

Churches and the Consolidation of Democratic Culture: Difference and Convergence in the Czech Republic and Hungary

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How do religious institutions cope with the realities of democratisation? This article explores this question through an examination of the relationship between the state, political parties and the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic and Hungary. We examine the extent to which the Churches have accepted and internalised democratic values, have pursued their agenda by democratic means, and have contributed to the development of civil society and a tolerant political culture. The article identifies similarities but also significant and unexplored differences in the Churches efforts to accommodate to the new pluralist regimes.

1. Introduction

The way in which national democracies consolidate has an impact on religious organisations, yet these organisation too can play an important role in how democratic culture develops and settles. Both historically and comparatively, this role has varied widely, depending on factors such as denomination, the compatibility of church doctrine with democratic practice, the extent to which the functioning of churches depends on state guaranteed privileges, and the degree to which new or aspiring political elites demand religious legitimation. There is a specific subset of factors, embedded in the democratization process itself, that shapes the ways religious organisations can influence the development of democracy. These are to be found in the relationship between church and state, and, in particular, in laws detailing the financing and operation of religious organisations, in the behavior and the ideological character of the major political parties, and, finally, in the dominant discourses of the churches themselves. The following analysis assesses the role of the churches within the democratization process by comparing these factors in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

It has now been well established by social theory and research that religious organisations play a positive role not only in democratic transitions but also in the ensuing

phases of consolidation.¹ Religious organisations also have the capacity to influence democratic culture beyond the nation-state. This has long been true for the Catholic Church whose position on a number of international bodies has allowed it to address global ethical concerns such as human rights, war, and debt. For the post-communist Churches there is now the opportunity to contribute to the democratic quality of an increasingly integrated Europe. The Catholic support for the principle of subsidiarity and for the development of civil economies has, for example, strong affinities with the increasingly associationalist models of democracy being supported at the ELT level. This support has a practical dimension too. The considerable organisational capacity of the Catholic Church makes it ideally placed to translate the desire for autonomy into living examples of independent organisational life; their activities thus offer a blueprint for other civic groups seeking to widen their separation from the state.

This chapter examines the impact of democracy on the Hungarian and Czech Catholic Churches, and looks at how those Churches have responded to, and coped with, the realities and demands of liberal pluralist regimes. The Hungarian and Czech cases provide a useful and previously unexplored comparison. The social and political influence of the Czech Church is weaker. The conflict-ridden historical relationship between Catholicism and the Czech national movements produced a virulent anti-clerical culture; secularisation started earlier there than in Hungary. But the two countries have many fundamental similarities. Both countries are new post-communist democracies of equal population size, both are highly secularised (as opposed to, for example, Poland) and in both the position of the Catholic denomination is best captured by the term 'plurality' as opposed to 'minority' (as in the case of Romania or East Germany) or majority (Poland or Croatia).

2. Heritage of the Transition

Eastern European churches were not the principal actors in the transition to democracy. Communism deprived them of material and political resources, and secularisation had a devastating effect on their traditional clientele. Yet, though they were rarely instrumental in shaping the institutional design of the new regimes, the churches gained in

¹José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* is the best known of recent attempts to assert a potentially positive role for religious organisations in the development of democracy. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For a discussion of the relevance of Casanova's work to Eastern Europe see D. Herbert "Christianity, Democratisation and Secularisation in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Religion, State, and Society*, Vol 27. No. 3/4, (1999) pp.277-293.

political significance. Their oppression under Communism granted them considerable moral capital, and the dominant churches were obvious allies in the attempts of the new political elites to re-define national identity and to accumulate legitimacy behind the new governments. Consequently, churches had access to political elites, a degree of influence on their decisions, and were able to speak with some authority in the early public debates on the postcommunist future.

While democracy heralded significant freedoms for the Catholic Church, the new political and civic pluralism also brought with it significant challenges. Indeed, some authors have suggested that pluralism would prove particularly difficult for the East European Catholic Churches who for the most part were isolated from the modernist drive of the Second Vatican Council. Mach, for example, claims that "the Church is not used to a free market of symbolic discourses; [but] feels at home in the situation where it has to struggle for survival or for domination."² These claims are somewhat simplistic, however, and the evidence so far is of a more complex picture, with churches often adapting easily to the new democratic discourse, clearly benefiting from democratic structures and modern means of communication, and sometimes even allying with the most progressive elements of their societies.

3. Church-State Relations after 1989: Similarities and Differences

Freedom of Churches was one of the fundamental rights upon which the new regimes were based. In both countries, a liberal consensus prevailed, resulting in a high level of equality and in the constitutional separation of church and state. Indeed, it is not only the official international monitoring bodies such as the Council of Europe and the European Union who acknowledge this fact; the often persecuted religious minorities do so as well.³ Both the Hungarian and the Czech state follow the typical European as opposed to US interpretation of neutrality, an interpretation that allows for state involvement and support for, rather than complete separation from, religious associations. Both countries are also typically European in their recognition of the special status of religious groups in comparison with

²Zdzislaw Mach, 1997. 'The Roman Catholic Church and the Transformation of Social Identity in Eastern and Central Europe', in Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (eds.), *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe* (Krakow, Zaklad Wydawniczy 'Namos', 1997), p.67.

³For example, in the rank of countries produced by the Seventh Day Adventists, Hungary and the Czech Republic are listed, together with Poland, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, in the first category, indicating that the religious group encounters no obstruction in the named countries. All other Western countries receive a lower rank. (<http://www.irla.org/reports.html>)

other associations. In practice, this 'positive neutrality' has given substance to the Churches formal freedoms through state subsidies, and support and protection of the religious heritage.

Despite these broad similarities, three major differences in the status of the Catholic Churches exist, differences which contribute to the determination of quite different political agendas in church-state relations in the two countries.

