

THE THEOLOGY OF THE SERVING CHURCH AND THE THEOLOGY OF DIACONIA IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES IN HUNGARY DURING THE TIME OF SOCIALISM

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Although the title refers to the Protestant churches, I intend to deal in the following mostly with the experiences of the Reformed Church of which I am a member. In the turbulent history of Hungary, the Evangelical (Lutheran) and the Reformed churches, similar in polity, have had common experiences of suffering and fellowship. This is also true of our experiences in the modern time of the "Babylonian captivity" of our churches.

There are many in our churches who believe that the time of Communist rule was one of utter failure and total loss for the Church. I am aware of the failures, losses and betrayals, the after-effects of which have not completely healed even today. Still I am convinced that our experiences in the years of captivity contain elements that we cannot afford to abandon without serious loss to our future orientation. That was Israel's experience in Babylon. In the time of seeming annihilation and abject humiliation, when "died . . . the total religious experience of Israel . . . there was born the only religion of all religions of the world that was essentially not a religion at all, but rather a total revelation of the meaning of life." That was the great gain of the Babylonian captivity. It was also our experience in Hungary, that the meaning of life was granted us in Christ, in a climate of false meanings and meaninglessness.

The "theology of **the serving church and diaconia**" was one of the central issues in the life of the Church during the years of Communist domination. Just at the beginning of the recent liberating changes the new Presiding Bishop of the Reformed Church, Elemér Kocsis of Debrecen, stated in his inaugural address: "This theology--even if it must be corrected by relevant expressions and transformation--is to be continued. The General Synod must help the further deepening of diaconal thinking in the congregations. Today even the Second Vatican Council (of the Roman Catholic Church) speaks about serving church." A little later Lorant Hegedüs, future Bishop of Budapest, promoted the utter rejection of this theology. By and large his opinion has prevailed.

In the following we shall look at the post World War II situation of the churches in Hungary including their social-political context, at the Communist design for the churches, and at the churches' attempts to find their role in that situation. Then we shall consider the impact of the 1956 revolution on the churches. Finally we shall examine the long period of the Kádár era, and the role of the theology of service in the churches' search for their role in the present situation.

1. THE POST-WAR SITUATION OF THE CHURCHES

a. The Social-Political Context

In 1945 Hungary was liberated from German Nazi occupation and from the Hungarian Nazi government brought to power by German intervention. The semi-feudal system imposed on the country at the end of World War I by the then victorious Entente Cordiale, also collapsed. However, the liberation carried out by the Soviet Army was the beginning of another equally inhuman oppression. From twenty-eight years of previous practice, Soviet power came into the country with tested patterns of cruel, long-lasting and efficient control. This strange juxtaposition of liberation and new oppression created an ambiguous situation that lasted until 1948 when the Communist Party illegally grasped power and the country became a one-party state.

Between 1945 and 1948, despite extreme difficulties, Hungary experienced an encouraging reconstruction both of economic and political-social institutions. In 1945 the whole country lay in ruins, deprived of most of its livestock, agricultural and industrial equipment. Even most of its rolling stock was taken away by the victorious Red Army. Yet the reconstruction produced miracles. By mid 1946 stable currency was introduced after a horrifying inflation. At the same time democratic structures were rebuilt. Hungary had had a long history of democratic traditions and aspirations from at least the 13th century on, even though they were often crushed by foreign powers.

This healthy and promising development was seriously hindered from the beginning. The Soviet Secret Service (NKVD, later KGB) began disturbing social and political life immediately. Their intrusion spread and grew more intense, to the point of arresting members of the elected parliament and administration. Democratic

development was continually disrupted until 1948, when the ambiguity ended and the country was brought under straightforward Muscovite Communist rule for the next 40 years. This was the social-political context in which the churches were seeking revival and new ways of mission. We turn now to the state of affairs within them.

b. The Churches Seeking New Ways of Mission

A spiritually devastating ethos, in which elements of rationalism were mixed together with liberal theology in a "quasi-unitarian" theology, prevailed in the Hungarian Protestant churches before the beginning of the 20th century. Signs of revival however could be seen in various forms between the two world wars. The various strands were brought together and surfaced in the post World War II revival movement, which was also influenced by the neo-Reformation theology of Karl Barth and his circle. For a time there was a lively dialogue between revivalists and theologians. The result was that in most congregations inner circles came into being with members praying and acting for the renewal of the whole community. All this prepared the Church for the difficult times that were to come.

