reformed Theology.⁸ “The church must not talk politics” was a widely supported opinion that should be acknowledged.

Uncertainty in Democracy and the Lack of Certainty in Church

The political convictions and conclusions of people are based on emotions and sentimental foundations. We think of people as elements of a network, for everyone is a point in the Internet, in a flow chart, in a database system, in the economy, in the military maps, in a cable network, etc. We have inputs and outputs like a tube, but it is hard to see what the premise and consequence of our actions is. In the last centuries the people were in direct contact with their world: a peasant lived on the ground he cultivated, a craftsman worked with formed matter, a soldier fought with other soldiers, etc. Nowadays the usefulness of our work is debatable because of the complexity of structures and society. I think the uncertainty of existence and its purposes are more obvious than never before, particularly in Central Europe where things are changing so fast.

How can anybody live in such an uncertain situation today? After the Second World War C.G. Jung wrote: “True democracy is a highly psychological institution which takes account of human nature as it is and makes allowances for the necessity of conflict within its national boundaries.”⁹ This psychological aspect is very significant when people give a political party a vote of confidence in Central Europe. Although there are elections every four years, usually the first political election is real in a person’s life. At the election, a person expects the chosen party to solve his or her problems and to make the future certain. Afterwards the voter will assess and interpret every political event in the light of the party they supported. This conscious or subconscious blindness helps to establish a point of safety, and to locate the enemy in the other parties at the same time. The participation in political elections fluctuates in Central Europe. When people do not go to vote, the uncertainty is expressed by distrust and indifference. On the other hand, the people who go to vote are usually deeply committed to a party.

Unfortunately, the church, which is a two thousand years old organization can only think and plan now in terms of four years governmental cycles. “The results of political elections in the country and local governments give us more hope...”¹⁰ said a public letter written by the four Reformed bishops in Hungary. Whereas the church that trusts the Lord of the variable and invariable things, can truly offer certainty for the people. Paul Tillich warned thus rightly: “in so far as democratization of political attitudes and institutions

⁸S. Fazakas - T. Kodácsy: *God and Hungarians Today*, 2000. <http://www.drhe.hu/~kodacsyt>

⁹C.G. Jung: *The Fight with the Shadow*, par. 456.

¹⁰“Püspökeink újévi körlevele”, *Reformátusok Lapja*, 1999/1.

serves to resist the destructive implications of power, it is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God in history. But it would be completely wrong to identify democratic institutions with the Kingdom of God in history.”¹¹

Theology and Society

I am afraid that we still have to go back to the era of communism to understand what are going in our recent theological life. Our structure of theological activities were limited and closed under the communist era. Generally, it meant that for doing theology to be authentic, it had to be isolated. Theological institutions and theologians existed like islands in the Red Sea¹², with restricted space. Such isolation could be of great value in the past, but this kind of attitude is no longer sustainable. In the last 12 years the world of Central Europe has been overblown by various types of religious movements, sects, and spirituality.

Nowadays the people are asking theologians about several issues, especially in ethical, personal, political matters. In addition, we are usually too slow to answer them. Either we do not understand the questions, or we sometimes have no answers, and often we are not ready yet to express ourselves.

When a theologian wants to connect to democracy in order to engage his or her theology with democracy, then it appears that there are three points or three different levels to link-up.¹³As first point, we can regard democracy as a tradition with a special history, with concepts and logic. As second point, democracy can be viewed as a structure, which controls the coexistence of individuals and communities. Thirdly, democracy can be formulated as a process, where we can recognise the birth of a democracy, a democratic transformation or a stagnating of democracy.¹⁴

Modern democracy had three major impulses, which also characterize the present palette of features: liberalism, social democracy, and Christian democracy. Keeping the spiritual heritage of liberalism, modern democracy is sensitive to individual liberty and the inalienable authority of the person. Nevertheless, how can a person be free entirely if there are other persons who want to be free and independent in the same way? Two other models appeared to emphasise the importance of the community and the living together of individuals. Social democracy thinks that the harmonising of the different conditions can be solved if the goods are distributed more fairly. Christian democracy thinks that the standard for acceptance of each other is the keeping

¹¹Paul Tillich: *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3. SCM Press, p. 385.

¹²After the collapse of communism, some very optimistic feelings were expressed in Central European countries. Enthusiastic pastors were preaching about the expected freedom and the signs of having reached Canaan, and they identified the forty years of communist oppression with the forty years of Israel's wanderings in the desert. It seems to me that the collapse of communism fits better the image of having crossed the *Red Sea* - now we are wandering in the desert.

¹³A. Csepregi: "A demokrácia teológia megközelítésének vázlatja." In: *Lelkipásztor, Evangélikus Lelkészi Folyóirat* 2000/01. p. 53-55.

¹⁴Ibid. 54.