3.1 Financing

The most long-standing of these differences relates to the restitution to the Churches of property seized by the Communists. In Hungary, the restitution process has seen relatively little controversy. The state continues what has been a slow; but committed procedure that returns the bulk of the property owned by the Churches until 1948 and provides compensation for the buildings and land it does not return. In striking contrast to the political will of successive Hungarian governments, the return of property to the Czech Catholic Church has been dogged with delay and bitter political battles.⁴ The Church has been successful in restituting only those properties of little monetary value. While in Hungary, the final set of laws relating to restitution were passed in 1996 and 1997, the Commission set up by the Czech Social Democratic Government in 1999, in part to resolve the restitutions, continues to debate the issue.

The consequence of this for the Czech Church has been, from the Church's perspective, an unwelcome dependence on the state. For example, priests and bishops continue, as under Communism, to be paid directly by the state, whereas in Hungary, the earlier resolution of the question of financing, allows the Church far greater economic autonomy: full control over wages for its personnel, for example. Unsurprisingly then, the major issue on the state-Church agenda in the Czech Republic is the resolution of restitution, while in Hungary the debate has moved on to the distribution of public funds, and to the Government's taxation system, which allows tax-payers to earmark a percentage of their income for religious organisations. The focus of the Catholic Church in Hungary is the reform of a financing-system that relies heavily on tax payers' decisions. Having many members who pay little tax or no tax at all (such as poor people, parents with many children, and pensioners), the Church has argued that it is disadvantaged, particularly in comparison with some of the new religious movements which have more enthusiastic and often wealthier

⁴For an analysis of the politics of restitution see Joan O'Mahony, "The Catholic Church and Civil Society: Democratic Options in the Post-Communist Czech Republic" in John T.S.Madeley and Zsolt Enyedi (eds) *Church and State in Contemporary Europe*. (London: Frank Cass, 2003) pp.177-194.

members, who can be better mobilized to contribute one percent of their taxes.⁵ The right-wing government reformed the arrangement in 2001 by introducing the census data as a major standard for the distribution of state support. The decision was made by the Hungarian-Vatican Commission, and resulted in a significant increase to the budget of the Catholic Church. In 2002, the victory of the left saw the reintroduction of the proportions of tax assignments as the major criterion, with the argument that (voluntary) census data do not reflect the actual will of the people concerning church financing, and that the tax-based system would be more advantageous for 102 out of the 104 state-financed Churches. But, anxious not to alienate the Catholics and the Calvinists, the two exceptions, the cabinet decided to rely on census data whenever that standard is more beneficial for a particular Church.

In Hungary, an agreement with the Holy See was signed in 1997. This agreement has enabled the Vatican to play a critical role in progressing church-state relations. In the Czech Republic, no institutionalised role for the Vatican exists. The Czech government formalised an agreement with the Vatican in July of 2002, yet the agreement was rejected in Parliament in May 2003 through the combined opposition of the Communists, the right-wing ODS, and various members of the Social Democratic Party who argued for the protection of state sovereignty, and insisted that an international treaty for the Catholic Church would not be in keeping with the principle of equality for the Churches. The draft treaty was supported by the junior Government members - the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and the Freedom Union (DEU). In Hungary, the signing of the 1997 agreement met with little political opposition. The Czech Republic remains one of the few post-Communist countries without a treaty specifying the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church.

3.2 The Registration System and State-Church Law

A second major area of difference relates to the religious registration system and the consequences that this has for traditional Church activity. In the Czech Republic a new law 'Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations' was passed in 2002. The 2002 Law has sparked a new series of controversies. The most problematic aspect for the Catholic Church is that 'under this law churches are not allowed to establish philanthropic organizations and charities as an integral part of the Church, but have to

⁵*Magyar Narancs*, 5 December 2002.

register them as separate 'civic enterprises.'⁶ As such, the charities will come under the control of the State who will in theory have the authority to disband these organisations. It is unclear what the implications are exactly for the traditional areas of church life. One concern is with the potential restrictions the Law places on the Church's welfare activities; in particular there is concern that the Church will be unable to use profits generated from Church enterprises for its work in health and social services. The ambiguity in the bill led to substantial opposition. It was rejected by a majority of the Senate, President Havel attempted a veto of the bill, and on its final reading three of the four main opposition parties, the KDU-CSL, the Freedom Union, and the Communists voted against it. In Hungary, the Church encounters no such obstacles in carrying out its traditional work.

There are further Czech-Hungarian differences in the way that state-church separation has been interpreted. In Hungary the state cannot gather information on the financial situation of the churches, and official registration requires nothing but one hundred signatures. In the Czech Republic however, the autonomy of the churches is more constrained. Churches are ranked into two categories. Those that wish to exercise special powers, for example teaching religion in public schools, granting marriage licences, and receiving state financial support need 10,000 adult adherents, and must go through a 10 year observation period during which they are required to present their articles of faith and report annually to the state about their activities. Changes in the by-laws of the Churches must be submitted to the state within ten days. The authority to exercise these special powers is revoked by the state if the Church does not publish an annual report.⁷ Churches can be - theoretically - disbanded for a long list of reasons; including secret ties to foreign organizations or if they pose a threat to the country's territorial integrity. Notably, in Hungary, independent ordinary courts register Churches; in the Czech Republic the government is the responsible authority. In Hungary there are more than a hundred registered churches, in the Czech Republic there are, in striking contrast, only twenty-one.

