

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIP IN CHANGING SOCIETY

by **Josef Hromádka**

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There are few Reformed churches in Europe which had to be preoccupied in depth and adequately with the problems of social responsibility of Christians in today's world to the requirements of theology to the degree that the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren [hereafter ECCB] had to deal theologically in the last forty years. I have in mind a remarkable struggle carried on at general assemblies for our church. The impulses to deliberate over the social responsibility of Christians did not always result from the inner sources of theology itself, which should assuredly not neglect any sphere of life. The impulses occurred largely due outward changes and transformations, which took place after the World War II, after the defeat of fascism not only in our country but in a wider European context.

Germany, totally vanquished and broken down, became aware of the fact--at least in the works of some of its church and theological representatives--that the debt of theology was exceedingly great. Germany learned how dangerous or even fatal it is when the relationship of theology to the world, namely to the sphere of social responsibility of Christians, has not been theologically coped with and is not voiced as a witness. No doubt, the legacy of Barmen was an important and bright chapter in the way of the Church but it was the one and only quite isolated declaration in the great German nation, which had the imprint of the Christian heritage.

In that atmosphere of post-war years, the Church and theology were seeking a new relation to the world and their responsible place in society, which was being newly established. The participation or absence of Christians in social events was a theme which concerned nearly each of the supreme bodies of the ECCB--General Assemblies. A serious problem was the fact that the Church and theology offered their message to the transformed social scene rather late, behind the times, often within the framework of a timorous and marginal social position.

The question of the relation of a Christian and the state and of a Christian and the society is a permanent question of his faith and life. For a Christian the legitimacy of the state is based on the state's function to organize human activities and thereby make possible a relatively peaceful coexistence where a coercive force is necessary for achieving a relatively peaceful coexistence. "First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." (I Tim. 2:1-2). The existence of a coercive force has its justification in the reality of human sin. Sin means an inner incapability of the person to live according to God's order, "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mt 22:37-39). But sin does not release the human being from the ability to understand the necessity of living in an order. On the contrary, all human activities are possible only on the condition that the human being discovers the orders and creates them him/herself. But these orders--being created in the presence of sin--are always relative and cannot serve as orders in their fullness.

In the social sphere they need to be realized by social compulsion. In the state this compulsion is carried out by police, the judiciary, and the military, which are organized specially for this purpose. They are provided with necessary sanctions, and their task is to protect the order by the embodiments of state sovereignty and to give protection against an attack from outside.

On the one hand the state creates these orders by itself. On the other hand it also sanctions others, which came into being without the state's contribution. With the increasing complexity of civilized life the state tends to organize wider and wider spheres of life. In this tendency there is a hidden danger that the state may exceed the bound of its legitimate commission. Instead of being a mediator of relatively peaceful human coexistence, it becomes an aim for itself. Through such a substitution of the aim by the means, the state becomes a master of life, not its helper, while the human being, who should be the purpose of the state fellowship, becomes its means. In order to avoid that, a responsible state must set certain limits to itself.

Naturally the state creates orders and confirms their validity in the economic, social, political, and cultural fields.

1. The Economic Field

Economy is a basic activity of human life for the purpose of biological self-preservation. But the means given for the performance of this function are limited both with regard to original conditions and to human strength. Therefore it is not possible to fulfill this task and to satisfy all needs of the society. The conditions brought about by sin (loving oneself more than God and neighbor) result in the overvaluation of one's own needs to the detriment of our neighbor. The factor of organization, which directs and governs the economy (ownership) is then one of the corollaries of that human violation. Nevertheless it is a factor which is inseparable from the social order of any kind as long as the need of economy lasts (it is the necessity to satisfy the needs with limited means). For thousands of years the institution of individual property was convenient for the functioning of that relative order. But since the rise of the technical civilization this institution became problematic in its function as an order. This is because of the fact that on the one hand masses themselves became problematic and on the other hand an uncommonly immense economical and consequently social power was concentrated in the hands of individual persons who were not capable to connect their power with the obligation to use it responsibly. Therefore, wherever the institution of individual ownership does not perform orderly its functions any longer, there is no doubt about the right of the political power to organize society on the principle of collective ownership, provided that the new society knows how to secure relative peace among people more effectively. The problem of ownership of this or that kind is not linked up for a Christian with the foundations of Christian faith. For a Christian this is only a technical problem, and the preference of the one or the other kind depends on the conditions of the society in question. The Christian cannot provide good biblical grounds for the legitimacy of the one or the other economic order. Both of them are only an inevitable consequence of human violation through a sin, and therefore neither of them can be without struggle. But the Christian is loyal to that organization of ownership to which he/she is bound, and she/he can give biblical reasons for his/her protest against either one of them only if that order is unable to fulfil its function as an order.