Partly alongside of these revival experiences and partly in them, movements arose that aimed directly at structural change, particularly in the Reformed Church, and also at defining the Church's place in the new political-social situation. The Rev. Albert Bereczky, later Bishop of the Danubian Diocese and senior minister of a large church in Budapest, had an important role to play in this movement. He was an influential preacher. He took part in the Hungarian resistance movement against the Nazis and also participated in the evangelistic efforts of post-war years. The main thrust of his activities was, however, to find a role for the Church in the newly emerging society. He was the first, in the knowledge of this writer, to speak about the "emerging vision of the serving church." His basic tenets were that the Church along with the nation was under the judgment of God for having been unfaithful to the Gospel and its social implications. The Church became salt that had lost its savor, due to its accommodation to the unjust society which itself was judged in the apocalyptic events of the last phase of the war. The judgment of God, however, was a gracious one. God gave another chance to the Church to turn to God in order to fulfill its mission. Therefore he said that for him the disastrous end of the war was a real liberation. The Church, in his opinion, having lost its credibility in society due to its failure to witness to Christ and to act on behalf of the poor and the derelict, could not exercise a prophetic function by pointing out evil trends in the new political-social development, but must be present, be with the people, and must learn from the Word among the events. According to his view, part of the authentic prophetic ministry of the Church in socialist countries--which are involved in building a "more just order of human coexistence"--is to speak about its positive experiences in the 'learning process' offered by the new situation, and to contribute toward preserving and strengthening peace. Thus the Church must serve instead of seeking privileges in society.

Bereczky worked in close alliance with János Victor, professor of systematic theology. Victor gave theoretical foundation and elaboration to Bereczky's thoughts. His article, "A kivülről munkalkodo kegyelem" (The grace that works within from outside) summed up his understanding of the new society. God is doing something very important for the world and also for the Church in the modern Workers' (i.e. Communist) Party, and this good must find its way of being effective in the Church. In the contemporary situation the Party and not the Church is God's avant-garde. In other words, what the Communist parties were doing under the sway of the Red Army was regarded as the good thing for humankind. That this amounted to making the Church completely subservient to the powers that be, was the conclusion of many critics.

One should, however, give a more balanced account of Victor's work and influence. Fundamentally he was a sound theologian who had been influenced by Anglo-Saxon theology, including the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and the mission-oriented early ecumenical movement, particularly the World Student Christian Association. Like many others in the Hungarian churches he was also influenced by Karl Barth. It cannot be known with certainty whether he really thought that Communism would build a better world, or spoke about it for tactical reasons. There are many in the Reformed Church in Hungary who feel greatly indebted to János Victor in their theological development and who are able to separate his statements concerning Communism from the rest of his life work.

Victor did not use the term "theology of the serving church". But some, particularly István Szabó, regard him as one of the fathers of this theology. If we use this term to refer to the theological/ideological justification of a positive attitude toward Communist rule, their view is justified. However, the two are not the same. There have been several in the Church in favor of a servile attitude toward Communist power who used different terminology. As for the "theology of the serving church," it suggests something deeper which was very much misused. To these problems we will come back later.

These churchmen, along with a third colleague, Benő Békefi, were, in the early post-war years, leading personalities in an organization for renewal, the Reformed Free Council, which was not identical with the revival movement, although some persons were active in both. Its aim was to bring about structural changes in the Church in favor of presbyterian over episcopal forms and, in church-state relationships, a "free church in a free state." In other words they realized that the Constantinian era was coming to a close and the Church should be equipped with new tools in the new situation. The fundamental problem was, however, that it was not possible to speak with intellectual honesty of a free state in the Hungary of the late '40s or early '60s. The aim of the leaders of the Council was to create a more friendly atmosphere toward Communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. In other words, they worked to get the Church into the Party line.

The ruling Communist Party's relationship to the churches could be characterized as a kind of Caesaropapism, in which Caesar was an atheist. While the Church was trying to find its way in the new situation, the Communists went on building up their apparatus of oppression. A state office for church affairs was organized for the purpose of keeping the church under strict control, to hinder its normal life in whatever way possible, to make it irrelevant, and to push it to the periphery of society before its final extinction. It used secret service methods, even though the Secret Service itself had an office for control of the churches, putting the churches under double control. It used informers and mechanical spying devices as well. It is difficult for historians to gain a complete picture of this office's activities, for it often gave verbal instructions by telephone that were authoritative, and were exactly opposite to what had been put in writing. Some in the Church worked for this office undercover, and joined it openly after the revolution of 1956 was crushed.