The rapid growth of various cults shocked the Hungarian Catholic Church, particularly since some of them – such as the Faith Church – had an explicitly anti-Catholic philosophy and strong links with anti-clerical circles. While in the Czech Republic the

⁶Karel Nowak, President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Czech Republic, cited at http://gbgm-umc.org/mission_Programs/ecg/2.19/czech/latest_news.htm. See also Human Rights Without Frontiers website at http://www.hrwf.net/html/czech_republic2001.html

⁷The traditional Churches are regarded as already fulfilling the criteria and are thus registered automatically.

Church must define itself with respect to the state, in Hungary the new and ascending religious cults serve as primary foci of counter-identification. The lack of any legal differentiation between large and small, old and new Churches runs counter to Hungarian traditions, and a large proportion of Hungarian society disapproves of it. This state of affairs encourages the Church to support those right wing politicians who promise a more hierarchical Church-state regime.

On the whole, the Catholic Church in Hungary finds itself with more freedom to exercise its traditional activities independently from the state. It is difficult to attribute the differences between the two cases to differences in the capabilities of the religious organisations – differences in political skill, for example - for both Churches are highly organised with an educated elite, active press offices, and an effective legal personnel. Rather than searching for explanations in the political agency of the Church, we focus instead on the different attitudes of the political parties in the two countries towards the postcommunist claims of religious organisations.⁸

4. Political Strategies

In the early 1990s in Hungary and the Czech Republic the clergy maintained a close relationship with the Christian Democratic Parties. These parties were smaller in size and more associated in the eyes of the public with the specific interests of the Catholic Church than their Western sisters.⁹ Given the dangers of supporting relatively minor parties, the clergy adopted a new strategy in the mid-nineties in both the Czech Republic and Hungary. But while in the Czech Republic the clergy opted for a greater distance from everyday party politics, in Hungary the Catholic Church simply shifted its allegiance to a larger party; instead of withdrawing from politics, it supported the conservatives in the 2002 campaign to an unprecedented degree. This bias towards right wing parties in the Hungarian Church manifests itself mainly at the lower level of the clergy, through participation in collecting signatures for right wing candidates, urging the flock in sermons to vote appropriately, and occasionally even distributing leaflets in front of the Churches. The leaders of the Church

⁸We do acknowledge the importance of historical differences (eg. Hussitism in the Czech Lands, anti-Catholicism of Masaryk, etc.) and sociological differences (according to polls the majority of Czechs consider themselves atheist, while two thirds of Hungarians consider themselves religious), but our focus here is on factors related to the democratization process.

⁹Zsolt Enyedi, 'Clerical and religious polarisation in Hungary', in David Broughton and Hans-Martin Ten Napel (eds.) *Religion and Mass Electoral Behaviour*. (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 157-176.

deny any direct involvement in partisan politics, yet noticeably they make little effort to restrain the activities of individual priests.¹⁰ They also leave little doubt about their political preferences; the Church circulars issued before the 2002 elections, for example, were similar in structure to the manifestos and slogans of the right,¹¹ with Bishop Veres proclaiming that while the Church cannot name any specific party, it would be understandable if the people were to read into the circular a particular party preference. Many priests offered their help in deciphering the high clergy's intentions. Father Blanckenstein, for example, claimed in an open letter that "we took our electoral victory too much for granted", and called for a campaign of prayers "against the Satan", unmistakably identified in the letter with the left wing opposition.¹² After the left wing victory in the 2002 elections, the leaders of the Church toned down somewhat their anti-left rhetoric, yet the Catholic media continues to take side openly.

No such alliance between the right and the Church exists in the Czech Republic. There, conservative politics has been dominated by the figure of Vaclav Klaus, the leader of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) for most of the post-Communist period, and now the Republic's president. Klaus has remained firmly committed to a thatcherite ideology which has persistently supported the values of individualism and the market, and has espoused a radical antagonism to the ideas of collective rights and participation prevalent in the discourses on civil society. The Church, and indeed other civic organisations, have had to look for support to the centre and to the moderate left – the Christian democratic Union – Czechoslovakian People's party (KDU-CSL) and the Freedom Union (DEU). Moreover, the Church's concerns for social solidarity and its opposition to technocratic politics, as expressed both in its 2002 Social Letter and its numerous Church circulars, lend it a strong affinity with the values of these parties. For example, the Church argues:

Today we are witnessing a dissemination of dangerous views of extreme libertarians who consider man as an isolated creature, selfishly seeking only his narrow personal interests under an extreme form of freedom. However, a healthy society needs the broadest possible consensus on what constitutes the

¹⁰*Nepszabadsag*, 3 September 2002

¹¹The Church has named the following criteria in 2002: "who protects the completeness of life, the sanctity of marriage and family, grants the livelihood of families with many children; protects the young against harmful addictions, helps them to get accommodation, secures the possibility of learning; who respects the values of Hungarian culture, grants the development of a healthy national self-consciousness, turns with open heart, even making sacrifice, towards our Hungarian brothers living beyond the borders and towards the neighbouring nations; who guarantees the freedom of faith and moral-teaching; who guarantees the free functioning of the Church; and whose program is feasible." *Uj Ember*, 24 March 2002.

¹²*Uj Exodus*, 2002 May 25.