2. The Social Field

Human relations are dependent to a certain extent on economic relations of production and consumption, which are practically inseparable. Therefore, with the increasing complexity of economic life and technical development the complexity of social relations increases proportionally. While a primitive economy allows a great degree of self-sufficiency for an individual, the complexity of the economy makes her/him frequently dependent on society. Consequently, the number of organizational and legal interferences in the life of individuals increases incessantly. Law, as a general concept for the state order, provides sanctions to preserve the state, is an indispensable corner-stone of the life of the state. It includes the organization of economic, social, and political relations and is a product of various forces in society. In a decisive way law is the work of state power. This means that state law is a positive law. The state is competent to create the law with the aim of peaceful coexistence without being bound with another demand than that of an order complying best with given conditions. There is no so called natural law with constant and historically unconditioned legal contents. Law is only a functional order, which cannot be connected with ultimate goals of human life. Just like the basic institution of ownership, law is the consequence of human sin. And this simple fact proves its conditioned character, variable to social needs. But the function it discharges requires its stability and authority both by the political power and by the citizens. If the Christian can be responsible for the making of law, his/her duty is to watch over it so that material points of view should not be enforced at the expense of persons. Respect to and for the human being must be the main principle in making laws.

3. The Political Field.

Political power concentrates in itself the life of the state because it organizes the life of the society by means of legislative power. Political power can use in the last instance all the means that are at the state's disposal. If the ownership and legal order are consequences of human violation through the sin, even more so is all power with the attribute of sovereignty under the affliction of sin. However necessary it is, political power remains the most dangerous means that an individual person or a group can seize. That is why effective control is needed on the part of citizens themselves to prevent the state from abusing its power against the citizens' interests. That control used to be exercised by organizing public opinion and with criticism that is independent of the state power. There are historical situations in which the state power becomes alpha and omega and all means of checking its power are liquidated.

If the post-February 1990 government [in Czechoslovakia], after having seized power had proclaimed publicly that it had assumed authoritative power but that it wanted to maximize order and build a better organized

society by abridging citizens' rights but at the same time that it wished to give true, though limited information, it would have reinforced its position better than by pretending democratic orders and attitudes, which were totally absent. The society finally resigned all claims. But the responsibility of the Church is greater still because its utterances were lacking in courage; they were evasive. Theology concentrated on the work in congregations. We feel our guilt as we were contributing to the shadows of our social life instead of helping to create a healthy balance in our society. The stability of new orders does not originate from the decisions of power but from the basic human positions of open social life.

4. The cultural field

The organization of cultural life can also be one of legitimate state functions. The state has a right to organize education through the system of schools which prepares workers for all branches of social functions and educates into being loyal to the state and its social order. Moreover it can organize the conditions of scientific and artistic life with material sources and links up competent institutions. But creative cultural activity is the activity aiming to seek and express truth, which can never be completely grasped and mastered by human spirit. The human being can never be its possessor and can never dispose of it. Truth is therefore a value which can never become a state institution. A legitimate state must never assume the role of an arbitrator as far as truth is concerned. It cannot declare it to be realized either in its institutions or in its ideology. A legitimate state is a mere instrument of truth, because in its legitimate functions it creates the possibilities of such living conditions in which it is possible for the people to search for truth. If the state oversteps these bounds and proclaims itself, its political doctrine and philosophy to be the last or at least undebatable truth, it oversteps the limits of its legitimacy and becomes a totalitarian state.