2. THE REVOLUTION OF 1956 AND THE CHURCHES

As a result of total frustration the whole of Hungarian society, including the more humane sections of the Party, was set in motion to find a way out of its economic, social and moral misery. Writers and other intellectuals organized debating clubs availing themselves of the few signs of relative leniency during the post-Stalinist period.

The same was going on in the Church. Clergy and laity of all generations came together in half-secrecy to discuss the problem. One such group, of the younger generation, formulated a statement which was adopted by senior churchmen, for the orientation of all who were seeking renewal in the Church. This document was published in Vienna under the title Hítvallo Nyilatkozat (A Statement of Faith). It rejected in clear and simple style, the ideologized pseudo-theology and leadership style imposed upon the people of the Church with methods alien to Reformed principles and practice. Positively it was a confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and a commitment to fulfill the mission he had given to his Church.

At the same time Ervin Valyi Nagy tackled the same problem. In an insightful study he termed the church leadership's theology "applied," the purpose of which was to "justify decisions motivated from outside." In this ideology, he wrote, "God is identical with the Marxist concept of history."

In both cases there was justified fear of the German-Christian theology of Nazi Germany in Hungarian form: history sets the agenda for the churches. It was symbolic that a group of Reformed clergy spent the whole of the--for us--great day of October 23, 1956, in prayer and fasting in a remote country parsonage without knowing what was going on in Budapest.

In those revolutionary days it was a gift of God to participate in the joy of the people. It also gave us an opportunity to organize the Reformed Renewal Movement under the leadership of Bishop László Ravasz and Professor László Pap. The movement received support, despite communication difficulties and later ruthless repression, from most of the parish councils (Presbyteria) of the Church. It flourished until it had to share the fate of all freely organized societies on behalf of the suffering people of Hungary, as the country entered a new phase of Communist oppression.

3. THE KADAR ERA AND THE CHURCHES

a. Crushing the Revolution and Ruthless Military Oppression

As was then well known worldwide but has since been forgotten, the Hungarian Revolution was brought down by the might of the Red Army which, with the cooperation of the puppet regime of János Kádár and the political support of all the Communist governments of the world, executed thousands of people. Other thousands disappeared and two hundred thousand fled abroad. Still, despite the people's suffering and disappointment, it was clear to everyone that Communism had failed for good, even though Soviet power was present with the consent of the free world. Its presence was part of the established world order; it had to be taken as a reality. But the tension of these two elements - the total failure of Communism and the presence of the powerful Soviet Army - was the most

important factor determining the development of Hungarian society during those years.

In this context János Kádár launched his new policy of appeasement, the so-called "goulash (or refrigerator) Communism" which was supposed to turn the country into the "most cheerful barrack in the [concentration] camp." Kádár proclaimed his "who is not against us is with us" principle, which meant in practice for most people to keep out of politics, carry on your work, and live a modest private life with a Trabant and a little garden. On the surface it seemed to work. Most people accepted this compromise. There was some limited freedom of movement, even for foreign travel. Certain elements of the market economy were introduced. A kind of private business (a second economy) developed to a limited degree, suffering Soviet interference now and then.

Thus the lines and limits were fixed. The Party controlled every segment of the life of society. Paternalistic attitudes prevailed. The resistance of many melted away in this cozy but frugal existence. Apart from some clandestine opposition, invigorated by the "Prague Spring" of 1968 on the one hand, and a few successful entrepreneurs in the "second economy" on the other, an attitude of passive reliance on the authorities and surrender of any responsibility for the welfare of society prevailed. Social coherence was negated, save for a few who experienced the community of resistance. In other words the compromise of the Kádár years was immoral; one of the most unsocial societies in history. The people were happy when this system finally fell apart from its inner rottenness, and the resources it inherited and exploited from previous regimes were finally exhausted. But old attitudes are still there and contribute not only to economic and social, but also to moral decay in the country even today. István Szabó sums it up: "Hungary . . . became part of coherent Soviet expansion politics, and so became a colony. . . . Thus we became peripheral to Europe. . . . Europe is unable to do anything with this region" even after the collapse of the regime. What, then, went on in the churches during this period?