'Common Good.' Our transformation so far has suffered from a one-sided emphasis on the economic dimension, while other dimensions were underestimated. The transformation needs to be understood as an overall civilisational change and regeneration involving the cultivation of the legal and moral order, the development of civil society, modernisation of the economy, civil service and public administration.¹³

Certainly, the Church strives to maintain an equal distance from all the political parties, yet the obvious differences between its own agenda and that of the Czech right - differences which acquire a greater meaning during election periods - continue to give the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) numerous opportunities to criticise the Church for political partisanship. Following the victory of the Social Democrats in 1998, there were hopes for a more positive relationship between the Church and the Government. However, the ongoing failure to make progress on restitution or an agreement with the Vatican has created much tension. The Social Democratic Culture Minister, Dostal, - who has primary responsibility for negotiating with the Church and Cardinal Vlk have resorted to exchanging insults through the press.¹⁴

The right-wing camp in Hungary has, however, always been more than ready to show its allegiance to religion and to Churches. Even before joining the European Union the right considered it a major goal of theirs to influence the EU constitution in such a way that God, Christianity and Churches receive a prominent position. In the first year after the political transition Christianity was associated in the right wing discourse as a symbol of Western orientation, but as the day of accession approached, the right stepped up its criticism of the West that it was turning its back on its Christian heritage. For example, as the leader of the right, The leader of the Hungarian right, Viktor Orban for example, said that, according to the West, Europe should be neutral in terms of world views, but Hungary, he argued, has learned that this is not possible, and that a Christian Europe is the only possible solution.¹⁵ In contrast, the anti-European stance of the conservatives in the Czech Republic focuses firmly on the autonomy of the Czech state and not on the question of what values or traditions a new European identity could or should be based on. It is an attitude that has attracted criticism from the Church who argue "In our situation of a weakened legal conscience we have to

¹³Czech Bishops Conference, *Peace and Good: A Letter on Social Issues in the Czech Republic*. (Prague, 2001), section 18.

¹⁴Vlk, for example, announced that his experiences with Dostal were "completely negative" and that Dostal was damaging to the Church. Dostal complained that some of the hierarchy "issue ultimatums, symbolically leave meetings, and engage in personal invective." *Prague Post*, 10 July 10, 2003

¹⁵*Magyar Hirlap*, 30 August 2002.

welcome the external pressure from the European Union. We warn against populism which might misuse national feelings in favor of interest groups which would prefer arbitrariness to the rule of law, even at the cost of our country remaining outside the European Community."¹⁶

5. The Prevailing Church Discourse.

The new democratic regimes brought in new opportunities for creating alliances with political parties and for political expression. Under Communism, religious organisations were actively discouraged from developing any overt political dimension; they were regarded as purely cultural bodies to be kept at a firm distance from the political sphere. In terms of the development of a democratic culture, two issues are important here: the Church's approach to past injustices, and the Church's political relationships in the present and the future.

5.1 Remembering the past

A key issue that post-Communist individuals and organisations have had to address is the way they cope with, and address, the injustices of the past.¹⁷

In the Communist era the Churches were victims by default. Their occasional cooperation with the regime can largely be explained by their simple wish to survive.

Both the Hungarian and the Czech clergy remember the decades spent under Communist rule as a time of martyrdom; at times they have used the memory of these decades for political capital. The fate of Catholic Churches under Communism was, however, far from homogeneous. Various Communist governments pursued various policies, ranging from suppression to tolerance and even co-optation. The Czech Church stood at one end of this range: the suppressed; the Hungarian Church stood at the other: the coopted.¹⁸

Originally the two Churches were attacked with a similar ferocity. The Churches' property was confiscated, the orders were disbanded, the leaders imprisoned and there was a general effort to present religion, and particularly Catholicism, as a backward, reactionary, and politically subversive ideology. In Hungary in the first years after the second World War the Catholic clergy was particularly radical, and certainly so in comparison to other religious

¹⁶Bishops Conference. Section 32.

¹⁷Bruce Ackerman has argued the importance of resolving inter-regime conflict for the consolidation of democracy, and for the determination of peace in the new order. *The Future of Liberal Revolution*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁸Patrick Michel, *Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). Pedro Ramet, (ed) *Religion and Nationalism in Ukraine*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press.)

organisations, in its opposition to the regime. Cardinal Mindszenty, for example, threatened excommunication to anybody who cooperated with the government's plans of nationalising the Church schools. The regime answered with ruthless measures. The persecution of the priests continued for two decades unabated. After Mindszenty's imprisonment the clergy regarded the survival of the Church as its main mission. The leaders of the Church, either because they were blackmailed, threatened, co-opted, or simply realistic, accepted close cooperation with the authorities as the only possible strategy, and by the 1960's and 1970's the signs of confrontation between the Church and the Government had largely disappeared. The more radical groups could not articulate their preferences. They were opposed by formidable enemies: the Communist state, the bishops, and from the 1960's onwards even the Vatican, which had radically changed its policies towards the Communist states and achieved reconciliation at the elite level, culminating in the visit of Janos Kadar to the Vatican in 1977.

A new wave of dissent began in these years against the Communist regime, but it had little to do with the clergy. Disillusioned Marxists, typically of atheist, and often Jewish background, were in the avant-garde of this opposition. Most clergymen saw a threat in these new initiatives. They were concerned that the relative tolerance that developed in the Kadar regime would be shaken, and that social peace would give way to renewed political conflict. They saw nothing in common between themselves and the new democratic opposition. In any event, there was little potential for a sympathetic alliance; the new oppositional forces had explicitly endorsed the cause of unconventional religious communities, and showed sympathy towards the rival groups within the Church opposing the official Catholic line.

One may claim that the Church had become a conservative, status quo force within the regime, while at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, continuously embodying the most visible ideological challenge to it. The clergymen could feel they were the victims, even the martyrs of the atheist regime, while at the same time sitting in the parliament, praising the Socialist progress, and cooperating with the authorities against troublemaker democrats.

The situation in Czechoslovakia was very different. The distinguishing experience of the religious there in comparison to those in neighbouring countries was in the degree of religious oppression they suffered. Czech Bishops lived under a regime that, since 1968, regulated and subjugated the Churches (in particular the Catholic Church) to a greater extent than in Hungary. In Czechoslovakia, there was substantial resistance to the state authorities and a large underground Church existed. This was not the case in Hungary, where the Church

had a more amicable partner in the Government than most other Eastern European Churches had. The state invested energy into recruiting the Church into its camp, offering considerable concessions.

