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Church–State Relations in the New Hungary

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The year 1989 was a historical milestone for the states of Eastern Europe: totalitarian communist regimes suddenly collapsed and the era of democracy dawned. However, the shadows of the old system are still present, and there is always the danger that the ways of the past will slowly creep back.

In the new political situation relations between church and state inevitably underwent profound changes. This paper deals with some of the new developments and problems in church–state relations in Hungary, with particular reference to the Reformed Church.

In the last months of communist power the reformed wing of the ruling Socialist Workers' Party introduced basic changes in church–state relations. The State Office for Church Affairs was dismantled in July 1989. A new 'Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion' was enacted by parliament on 24 January 1990. It stated that freedom of conscience is a basic human right; that the activities of the churches are beneficial for society; that the churches are autonomous organisations and the state shall not interfere in their internal affairs; that the state cannot control or supervise the churches; that ecclesiastical laws do not need state approval; and that the churches may involve themselves in education. The new law rendered the church–state agreements of the communist period obsolete, and they were solemnly cancelled in the spring of 1990.

The 'Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion' placed church–state relations on a new basis, and it opened up new avenues for the churches in the newly democratic society which came into being after nationwide elections in the summer of 1990. Since then the churches have been facing tremendous challenges as they try to rebuild themselves and find a constructive role in the life of the new democratic Hungary.

Clergy who were persecuted under communist rule have been rehabilitated, including the late Cardinal József Mindszenty and Bishop József Grósz of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Reformed Church the late Bishop László Ravasz and Professor László Pap have been rehabilitated together with some one hundred pastors, and Bishop Lajos Ordass and other clergy in the Lutheran Church.

The question of the responsibility of collaborating church leaders has also been raised in the churches. 'Opus Pacis' has been dissolved. Investigations were planned into the activities of the 'peace priests'.¹ In the Protestant churches there were insistent demands that the respective churches withdraw from the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference, and even calls for its dissolution, for it was generally understood that this movement had been a propaganda instrument to promote the cause of the 'Pax Sovietica' among Christians all over the world. First the Lutheran Church withdrew, then the Reformed Church, after having suspended its membership for a while.

This was a sensitive issue, for the president of the CPC was the former Reformed Bishop Károly Tóth. In Hungary, the free churches similarly withdrew from the state-sponsored 'Council of Free Churches in Hungary', which was the state's arm for controlling the smaller Protestant churches such as Baptists, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists and others.

Renewal movements in the Protestant churches aimed to regenerate those churches '*in capite et in membris*'. This inevitably led to demands for the resignation of some bishops and other church leaders on the basis that their election had not been in accordance with church laws; in most cases the state, through the State Office for Church Affairs, had allowed only one candidate to be nominated to the vacancies.

In the Reformed Church there were proposals to end the practice whereby bishops are elected for life and to introduce the office of a moderator with a limited four- or six-year term.² In late 1990 new bishops were elected for six-year terms: Dr Loránt Hegedűs, István Mészáros, Mihály Markus and the incumbent Dr Elemér Kocsis. In the Lutheran Church Bishop Gyula Nagy retired; the new bishops were Béla Harmati and Imre Szebik.³

The 'Theology of Service' and the 'Theology of Diaconia', the official theologies of the Reformed and the Lutheran Churches in the communist era, were severely criticised as theologies of servitude and even collaboration. These politically motivated systems had given a theological basis to unconditional support for the realisation of communist objectives both at home and abroad. They clearly spelled out the superiority of the communist system over all other social systems and urged church people to be unstinting in the building of socialism.⁴ They failed even to mention that in the communist society of the future there would be no place for the church at all. Among the Protestant churches theological pluralism is now established, and a broad spectrum of doctrinal views is on offer, from the conservative revivalist to the liberal including some rather radical theologies of western origin.