b. Theology of the Serving Church as Model for the Church

We must distinguish between the design of the Communist authorities for the Church and what was going on in the churches. In 1993 a Hungarian Communist security officer assigned to control the churches said in an interview with a journalist, "we had the church completely in our hands." That was what he thought. István Szabó is right in stating that the role fixed for the Church was that of "a propaganda front organization to serve the interests of the Soviet Empire." As a teacher of Marxism-Leninism put it, the fact that Marxism and religious belief are irreconcilable "does not exclude the possibility of reaching a common mind and cooperation with believers, even with theologians, in the realization of social progress . . . i.e. upbuilding socialist-communist society." That was the "task" set for the churches by the powers that be.

The Communists made many shrewd calculations. They did not, however, take into account one important factor: the word of God. For them the Church was only a social phenomenon. Sometimes they were perplexed at its endurance over the ages, but they knew nothing of the power behind it. In their obsession with the material, they could not perceive the power of the Word that created the Church and continued to support its proclamation of Christ the savior.

Unfortunately there were people in the Church also for whom the ultimate reality was not the Word of God. If we read many statements by church leaders in the Kádár period, we get the impression that the security officer was right. The Church was in the hands of Party bureaucrats indeed. The Party's tactics included fighting against the Church from outside, trying to prevent people from being active in it, and trying to make the Church rotten within by corrupting people. Some of us who were part of the Church's inner struggle in those days were clear that we had traitors among us. There were also far more people whom we trusted for a time, then the relationship began deteriorating until it was completely broken. And there were some who left us, and then came back.

There were also people whose public statements horrified us, who could be regarded as examples of betrayal and shameful cooperation with the powers, but who on other occasions showed a desire for and a readiness to listen to God's Word. The present writer has come to the conclusion that one must speak dialectically, both about the "theology of the serving church" and about the persons who represented it. It is true that most of the statements about "service theology" were on the level of journalistic propaganda, or of "assertive quasi-theological talk." No serious monograph was written on the subject. Still it was dealt with in various studies and presentations which did have theological foundation.

One should distinguish therefore, within this theology, between political accommodation and reflections directly related to the theology of a serving church. Some church leaders, in praising the Soviet system and exhorting the people of the Church to have a positive attitude toward it, described socialism (i.e. Communism) as the best relative, penultimate good for the people today. It was not, in other words, the ultimate, which is the kingdom of

God. The distinction is fundamental to the biblical and theological witness of the Church as God's servant community, but everything depends on whether it is used to sanctify the existing system or to maintain the creative tension between God's promise and human power-structures.

The struggle over this distinction characterized much of Hungarian "theology of the serving church" during the Kádár years. On the one hand Reformed Bishop Tibor Bartha of Debrecen, Presiding Bishop of the General Synod and Bishop Zoltán Káldy of the Lutheran Church exercised strong leadership in promoting it, to the extent of confusing their teaching and their governing ministries. Positive acceptance of the ruling Communist Party's political decisions was taken for granted and never questioned. Critic István Szabó called their theology "Christology in brackets" because there was no interaction between it and the Communist interpretation of world events. Theology was saved by being neutralized.

On the other hand Bishop Bartha did initiate such bodies as the Collegium Doctorum with the task of working out the inner dynamics of theology interacting with community life and social decision. In spite of ideological restrictions real theological work was done in its various departments, which explains why it survived the collapse of the political regime. Furthermore, Elemér Kocsis points out that the Christological foundation of this theology--participation in the ministry of Christ the servant--is the basis of the service of the Church to the world, and that in working out this basis much help was given by the Biblical and historical research of churches in the rest of the world. It is not true that the servant-character of the Christian life was a "genuine Hungarian discovery," as was claimed. Biblical and systematic studies were done in many parts of the world. In 1961 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches took as the theme of its world assembly, "The Servant Lord and His Servant People".