In sum, the Hungarian experience was predominantly one of accommodation, an accommodation that ensured that Bishops and clergy were able to maintain their clerical circles and live their lives largely within a private religious sphere. This contrasts greatly with the Czechoslovakian case where clerical interactions were severely restricted. Indeed, at a time when Church-state relations across Eastern Europe were improving, Czechoslovakia was "distinctly out of step with its Communist neighbours". The Western press noted that "Czechoslovakia's Communist regime has strenuously escalated its campaign against the Church – especially the Catholic- and its followers. [There has been] a systematic tightening of administrative controls ...barring the clergy from carrying out its normal spiritual functions and rejecting the appointment of Bishops to long vacant dioceses".¹⁹ In contrast to the Hungarian clergy, those in the Czech Catholic Church who were opposed to Communism found themselves living their lives predominantly through alternative organisations and networks and not within the Church itself. Many of today's Czech Bishops had their licenses to practice as priests rescinded by the Communist state and were consequently forced to seek normal employment. Priests were notoriously assigned some of the most unpopular jobs under Communism. Some of today's key figures within the Church were imprisoned for periods of time ranging from a few months to 15 years. Others participated in the underground religious networks, and others again in the anti-Communist resistance - Charter 77 and Vons (the Organisation for the Unjustly Repressed). O'Mahony has detailed the way in which these alternative living experiences - in particular that of living and working with atheists and dissidents, secular and lay people - had a strong formative influence on Czech Bishops encouraging values of tolerance, plurality, and public mindedness.²⁰

The different experiences of the clergy in Czechoslovakia and Hungary during Communism is one explanation for differences in how the Churches in both countries regard the issue of addressing the injustices of the past. In Hungary, the Catholic clergy strongly opposes any initiative that would lead to the disclosure of information on the links between priests and the Hungarian Communist secret police. Other mainstream denominations are also

¹⁹*The Irish Press*, 26 July 1972.

²⁰Joan O'Mahony, *Social Capital, Democracy and Religious Elites in the Post-Communist Czech Republic*. (Political Studies Association Conference, 2003). [http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2003/Joan % 20O'Mahony.pdf](http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2003/Joan%20O'Mahony.pdf)

opposed to compulsory lustration, but they often encourage their officials to turn to authorities for clarifying documents. In contrast, the Catholic bishop Andras Veres argues that for the believers it is not earthly justice but the judgment of God that is important.²¹ Peter Erdo, the new head of the Catholic Church also claimed that lustration is unnecessary on the grounds that the clergy are aware themselves of who collaborated.²² In general, the principal position on the issue, accepted by the large part of the political elite, is that priests differ from journalists, politicians or economic leaders in that they belong to an institution whose autonomy is protected by the Constitution. Therefore sorting out sensitive issues such as cooperation with the dictatorship should be left to the Church itself. The very fact that in the Catholic Church officials are not removable, unless the Holy See decides so, makes the implementation of the lustration mechanism difficult anyway.

Given the extent to which the Communist party pervaded all aspects of society, in the Czech Republic there was, initially, strong support for Lustration. Yet, the sheer number of secret police files, and the difficulty in trusting the police's account of who collaborated or not, has brought the workability of screening mechanisms into disrepute. In addition, political parties such as the KSCM (Communist Party) and members of the Social Democratic Party have pushed for an end to the Lustration law. Against this, the Catholic Church, while recognising the technical difficulties with the Lustration Law, has broadly supported it. In their Social Letter, attention is paid to the elements of the Church who collaborated with the regime, and the letter calls on the importance of reflecting on this and on subsequent divisions within the Church. Indeed, the problem for many in the Church is not any undue concentration on the role of the Church under Communism, but rather the readiness of the public to forget the role of the dissidents - including the dissident clergy. Leading dissidents such as Bishop Vaclav Maly are however frequently approached by the press to comment on cases dealing with communist injustices. A typical comment from Maly is seen in his reaction to the High Court's rejection of a case of treason relating to the 1968 Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, Maly commented: "It is very bad when one says, 'The past is the past.' ... I am against revenge, obviously, but ... it is not a matter of going back to the past, but to show that we respect justice. For this reason, I am in favor of punishment." "Many judges" he added "are connected with the past regime, and the courts work very badly."²³

²¹*Nepszabadsag*, 3 September, 2002.

²²*Magyar Hirlap*, 20 December, 2002.

²³The Prague Post, 22 October 1997.

5.2 Towards the Present and the Future

The tendency to emphasise human rights and religious freedom is present in the discourse of both Churches. This is more so, however, in the Czech Republic, where priests involved in the anti-communist movement are now in key positions in the hierarchy of the Church, where they can influence its public face. For example, the team who discussed the content of the 2002 Social Letter was designed expressly to include people with “wide life experience..those who were political prisoners in the 1950s and the 1960s, and active participants in the Church dissent of the 1970s and the 1980s”.²⁴

The language of the Hungarian Church is more heavily influenced by its present alliance with the political right. Accordingly, in Hungary, along with a human rights discourse, the Catholic Church also speaks a conservative language of nationalism, moral conservatism, anti-liberalism, traditionalism, and anti-Communism. Nevertheless, in comparison to the Hungarian right, the Church's stance is moderate. When, for example, the Christian Democratic Party adopted a radical right rhetoric and allied itself with extreme right movements, the clergy distanced itself from the Party. Nor did the Church support radical anti-Communist programs; this was understandable, perhaps, given its previous co-optation into the regime. While the Church was welcoming the clerical inclinations of right wing politicians, the kind of ‘unmistakable theocratic impulse’²⁵ that could be observed in Poland, and in some occasions in Croatia²⁶ was largely absent in Hungary.