Our society and church were living under conditions of a totalitarian state for more than forty years. From a political, philosophical, and social view-point it was a sick society. Its components were limited. The churches were also handicapped. Nevertheless even there the biblical verse "God's word is not in prison" (2 Tim 2:9) was reality. The Church, however limited it was, did not give up being a church. But we contributed our share to its present critical state with our lack of courage. New Caesars and Napoleons were able to grow up among us; they were able to dictate and rule. In the utmost theological conception of that situation we talked about "carrying the cross."

The churches had to face the pressure of power and of administration, which kept them within increasingly smaller limits. Moreover we could often hear in our society--directly or indirectly--that the churches, in their activities and even mere existence, represented a residue of bourgeois mentality, which was doomed to a gradual dying away. Besides they were an ideological enemy. That is why they felt that it was necessary to carry on an irreconcilable struggle. Various administrative means were developed into a network of state authorities, i.e. a system of church secretaries who were to bring about gradual extinction of the church. The actual representative and controlling body of the state church policy was the State Security Police (according to the Soviet model). It governed the entire sphere of culture and other spheres as well. That was one of the characteristics of the totalitarian regime.

This administrative and power system was not supported by a judicial but by a political mechanism. Any member of the Communist Party was obliged to fight against those "prejudices." The strategy of that fight had many faces. It was a strange game, without any doubt a dangerous one, which was played by state authorities with our churches.

When I talked about these state methods with my predecessor, Dr. Kejr, he remarked "they are only human beings"; that is people affected by sin, not knowing anything about the power of the Gospel. He pointed out that, "in the underprivileged position, in which we find ourselves, we Christians have a more solid ground under our feet". Here may also be the reason why some of the state functionaries tried to find personal, human relations with the representatives of the church. But they could not oppose their own main purpose--from a Marxist viewpoint--the liquidation of religion and the churches in society. One of the most dishonest methods of their struggle against religion were internal instructions, which the church did not know. Yet the functionaries of state authorities followed these internal instructions in their strategic negotiations with the church.

November 1989 brought a fundamental change. The whole political background of changes in Central and Eastern Europe can be connected with the chain of political, economic, and social errors in all regions that were led and determined by Marxist-Leninist philosophy and limited ideology, resulting from it and absorbed in itself. The churches did not fit in this scheme because of their mere existence. For years the churches were an open challenge to the Marxist regime. In this respect their mere existence was already a struggle with totality.

Told in a biblical image, the time of "Babylonian captivity" is now over. There is time to build. But wisdom requires deliberating on things. We have entered a period which makes many demands on us. We must not succumb to euphoric moods and we want to avoid useless errors, which all newly constituted societies commit.

The tasks which face us are great and numerous. A renewed society and free church must not waste an immense treasure of confidence of our young generation, the confidence which was redeemed in the struggle with manipulative and inaccessible power. That confidence does not dispense us from the task to deliberate and act with competence and sobriety. We find ourselves at important historical crossroads. We hope we shall understand the signs of this period in depth and measure it with the only adequate criterion, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

OUR TASKS

1. We enter a pluralistic society. We would like to build it as an "open, participating society." In such a society the church loses the advantage of an "oppressed" organization or group. In the past the church, practically as the only "public" institution, offered something totally different than the nationalized society. Thus it enlisted the sympathies of many citizens, particularly the youth. It also had the sympathies of those who could hardly conform to the church inwardly. In the new situation it will be necessary to seek and find a sensible and well balanced relation to the transformed society.

2. A citizen's spontaneous task in a democratic state is her/his personal participation in political and social life and sharing the responsibility for it. And this is also a spontaneous task of a Christian, living up to the Gospel and Christ's work, which leans toward the world and is full of judgment and grace, which liberate the human being and the whole creation.

In this commitment, spread both vertically and horizontally, the church itself cannot be attached to any political power. The Gospel and its dynamic core will always evoke a tension between the present state (reality) and promise (eschatological truth). And that very tension will be needed for a responsible way ahead.