The restoration of the churches' role in education is well in hand. The communist regime nationalised almost all schools in the land, leaving only a handful in the churches' possession. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, was left with eight high schools; the Reformed Church had only one; the Lutheran Church had none. The Reformed Church now has some sixty schools, lower and higher, and has founded the Gáspár Károli Reformed University, to mark its 450th anniversary.⁵ Other churches have also reclaimed their former schools. The churches have resumed their traditional roles in education; but this did not happen without a struggle. The opposition political parties – liberal and left-wing – did everything they could to block this development during the period of government of the right-of-centre Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) (1990–4).

The churches are now reclaiming some of their nationalised properties so that they can accommodate the newly organised religious orders and religious associations. The government is offering financial help for running schools returned to the churches. Before the communist takeover church schools were supported by income from church estates, and not all of these are being given back to the churches, although Act XXXII of 1991 allows the churches to reclaim some of their former property. The state is thus providing the means for the churches to implement some of the social functions they have voluntarily undertaken. Before the Second World War churches owned 35,000 to 40,000 estates; they are now being allowed to reclaim only 6,300, which will be restored to them over a ten-year period. Only 1,000 estates have been returned so far.⁶ Bishop Hegedűs points out that 'the church cannot reclaim all its former estates, but elders of the Kirk-Sessions (Prezbitérium) can...

reclaim them and donate them to the churches. In this way we will again have revenues from our farmlands.⁷

Besides schools and estates the churches have received back some institutions such as hospitals and kindergartens. They have organised shelters and relief work for refugees from war-torn parts of Eastern Europe, mainly former Yugoslavia. There are church missions among the inmates of penitentiaries and prisons. The organisation of army chaplaincies is well under way.

In this new situation both church and state are trying to define their role and establish constructive relations in society. Not long before his death the late prime minister József Antall spoke of the role of the churches in the new Europe.

After the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the failure of the communist dictatorships we need to examine the situation of the churches in the European culture in which they played so important a role: their relation to the state, their part in cultural life, in scientific life and education and their role in the task of European integration... In this new situation Christians have to be renewed, as the Second Vatican Council envisaged with regard to the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant churches have their renewal movements. This agenda is also to be found in the documents of international church organisations.⁸

Dr Miklós Pálos, then undersecretary of the Council of Ministers, reported that

The government has incorporated a new type of church policy in its programme of national renewal... [Its core is] that it acknowledges and highly appreciates the role of the churches in society, a role which cannot be replaced with something else, and it appreciates their role in the peaceful political transition to and realisation of a lawful democratic state.... [The government] calls upon the churches to undertake a decisive role in the furthering of moral renewal.⁹

He also emphasised that the government would like to contribute financially to enable the churches to function properly. The government supported the aim of making the churches economically autonomous. Although it did not consider itself obliged to return all former real estate, the government would secure the smooth functioning of church activities and the socially beneficial activities the churches had promised to perform. The restoration of church property raised some problems, but these were being solved by compromises. The undersecretary summarised the experience of the previous three years: 'We can say with satisfaction that in the Hungarian republic church–state relations are based on mutual trust and sincere partnership, with respect for each other's rights.'¹⁰

The question of the role of Christians in public life and of the relationship between church and politics has come to the forefront in the thinking of politicians, theologians and intellectuals. A national congress dealt with these questions in the autumn of 1993. Delegates were unanimous in the view that it is the duty of Christians to participate actively in public life and in politics. One speaker stressed the fact that political activity and morality are not mutually exclusive concepts. Christians must pursue politics in the light of moral values.¹¹ Foreign minister Géza Jeszenszky pointed out that 'Christian intellectuals have to emphasise Christian values publicly. ... In this century a powerful role has been played by political ideas which have denied thousand-year-old values. For example, the communists reevaluated the concept of sin and in doing so they caused unfathomable damage.'¹² Attila Kálmán,

undersecretary at the Ministry of Culture, said that 'we badly need a textbook on ethics for children who do not attend religious classes at schools'. He nevertheless stressed the irreplaceability of religion and condemned that attitude which expects Christians to be tolerant of everything while in the meantime no one is prepared to tolerate Christians.¹³