In spite of its pro-Habsburg tradition, Hungarian Catholicism is characterized by a robust nationalism. The common nationalist orientation was probably a more important factor in gluing the Church and the right together than the privileges provided by the right wing governments.²⁷ Many clergymen, together with right wing politicians, see Hungary as the site of a battle between two ideologies, the Christian and the liberal. Liberalism is associated with cosmopolitanism, Marxism, materialism, atheism, consumerism, and anti-clericalism. By

²⁴ Czech Bishops Conference.

²⁵ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Whose Democracy? Nationalism, Religion, and the Doctrine of Collective Rights in Post-1989 Eastern Europe*. (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 1997), p.97.

²⁶ Anna Maria Gruenfelder, Anna Maria 2000. “The Catholic Church among Croats” in *Central European Review*. Vol. 2. No 19. (2000). <http://www.ce-review.org/00/19/gruenfelder19.html>

²⁷ For example, the official Catholic weekly gave the following reason why it professed a preference for the outgoing right wing government. "This government gave priority to the interests of Hungary over the interest of international capital, it boosted the economy, protected Hungarian land, brought to the forefront the valuable traditions of the nation, [and] supported the Churches that support the humanity in the people. *Uj Ember*, April 28, 2002

supporting this discourse,²⁸ the Church contributes to the particularly high level of polarization found in Hungary.

Despite pressure from various circles inside and outside the Church to do so, the Hungarian clergy did not issue a declaration analyzing and condemning antisemitism in Hungary. But it did issue public statements supporting the policies of the Orbán government concerning the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries.²⁹ The explanation of the different level of activity in these two cases lies partly in the fact that the first issue is seen in the Hungarian context as benefiting the left, while the second is seen as helping the right. In other words, the Church's behaviour is attributable to the fact that it has a right-wing agenda and is – both emotionally and in terms of its interests - attached to the right wing parties.

The clergy is, of course, delighted to hear that right wing politicians intend to build a "Christian Hungary". As bishop Spanyol acknowledged, there will one day be a Christian Hungary, but that requires the co-operation of Churches and the political powers.³⁰

The Hungarian Church's relative conservatism is not surprising. Before the war the Catholic Church was a deeply traditionalist institution. And, during Communism, the Church became in many ways more, and not less traditionalist. Its clientele was aging, rural, uneducated, and culturally isolated. As a defense against persecution "a special kind of escapism was developed by glorifying the past, by referring to eternal and unchangeable values and ideals, and by condemning the present ...the only stable basis of identity Christians could refer to was their tradition."³¹ The alliance with the right after 1989 has kept the Church on this traditionalist track.

In both the Czech Republic and Hungary, social concerns feature prominently in the public statements of the Church. While critics often complain that the Church neglects the poor in its daily activities, the social views of the clergy happen to be rather radical: criticising privatization and free market capitalism, for example. In the face of the dominant

²⁸Pal Bolberitz "Church in a pluralist world", *Jel*, January, 1995 and Interview with Pal Bolberitz "The chance of Christian humanism", *Új Ember*, 10 April 1994, For a typical opinion concerning the difference between communism and liberalism see the interview with the Salesian monk Fr. Halasz "Liberalism is everywhere an enemy of Christian faith. Its impact is larger than that of communism. Communism was an open enemy of Christianity, while liberalism penetrates the soul of the young people slowly, almost unnoticed." *Új Ember*, 27 January 2002.

²⁹Zsolt Enyedi, "The Contested Politics of Positive Neutrality in Hungary" in: John Madeley and Zsolt Enyedi (eds.) *Church and State in Contemporary Europe. The Chimera of Neutrality*. (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 165.

³⁰*Magyar Nemzet*, 6 December 1999.

³¹Miklos Tomka, "Hungarian Post-World War II Religious Development and the Present Challenge of New Churches and New Religious Movements," in Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (eds.) *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*. (Krakow: Zakład Wydawniczy 'Namos', 1997) 203-233, p. 230.

technocratic anti-welfare agenda in the Czech Republic, the emphasis the Church has placed on social issues takes on an added importance, in comparison to Hungary where the Church is just one voice among many calling for more attention to welfare. Ironically, in Hungary these views of the Church bring it closer to the right, and not to the left, since the political right is often associated with statist and populist economic demands. The similarity of values between the right and the Church surfaced during the 2002 electoral campaign. After the lost first round of the elections Orbán announced "If the Socialists were the ones to form the government, then in fact the big capital and the financial capital would govern the country". Five days later in a mass broadcasted by the public radio Bishop Papai concurred "...we wouldn't like if the international faceless capital, the stock exchange and the banks could shape the future of our country".³²

Despite the radical impulses in many of the Church's public statements, there is also a conservative dimension, but this is so to a much greater extent in the Hungary than in the Czech Republic. Both the letters published by the Churches - the Czech Church's Peace and Good: A Letter on Social Issues in the Czech Republic, published in 2001, and the Hungarian Catholic Church "For a More Just and Solidaristic World", published in 1996, received a very positive public reception, and were praised for their humanistic spirit, and for their address to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. At the same time, in Hungary, liberals criticized the circular's anti-individualistic tone, the preference for the patrimonial characteristics of traditional family structure, and the neglect of women.³³ In the Czech Republic, however, while the Church emphasises the importance of the family, this is combined with support for gender equality within the home. The Social Letter notes:

The idea that the work concerns mainly men and the family concerns mainly women *is not justified*. It is up to men to realise their new roles which they are to take up in a modern marriage. An increasingly flexibility of roles and equality in partnership contributes to creating better relations in family life.³⁴

The Churches moral conservatism was also evident in their protests against the abolishment of legal discrimination against homosexuals over the age of consent. However, in the 1999 encyclical "For happier families" the Hungarian Church argued that alternative forms of families should not be persecuted and in general called for more tolerance, but it also called on the media not to show homosexual relations in a positive light and protested

³²Új Exodus, 25 May, 2002

³³János Kis 'With Liberal Eyes' in *Magyar Narancs*, 26 September 1996.