3. The church cannot simply count on the fact that all those who were dissatisfied with the fallen regime will be attracted to it. The church of today cannot easily compete for the sympathies of the nation with the program which announces: We Christians are many (the most numerous group of population); we suffered a lot; we have the right to take up the foremost place in the society.

The Roman Catholic Church--on the basis of its inner theological understanding--considers itself to be in its true essence above any society, state. In this situation it seriously thinks the question is that society should not be pervaded by the emphases of the Gospel even in a visible form. It intends to cover up the entire society with the vestment of Christian ideology and to try again to achieve a position of power in it. At this historical landmark such an ambition is understandable. But it forgets two things: a modern state in a democratic society is a secular state and the Gospel does not build structures but relations within all structures and it transforms them from the ground up. It is salt and light, not a skeleton for building a religious systems.

4. In our new situation we cannot content ourselves with traditional forms of church work into which we were practically pushed in the past. Any attempt at a new interpretation of the Gospel outside the confines of the church was stifled. Our guilt is that we finally accepted those restrictions.

Nowadays we have the duty to submit the message of the Gospel to our nation in a way that is adequate to this time; we want to be competent partners in the dialogue of various social and spiritual tides in the new society. The modern human being cannot understand her/himself, and she/he can hardly realize the goals which open for him/her without discovering the treasure of biblical thinking which marked cultural history of Europe. It means that we must create a responsible and participating society, which will not be a mere copy of western democratic states.

In this process of creating a new society the church with its message of the Gospel is an irreplaceable element and instrument. But it must not forget that this spiritual heritage is not its possession. The mission of the church is only to serve the new generations by preaching the Gospel. Here I also wish to stress the important role of theology. The church will urgently need profoundly educated and believing theologians and laity and not mere theological managers who can promptly quote verses from the Scriptures.

5. The church must map out its own terrain again and thoroughly. It must not fall into false pride and the temptation of megalomania. The Gospel is great and powerful. The church is Christ's servant and bride as well.

Particularly we, Christians in Europe, must be aware of old prejudices against the church and of prompt criticism of the regenerating society, which will not respect the church anymore if it tries to seize upon the positions that do not appertain to it. The church cannot play the part of spotless Messiah since it has displayed various failures

and faintnesses. The church can participate in the process of moral renewal of the nation, but only as the one which also strives after its own renewal as a repenting church.

6. This introspection should also include a profound, factual, professional, and sociological analysis. In our country there are areas and regions where the church lives in dispersion. We experience now some euphoric renaissance of many former methods of work. We want to take them up again.

It is necessary to respect the present conditions, the psychology of the nation, to respect the existing state and today's desires and needs of people. The church must keep its balance, humbleness, sobriety, good taste and discretion. All that is not a mere question of strategy. It is a question of principle. It consists in the service to the human being, people and their innermost needs--not in the rule over them.

7. The church must not become a ghetto in the newly organized society. I have known from my own experience that even in free democratic states the church can find itself in a ghetto of its own, being shut off from society if the society does not show any interest in its activities. Nevertheless this [Czechoslovak] society supports the church at least financially and morally. In a ghetto the church represents a spiritual consumption of the values of the Gospel only for itself, and it becomes sterile.

We would like to start our work from the basic units of our church, from the congregations, which are integral parts of their neighborhood. The proclaimed Gospel is a reflex of the present life conditions and the world, not an artificial flower, which decorates the tables of our society, which plans and realizes the projects of future, independent of the Gospel.

But a modern secular person has not stopped being God's creation and God's child sought in Christ. He or she has to know this. This news must reach each person as a good news that sets him/her free. The church with its message cannot break into the inner heart. The gospel is ferment and light; it is not a structure or method.

8. We need to work out a new model of pastoral care. The existing way has its origin in the epoch of Joseph II, and it is based on a parochial ground. We have surely kept up with the modern tides of theology in this field including the important role of psychology. Nevertheless we also wish to learn from your [American] experiences because a sensible work with the human being in the space of her/his innermost ego is important from the viewpoint of the church and its message. But we refuse the sociological trick we often notice in various religious movements: to dupe a person by pushing him/her into a corner so that he/she will finally accept the Gospel. The Gospel is the only force in the whole world which can afford to be only offered. All of God's supremacy is hidden in this fact. We often understand it as God's powerlessness, but this is where the force of the Gospel lies.