Theologians and church leaders are seeking both theological and practical answers to the question of how the churches should relate to the state, and they are trying to define the role of churches in the new democratic society. In late January 1994 the Reformed Church held a conference on the theme 'Reformed believers in public life', with 120 participants. Answering the question 'How should Christ's present-day disciples relate to the world?', Professor Gusztáv Bölcsey argued that Christians should bear in mind four considerations. Firstly, since man is a created being, faith prevents a Christian from becoming '*homo absolutus*', replacing '*deus absolutus*'. Secondly, it is important to recognise that man has fallen away from his original humanity because of sin. Christian faith has no illusions about the realities of the world. Hence it follows that Christians must distance themselves critically from all political formations, present and future. Christians must not accept any political organisation with a programme based on an ultimate claim. Thirdly, Christians must accept state authority as long as it remains in the realm of the relative; as long as it does not claim to be absolute. Fourthly, there is the category of relation. Human values cannot be reduced to individual values, for these are merely particular aspects of the full human life, and they are valid only if they are held in mutual relation with other people's values. While standing firm in their truth, Christians must be ready to listen to the opinions of others, for radicalism easily turns into fanaticism.¹⁴

Reformed theologians are reaching back to the theology of Karl Barth, who fought against Nazi totalitarianism, and especially to his work *Christian Community and Civil Community*. Here Barth argues that

The church cannot remain indifferent to the state. The task of the church is to remain a church, and by so doing its very existence is politics.... Since Christ has only one body and there is no duplicate of it in the realm of politics, there is consequently no Christian doctrine of the state.... While on the one hand the Christian community obeys state authority, on the other hand it differentiates between good and better states.... and says yes or no... and it can fight for or against the state.... The church resembles the Kingdom of God: it should not expect that the state can ever become the Kingdom of God and it should not pretend that it is the Kingdom of God itself.... Since God's children are free, there is a basic right of freedom ... [God's children] must resist every totalitarian tendency which is aiming not only to secure the framework of the various spheres of human life such as family, school, art, science, faith, but also to determine their content.... The normal state of a Christian community is not ruling but serving.... Democracy is not the exclusively correct form of a state, from the Christian point of view, but the relationship between the two is undeniable.¹⁵

The conference dealt not only with the question of church-state relations, but also with other important themes such as 'Reformed churches in the bloodstream in Europe', 'Reformed ethics and the economy', 'social responsibility', 'school and church', 'the church and the press', 'politics and young people' and 'the nation and national minorities'. The conference report says that 'national consciousness, like the

nation itself, suffered heavily when historical Hungary was partitioned, and during the half-century of Soviet-communist rule.’¹⁶ An issue of great importance for the church is aired:

The Hungarian nation can only be thought of as one which includes the Hungarians living beyond the border of Hungary. Our newly awakened national unity is in the interest of all Hungarians. Any trend, wherever it appears in the world, which aims at the denationalisation and elimination of Hungarians is unacceptable. The interest of the whole nation demands that the churches should be able to make unhindered use of instruments for forming national awareness, despite earlier repression. In past centuries the Reformed Church always regarded it as its duty to support social currents and forces aimed at the furtherance of the existence of the nation.¹⁷

The importance of the question of the role of Christianity in public life in today’s Hungary is emphasised in a document recently issued by the Reformed Ministerial Association of the Cistibiscan District. ‘It is desirable, even indispensable, that Hungarian Protestant Christians should secure autonomous political representation by uniting their political forces in an independent organisation which will nominate candidates for members of parliament in national elections.’¹⁸ This is the first attempt by the Protestant churches to secure their own church representatives in the National Assembly.¹⁹