³⁴Czech Bishops Conference, section 50

against allowing homosexual couples to adopt children. Similarly, the Czech Church was adamantly opposed to a 1998 bill on homosexual partnerships that would have given same sex couples the same rights as married couples. Nevertheless, their opposition was expressed in tolerant tones; the Church called for 'respect and delicacy' when approaching the issue of homosexual partnerships.³⁵

In both the Czech Republic and Hungary, ecumenical relationships are strong. By maintaining generally good relationships with the other traditional Churches, the Catholic clergy contributes to tolerance and stability. Politically the most significant ecumenical aspect is the cooperation with the Jewish community. Given the widespread anti-semitism that characterized the Church before the war and the fact that anti-semitism continues to be a political force especially in Hungary, the symbolic gestures between the two "Churches" carry a very important message. Similarly, the fact that the Church regards the care for the Roma among its priorities, contributes to the increasing level of tolerance. Indeed, in the Czech Republic, the Church is one of the strongest groups to speak out against racism, and has issued numerous circulars criticising racist attitudes in the Czech Republic. The stance of the Catholic Church had drawn the attention of the European Union. Commissioner Van den Broek commented that improving the position of the Romanies was regarded by the Union as of key importance to the Czech Republic's membership. He remarked, "we value the role of the Church in the integration of Romanies", and added "in general I think that the main participants in the civic society, and the Church is undoubtedly one of them, play a great role in informing the public, highlighting the standards and values that unite us in the EU."³⁶

The most interesting combination of discourses is observable in connection with how the Church presents its own grievances. Instead of confining itself to one particular approach, it maintains parallel arguments: sociological, historical, democratic, metaphysical, and utilitarian arguments. Historical justice, religious freedom and the rights of religious taxpayers are the main rallying cries, often mixed into particular combinations. The major rights of churches, such as their full autonomy, their privileged status in relation to other social organisations (full state financing of social, health and educational services provided by churches, for example), and the special treatment of church schools compared with private schools all have an, at least, double legitimisation. One argument is based on the modern principle of freedom of religion while the other on the claim that the church was established

³⁵Czech News Agency (CTK) 26 March 1998.

³⁶Czech News Agency (CTK) 26 May 1996.

by God, and this is therefore a reality *sui generis*, on equal footing with the state.

The combination of the two discourses, one based on democratic rights and the other on historical and metaphysical peculiarity is apparent in the debate that broke out in Hungary in 2002 between the large established churches, particularly the Catholic Church, and the new left wing government. The Government regulated the right of churches to provide basic health and social care such as pension homes. These provisions receive complete state finance, so an agreement with local government authorities was stipulated as a precondition before the churches could set up their services. The clergy argued that, in line with the 2001 decision of the previous government, churches have a right to provide these services. They claimed that it is unconstitutional to place churches at the mercy of local politicians, particularly since these politicians have an interest in providing low level services themselves, instead of transferring money from their budget to churches. The bishops, together with the right wing politicians, also claimed that the newest regulations deprive citizens from receiving basic services in religious institutions. As Bishop Andras Veres put it the citizens' rights are violated, in spite of the fact that "under democratic circumstances people must have equal rights, irrespective of worldview... [the] state must grant the right to each tax-paying citizen to choose which institution should provide for her certain basic services".³⁷

As follows from the "citizens' rights" approach, the Church claims that if the state supports its own educational and welfare institutions (such as schools and hospitals) more than those of the Church's, then it places a double tax burden on religious citizens, who pay twice for basic services. Such a policy would also curtail the freedom to choose between service providing organisations with varying ideological backgrounds. In these instances then, fundamentally liberal arguments are being used to strengthen the privileges of a conservative institution.

The position of the Church described above rests on two assumptions. The first is that self-financing is not a possibility. The usual argument is that civil society is not strong enough in Hungary to maintain churches, that the culture of donation is missing. The problem with this argument is that in the long term it may perpetuate the weaknesses of Hungarian political culture. The second assumption is that the churches must have a different status than other civic organisations.³⁸ Bishop Veres has explicitly protested against churches being

³⁷*Új Ember*, 2 February 2003.

³⁸Note that in the Czech Republic church schools are also sharply distinguished by law from private schools.

treated like other organisations, pointing out that the Constitution and the Act 4 of 1990 gives special status to churches, implying that their function should not depend on agreement with political or other organisations whose interests are different to those of the Church. While civic organisations in general may or may not be supported by the state in their provision of health services churches should automatically receive this support, as they do in their provision of education.³⁹

From the point of view of democratic consolidation, it is probably fortunate that references to democratic norms have such a high prominence in the discourse of the Church. The title of an interview with bishop Andras Veres on welfare participation of churches is typical in this regard: "Not money, but democracy is at stake" He claimed in the interview that "the connection between state and Church is not a matter of money ... the issue is not money, but democratic rights ... it simply devolves from the very nature of this thing that money, and duties of financing is linked to that".⁴⁰ An equal concern for democratic freedoms and autonomy is evident in the Czech Republic. The restitutions are important, Cardinal Vlk has consistently argued, because "in the past, the Church has learned how dangerous it is to depend on the State, on the political power... We want to be free. So we have to find our own finances".⁴¹

The "democratic" discourse has its own dangers, in so far as it is used to defend a particular configuration: the absence of public surveillance over institutions that are treated in many respects as state organs, sharply distinguished from other civic groups. Additionally, the Church's potential as a prototype for other civic organisations is somewhat undermined when it persistently attempts to differentiate itself. For the Church, on the other hand, frequent reference to democratic norms and to the Church's social functions is very important in a climate in which its financial claims - whether justified or not — were often met with hostility by many people. Though Eastern Europeans tend to see less clearly the link between their personal tax burdens and the government's expenditures, economic hardship raised their sensitivity to the new financial burdens. The packaging of these demands became, therefore, a very important issue.

