

ON INTER-CHURCH DIALOGUE IN HUNGARY - CURRENT SITUATION

Angela Ilić

Angela Ilić, a free-lance journalist and part-time lecturer at the Novi Sad Theological Faculty is a Hungarian citizen who had been living in Belgrade, Serbia with her husband Luka, until they started further studies in Philadelphia in 2006. Her master's thesis on church-state relations in Serbia (Catholic University of Leuven, 2004) was published in REE in 2004-05. In this presentation at the CAREE conference in November 2006, she focused on Hungary which she visits regularly.

I am originally from Hungary, but I spent the last several years with my husband living and working in Serbia. I am going to give just a very brief report on current events in Hungary, on what is taking place in the field of ecumenical relationships. I cannot avoid mentioning the current political situation, because it has been in the news in recent months, so I want to weave it a little bit into this presentation, to show how that affects the churches.

In general when one thinks of Hungary, this is what comes to mind: If you have studied the recent history of Eastern Europe, you will probably think that in a lot of ways Hungary has been a very positive place for encouraging ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and also for playing a part in peacemaking – not only within its own boundaries, but also in surrounding nations. One can think of initiatives that have taken place, particularly from the 1990s onward, often bringing together different warring factions from the former Yugoslavia, bringing them out of their own context, into Hungary, into a more neutral place. Several conferences and workshops like that have taken place in recent years. Of course for those of us living in Serbia, we often look to Hungary and think, “Oh, I wish we had such opportunities here in this country as well.” But of course it is far from a completely rosy situation.

We must acknowledge that Hungary does have a very long tradition of recognizing its religious plurality. This year we remembered the 400th anniversary of the peace treaty of Vienna (1606), which was one of the first legal documents accepting religious pluralism, and giving equal religious rights to a variety of Christians in Eastern Europe. So there has been this tradition, perhaps more so than in other countries, of knowing about others, and knowing about our differences. Looking at the present religious makeup of Hungary, the population is about 2/3 Catholic, about 1/3 Protestant. It has been a society that has recognized that there are those people out there who are different from us, but we can all still contribute to the greater good of the country. I think that is a very big strength.

The Hungarian Ecumenical Council was established in 1943 and has been active since then. Of course, times have changed now, and I think that is one of the big challenges for the churches - how to approach ecumenical relations and their own role in society after the fall of communism, also now that this first transitional period is over. These are some very real questions. One of the issues around which a very large number of religious communities have rallied is religious education. That brings us to the issue of the relationship with the state. As of 2005, the government wanted to cut back on funding that goes to religious schools. Now obviously there were almost no religious schools functioning during communist times, but since the change of regime the churches have jumped back into the role they had held onto very strongly previously. They (re-)opened a lot of their own educational institutions – partly because they were able to get a lot of their buildings back, so that played a big part. But a lot of churches, not just Christian denominations but also the Jewish community, the Buddhists and other religious communities, have taken advantage of this. They have really been focusing a lot of their efforts on education. So when the government decided to reduce the financing of religious schools, a lot of these religious communities rallied around the issue and actually began petitioning the government. Of course it is often in the face of adversity that some kind of unity or cooperation is formed. But nonetheless, it was very encouraging to see that denominations we would not otherwise see working together recognized that this was a common interest for all of them. Unfortunately this saga continues, because in November 2006 other decisions were taken by the government. Even though they had consulted religious communities, apparently they decided to go ahead and initiate further cutbacks. This is one of the issues the churches are facing: how to fulfill their role within a changing society. Obviously education is very important, not only because it is a financial issue, but involves rethinking one's role, about how you can exert an influence in society.

Hungary has also been involved in trying to help other nations – not only in the field of ecumenical or inter-religious dialogue, but also by just providing basic help. The Hungarian Ecumenical Organization is an example of that. Ever since it began in 1991, it has been very active in neighboring countries and beyond, in sending humanitarian aid and uniting a lot of different denominations together for reaching out and helping those in need.

This year we remembered the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. There was a long list of ecumenical events organized around that commemoration, which culminated in an ecumenical service in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Budapest. There was also a

very important conference, held in Budapest in mid-September, and that was the meeting of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. Representatives from all over Europe attended. Even the highest local representative of the Hungarian Catholic Church participated in some of those meetings. Those are very positive signs.

Another issue is the church's political involvement. Of course no one can answer what is right to do and not to do since different churches in Hungary have different traditions as to how they react to certain political events or how far they go in taking sides in a conflict or a certain situation. I think I can safely say, and I have read several of the press statements, that probably most of the churches condemn the violence that has taken place in recent months – we could see people protesting in the streets against the government, and some clashes took place with the police. The violence was something that several church leaders publicly condemned. But of course, the question always is of finding that fine line between staying neutral and getting too involved. I think maybe the Hungarian Reformed Church was an interesting example of that. They very clearly took a position on a previous issue, on December 5th of 2004. There was a referendum held in Hungary about whether to give Hungarian citizenship to those Hungarians living in neighboring countries – in other words, to members of the Hungarian minorities in Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, etc. The Hungarian Reformed Church was actually very clear in its position of being *for* this referendum, and for a “yes” vote. So much so that when they lost and the people turned down this proposition, the Hungarian Reformed Church felt that they somehow had to pay for the mistake they made. So this year when they organized the yearly world-wide meeting of Hungarian Reformed Christians, which is a tradition that they have been doing for several years now, it was the first time that they refused any government funding for that event. They felt that this was not correct in light of what they had done regarding the referendum. It was the first time that they actually side-stepped any government financing and tried to raise the money themselves.

So those are just some small examples, but I think in general, one of the main issues for the churches and religious communities is trying to figure out their roles in society, and particularly, as they are increasingly taking on specific societal responsibilities. I mentioned education already, but a lot of the religious communities are also very involved in other forms of social work, having centers for mental hygiene, for counseling, for old people and children, orphanages and things like that. Obviously that means increased interfacing with the government as well. I think some of those questions of how they can best do that have not

been answered, so I think that is one of the challenges that lies ahead of them.

Regarding the American involvement, I will offer just a few words – I am in no position to pass any kind of judgment. One of the things I have observed is that Americans have been very instrumental in a lot of things that have taken place within Hungary and also outside of it, alongside the involvement of Hungarian religious communities. What has happened is that it has almost become too much of a good thing. Because today Budapest is a fairly international city, you can get by with only English to a large extent, and a lot of services exist just for expatriates. What one can observe is that we have actually seen a huge increase in our missionary community, which is a very good thing, but I think a lot of people find it difficult to resist the temptation of living inside that English-speaking bubble. So what I have observed personally, but what Jim Payton has already said about learning the culture, learning the history, and learning at least some of the language, really makes a difference. Because now it is easy to get by without knowing the local language – and Budapest is not the only city like that in Eastern Europe, where you can live a very nice life as a foreigner, and you never really have to touch the local culture in your everyday life. So I think there is definitely a trap that anyone who wants to get involved and make a difference should avoid.