As to the concrete tasks the church is facing in the new Hungary, Dr Loránt Hegedűs, the presiding bishop of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary, offers a list in his annual report entitled *Babilon után (After Babylon)*. He stresses how important it is that church members should be involved in public life. ‘It is impossible that people renewed in faith should refuse to shoulder their responsibility towards society and politics.... It is also impossible that individuals who do not believe either in God or in man should ingeniously manipulate society while people enthusiastic about God and man pursue silly spiritual hair-splitting.’²⁰ The bishop points out that the church is living amidst ‘minor miracles’: evangelisation is now possible; so is religious education in schools and among young people; church building is starting again; Hungarians abroad have helped to open a hospital; publishing activity is increasing; the evangelical theatre is doing important work; relations with Hungarians abroad are deepening; the Gáspár Károli Reformed University has been founded; preparations are in hand for the General Synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church. And all this is happening in an unstable world of crisis: below the socio-economic and political crisis, there is an existential crisis, and below that there is a crisis of ethics and values. In the church there is a theological crisis: a crisis of responsibility before God for the problems of individuals, the problems of our age and the universal problems of all people everywhere.²¹

The bishop mentions four critical problems facing the church. First, there is the problem of ‘to be or not to be’ for Hungarians in the light of five million abortions since the early 1970s.

We have to tell our people.... that our most important task is to support life instead of death.... Plain family life and innocent love must be made desirable. The vocation of mother must be regarded as the highest... a new demographic policy has to be commenced without delay with family-centred economic planning.

The second area of concern is public life: the problems of a society in transformation have to be handled sensitively.... The past cannot be abolished, but it has to be closed down. This is valid for the church too. In the Reformed Church new elections have opened up the gates for the future. We cannot magically create the future here but we can approach it by waiting for God and doing our work: nurturing our spiritual identity, making economic sacrifices instead of selling out the country, and approaching political controversies with caution.

The third area of concern is the issue of our true national culture. It must prevail against western pseudo-cultures which promote the living of life in the here and now on a substandard level. True culture opens up the deep dimensions of life; it preserves personal identity; it gives life to Judeo-Christian values. It revives eternal symbols.

Last but not least there is the fourth area: the divine world of eternity; the realm of eternal and divine love. For this the church is responsible.

We almost perished because of idols. Instead of divine Paradise, an evil hell was created through the deification of human powers. Now we must bid farewell to all closed ideological systems.... We are offering to pull together with all in our efforts to build a harmony for the future. No one should reject this, no one should be a devourer of others, merely calling others to account; but each Christian should be a Christ for others.²²

Summing up the main problems facing society and the church, the bishop quotes in full agreement a statement by the Roman Catholic bishops.

Most painful is the deepening moral crisis in our country. Signs of this include wilful disparaging of the values of marriage and family, unjust attacks on religious education classes and religious schools and discrimination against them, widespread impoverishment while a few people get rich, and at the same time the deterioration of truthfulness, conscientiousness, honesty and trustworthiness.

The bishop reminds us that

Christians are all responsible for shaping the future. We must not allow political leaders to come to power who will fail to give full guarantees for religious rights in a society with a religious majority: we must neither help them to power with our vote nor allow them in through our indifference and absence. Christian values are not self-centred but they always contribute to the country's development in moral and economic terms... let us go forward together for life.²³

After decades of persecution, oppression and marginalisation by successive communist governments, the churches in Hungary have found themselves in a radically new situation since the revolution of 1989. To summarise, some of the most important features of the new relation between church and state are as follows. The Democratic Coalition government (1990–4) invited the churches to participate in rebuilding the moral dimension in a society which has almost lost its morality. The state secured freedom of religion and conscience. It declared its readiness to return schools and property to the churches and it offered them material help so that they could accomplish their task in society. It reinstated churches in some of their tradi-

tional roles, such as organising education inside and outside school and engaging in charitable work. A new phase in church–state relations was inaugurated by the national elections of May 1994, which gave an overwhelming victory to the Socialist Party (MSzP), the reformed communists. They captured 55.15 per cent of the vote and returned 209 members to the 386-seat parliament. To enhance their absolute majority, the Socialists entered into coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz), which won 18.13 per cent of the vote and returned 70 members. The ruling Democratic Forum (MDF) won only 9.59 per cent of the vote and returned only 37 members. Even with its coalition partners it now merely represents a weak opposition in the new parliament.