9. In our church we try hard to keep the unity in plurality and to minimize the crises of the present time of transition. In the church there have always existed various streams of theology side by side. The same can be told about our country. From the very beginning of the totalitarian regime movements or groups arose in our [ECCB] church, whose reaction to the outward political conditions differed from each other. The leadership of the church usually chose the way of loyalty to the regime. Some members called it collaboration. Responsible church workers considered it inevitable not in collaboration, but in loyalty, which included a whole range of attitudes from passive inactivity to critical standpoints. The groups of frank critics of our society represented a desirable critical voice, which the church as a whole did not venture to risk. The consequences which the preachers in opposition to the regime had to face were hard: losing their state licence to perform active service in the church. It is difficult to pronounce judgments. But it is necessary to confess in repentance that our past was just like this. However, a critical look back must not prevent us from living together in our church with responsibility for today.

Moreover, in new conditions of an open society we will be soon witnesses the fall of the illusion about an ideal unity of the nation, about a non-problematic orthodoxy in the church. We shall have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that a variety of religious groups are developing, which not easily find a common language. History teaches us that the worst form of intolerance is religious intolerance. Absurdly the intolerant, decayed Communist ideology closely resembled and in some cases it was even greater [than religious intolerance].

We wish our church to live in an ideal atmosphere, which could be characterized as unity in variety. Differences in endowments, opinions, and emphases have their justification only in mutual service, not in competition.

10. We need to reach a higher standard of education for the whole society and the church. It is necessary to know much more about the development of European and world thinking. The standard of education has fallen off in our society in the last decades, but it does not mean that schools totally degenerated under the Communist regime. Young people have a lot of information and knowledge, maybe more than before. But they miss the education, a

certain culture of mind. I mean the humanistic dimension and the heritage of Christianity. Christianity with its essence accentuating the irreplaceable value of every human being penetrated European and American culture to that extent that without the new grasping of it humankind can advance in technological and scientific fields, but as for mutual human relations it will get gradually stunted and extinct.

This fact is very important both for the renewal of society in our country and even more in the sphere of the church. The church is to bear the essence of the Gospel and transmit it to every culture and for every generation.

11. At the beginning of the new way in our society the church should not put forward a great number of demands. It is necessary to state priorities and to have a clear conception. After forty years' rule of one ideology we meet with the mentality of people who became used to being ordered and manipulated by the state and its powerful authorities. We will have to learn to live in freedom, which is not arbitrariness, and to make independent and responsible decisions. There are many things that we must plan or ensure by ourselves. There are no obstacles. It is necessary to differentiate between fundamental and minor matters. And thus we should evaluate our forces and set the sequence of tasks according to their relevance and urgency.

12. Theologically, the church living off the Gospel knows that all human striving after truth and righteousness cannot turn away from Christ's rule over the world. It knows that in the end "we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (II Cor. 13:8). World history is a history of difficult, often tragic, but also noble searching for righteous structures and orders of life. That is the desire for truth and righteousness, which is hidden in the human heart, but it is drowned in the power of sin. World history is also the history of its transgressions, of sin, evil, violence, pains, and disappointments. The Gospel--good news for the human being--is the only one which opens human eyes, so that the human being may see the way to salvation and hope. Our church in its witness to our country does not hold in contempt any struggles of the world, that is of our renewed society, for a new order and form. We only want to bring into those struggles the desire for a more profound righteousness, for a more genuine beauty of life, for a closer mutual service, through which the human being will consider her/his neighbor more dignified than her/himself.

It is not "pure ideologies" and "pure religious doctrines" that will be valued in the future of the world and humankind but plain and persevering human responsibilities towards God and of one person towards another for the sake of life, its purposes and aims in all fields.

In our restored society the following missionary motto is considered the most effective: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love for another" (John 13:35). I am sure that in spite of the great distance across the Atlantic Ocean our Christian task is in common. Yours here and ours in our country. I also believe that your ways and witness can be an example and inspiration for us.