Finally, the Church fits into the modern discourse by downplaying its missionary ambitions and highlighting instead the numerous public services that it provides. By denying,

³⁹ *Új Ember*, 27 April 2003.

⁴⁰ *Új Ember*, 2 February 2003.

⁴¹ Interview with Cardinal Vlk, transcript in Esras Archives. (Dublin: Esras Film Company, 1993).

however, that these services may play a role in ideological competition, and by demanding a higher status for the Churches than for other organizations, the Church can also maintain an advantage over non-religious and anti-religious organizations.

7. Conclusions

The Eastern European churches have been oppressed by undemocratic modern regimes for a half a century. Surviving these difficult years, they are struggling to find their role in a democratic and also modern context, and they realize that this brings with it a new set of challenges. The particular role the Catholic Church has played in the post-Communist years was shaped by the experience of the clergy under Communism, the extent to which the post-Communist party system was, and continues to be, polarized on clerical issues, the degree of state control over the Church, and the balance of power between conservative and progressive elements within the Church.

On the whole, the Czech and Hungarian Catholic Churches have made, and continue to make, a substantial contribution to the development of democratic norms. Certainly, they may not be typically liberal, they are, for example, critical of the free market and they have a definite commitment to traditional morals. Nevertheless, these non-liberal tendencies are expressed in a profoundly democratic manner. First, they respect the 'rules the game' that are the mark of political competition in polyarchical regimes. Second, they avoid the kinds of populist or demagogic appeals that have been seen in many other post-Soviet countries. Third, though critical of non-traditional lifestyles, they are tolerant, and sometimes actively so. The Catholic Church in the region proved itself able to combine various discourses and advance its interests as part of a democratic project.

Both Churches contribute to the rapidly developing civic culture in the region, but as has been shown above, within certain constraints. The rhetoric of civil society has penetrated the discourse of the Czech Church to a remarkable extent, but state policies deprive the Church from fulfilling the role of the archetypal civic organisation. The overall fit of the Catholic Church into the spirit of civil society is made more difficult, particularly in Hungary, by its anti-sect rhetoric, and by its striving for greater legal differentiation between Churches and other organisations and among Churches. In heated debates with governments, the Church often attempts to secure its rights by appealing to the authority of international treaties with the Vatican which have a higher status than the decisions of the national

legislature. This unique possibility sets the Catholic Church apart not only from various organizations of civil society but also from other Churches. An even more serious concern stems from the lack of transparency in the Church's operations in Hungary. Separation from state is sometimes interpreted as immunity from any degree of accountability, whether that concerns revealing financial matters or the presence of Communist secret police agents amongst the ranks of the clergy.

The differences between the Hungarian and the Czech Churches are obviously rooted in history, as well as in the more recent past under Communism, in the relations between national identity and Christianity, and in the diverging attitude of the political elite. But, as the analysis above has shown, the legal arrangements of Church status may also play an important, and somewhat paradoxical, role. The Hungarian state has been keen on granting maximum autonomy, while the Czech state opts for more control through a direct financing model. The Czech state prefers the French model: Churches should rent the property from the state, and should be non-political actors. Hungary is closer to the German model of cooperation and significant church privileges. As a result, in the Czech Republic the existence of state surveillance pushes the Church towards an emancipatory struggle with the state. In Hungary, however, the more generous arrangements have provided the Church with more confidence and with different enemies: the new religious movements and the left that sympathizes with them. More liberal conditions seem to have led – or at least be associated with – more conservative or right-wing Church discourses.

The relevance of cultural issues such as anticlericalism in party-competition⁴² and the differences between the policies of various governments have made the Hungarian Church highly sensitive to the outcome of the elections. In contrast to Hungary, in the Czech Republic the political scene has been dominated by parties – both the right wing ODS, the Social democrats, and the Communist party - deeply committed to the idea of protecting the state from 'rent-seeking' civic organisations. The higher level of secularization and the anti-Catholic traditions made it easier for Czech politicians to place the Church within this band than it has been in other countries. On the other hand, the participation of the Czech clergymen in the democratic anti-Communist opposition, the weaker position of the Church in society, and the dependence on an often hostile state has produced a more progressive

⁴²See Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski and Gabor Toka. *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation, and Inter-Party Cooperation*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

discourse than the one prevailing within Hungarian Catholic circles, where the nationalist tradition carries a larger weight.

It is difficult to predict with any certainty the future trend in religious discourses in the Czech Republic and Hungary. The issues that the Churches choose to address, and the manner in which they address them will depend to a great extent on what happens in the political sphere, on what new political alliances emerge or die, and on what their attitudes to civil society and religious organisations will be. However, one major factor, the impending EU accession, suggests that there may be increasing convergence. The build up to the accession has had its effects both on the Churches and on the political parties. For example, the Archbishops and bishops of the East and Central European countries have organised a year long series of meetings that addresses EU accession, and has resulted in common pastoral letters between the Churches in the region.

The decision of the Holy See to appoint in 2003 a relatively young academic as the new primate of the Hungarian Church may very well indicate the arrival of a more modern, cosmopolitan and moderate rhetoric. In the Czech Republic the eventual retirement of many of the Church leaders who were socialised in the opposition movements to Communism may result in a change in a more conservative direction. But all these shifts of emphasis will happen within a fundamentally democratic discourse.