In conclusion then, what can we learn from this theological-political controversy? Let me suggest the following:

(1) To be a Christian means to be in Christ; having been buried and raised with him, the Christian participates in his life and becomes part of his body along with other Christians. Participation in his life brings a share in the dynamics of that life, which is service, as he came not to be served but to serve. In Christ, God himself--God of God, light of light, very God of very God--came to serve humankind. We are served by him, as he gives us in baptism a share in his death and resurrection. So he engrafts us into his body, which is the Church. Again, he, the bread of life, feeds us on his body and blood in the eucharist. Thus he gives us himself, that we may share in his life and ministry.

(2) This "discovery" was Hungarian only insofar as it was the Hungarian situation that forced the Church to search the Scriptures for a suitable model of survival, life, and mission in an extremely hostile situation. Actually it was a rediscovery of an ancient experience of the Church which had been all-but forgotten in the Constantinian era with the might of the state standing on the side of the Church. The servant image was meant to show how to live in Christ and bear witness to him in a hostile environment. It was based on the early church's vision of the *ebed Yahweh* prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah, which themselves go back to Deuteronomy 32:36 and Psalm 135:14. George Knight, as has been noted, asserts that the time of captivity with its sufferings was decisive for the shaping of the theology of the Old Testament which was carried forward into Christian theology. Later the Constantinian era, with its one-sided emphasis on the image of the victorious Christ shaped after the image of the emperors, made the servant image fade away. Triumphalism in the Church is a typically Constantinian phenomenon, and is a very dangerous one. With the end of Communist rule it is important that we keep with us the form and content of the servant image.

(3) The struggle for new orientation in theology coincided with a renewed emphasis on the significance of the Old Testament for Christian thought, and on the unity of the two Testaments. This brought a new appreciation for the word-deed character of the Word of God who is Christ. If the essence of Christianity is to share in the person of the Word incarnate, the implications for the life, liturgy, and witness of the Church must be drawn. The sacraments--which are fundamentally inseparable from verbal proclamation--come into the center from the periphery where they had been, at least in the life of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Worship will accentuate the unity of word and deed which impels the believer to witness to Christ by--as it were--"living him into community."

(4) These considerations strengthened awareness of the significance of diaconia. Problems arose in defining it to be sure. In the Hungarian contribution prepared for the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968 we read: "The Church of Christ is not bound to any social system, but it has to fulfill its mission in every society." Implied was that this mission, and the service it involved, was to stand by and support the new social-economic, Communist system. It is not clear whether such statements--and they were numerous--were tactical necessities or cynically self-serving. It is, however, absolutely clear that the fundamentally sound theology of the

serving church was misused and abused in various ways. It was falsified and became an ideology, a means of fitting the church into the role allotted to it by the bureaucracy of the one-party state. As such it became a means of oppression. It helped corrupt the thinking and practice of people in the Church and illustrated for despisers outside its corruption and irrelevance. The after-effects of this can be felt even today.

Nevertheless true diaconia grew and was practiced among believers in this time of troubles. To take just one example, it was a wise decision of the Church to develop work among persons with mental and physical disabilities where it had the freedom to do so. Communist authorities believed that the Church would not be built by working among the handicapped. In fact some centers of this diaconia became centers for learning about Christian mission and renewal. This ministry continues and grows today.

Therefore the "theology of the serving church" must be seen and examined dialectically. It did help the Church to find a christological basis for living in a hostile environment, and to maintain and deepen its identity as the Body of Christ in one of the most difficult periods of its history. The sad way it was misused and abused should remind us of the constant possibility that good things can be used for mean purposes. It is true that today the spiritual as well as the economic condition of our churches is deplorable. Yet we have survived the evil intent of one of the mightiest military powers of the world, which intended the final termination of the Church. We have members who have been faithful in the midst of temptations and sufferings. We have a young generation which, looking critically at the past, is ready to take over the responsibility and is carrying on the work of the Church.

In our present struggle to find the place and mission of the Church in an emerging pluralist society, it is critically important that the events of the Communist years be analyzed in a spirit of repentance, humility, and truthfulness. So doing, we can learn the lessons of our experiences, be rid of our sins and failures, and take with us things found right in the eyes of the Lord. The most important lesson to be learned from the "theology of the serving church" is to deepen the christological basis of our faith, and to build ecclesiology and church life in practice on it. This will help us to avoid the temptations of either triumphalism or despair, and thus to find our role and mission among the great crises of humankind as we face the third millennium. During the period under survey here, it was the Gospel that proved to be the power of God for salvation in spite of our failures and weaknesses. For this we can glorify God's name and be thankful.