The heavy defeat of the ruling parties reflects the fact that their policies had alienated the majority of voters, for a number of reasons. Transforming the economy from a centrally-planned communist model to a market-oriented western-style model proved to be a more difficult and complex task than anticipated. Problems were compounded by the fact that the process coincided with economic crisis and recession in the western democracies, which prevented them from providing the assistance to the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe which was expected and badly needed. At the same time, the difficulties of economic transformation resulted in a deterioration in the living standards and social security of the population. During the period of MDF government the number of unemployed reached 600,000 and the national debt grew by US \$4 billion to reach a zenith of US \$24 billion. Meanwhile a secret agreement with the reformed communists before the 1990 election meant that the government's hands had been tied in some respects and that it was not able to make some essential changes. There was also a widespread feeling that the outgoing government had not done well by the Hungarian minorities, totalling some 4.5 million, living in neighbouring states. The government had signed a treaty with Ukraine with regard to Carpatho-Ukraine, a northeastern region of historical Hungary with a significant Hungarian minority. The treaty was widely regarded as a betrayal of national interests. Finally, in the run-up to the 1994 election the centrist and rightist parties were not able to work out a common platform and they remained badly divided.

The Socialists and Free Democrats worked out a coalition agreement published on 27 June 1994. In Article XI the two parties describe their policies on freedom of conscience and religion and on the church. The document stresses that

The government guarantees freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, the full separation of state and church on a basis of equal rights according to the constitution and law. ... It guarantees that the state will not interfere in the life of the church. ... The two parties consider it vital to build up the material basis for church activities.... In the long run they would like to see church members responsible for supporting the churches with part of their income tax. They are aware, however, that the churches need state subsidy for the time being.... They will give state support from the state budget.

The coalition parties promise support for church schools and institutions such as libraries, archives, museums and cemeteries. They acknowledge the rights of churches over their repossessed properties. They even guarantee religious practices in the armed forces.²⁴

There is a measure of confidence that the new left-wing government will keep its promises. After all, it was the reformed communist government of the late 1980s which made possible the multiparty election in 1990, opened up the Iron Curtain on

the Hungarian–Austrian border, provided safe conduct to the West for tens of thousands of East German refugees, and thereby hastened the collapse of the East German communist regime and the unification of the two Germanies. The minister of foreign affairs in that government, Gyula Horn, is the leader of the left-wing coalition and the new prime minister.

The churches face new challenges. They have to restructure themselves spiritually and materially. At the same time they are establishing a new relationship with the state and discovering new and effective ways of helping society solve some of its crucial problems. In their openness and their responsiveness to the challenges of society lies the future of the churches in the new Hungary.

Notes and References

¹ *Új ember*, Budapest, 3 November 1989.

² *Reformátusok lapja*, Budapest, 8 April 1990.

³ *Evangélikus élet*, Budapest, 8 April 1990.

⁴ Elemér Kocsis, 'Theologiai gondolkodás egyházunkban', *Studia et Acta Ecclesiastica* (Ref. Zsinati Iroda, Budapest, 1983), vol. 5, p. 563.

⁵ The Reformed minister Gáspár Károli translated the whole Bible into the Hungarian language in 1590. The university has four faculties so far: theology and humanities in Budapest, a law school in Kecskemét and a teacher training college in Nagykovács. After its charter was granted by the government it was operational from September 1993.

⁶ *Forum*, 18 November 1993.

⁷ *Reformátusok lapja*, 2 January 1993.

⁸ *Reformátusok lapja*, 13 June 1993. The extract is from Antall's letter to a conference in Budapest, 26–28 May 1993, on the role of the churches in postcommunist Europe.

⁹ *Reformátusok lapja*, 20 July 1993.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Új Magyarország*, 29 November 1993.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Reformátusok lapja*, 20 February 1994.

¹⁵ *Reformátusok lapja*, 27 February 1994.

¹⁶ The Treaty of Trianon after the First World War gave two-thirds of Hungary's historical territories to Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Austria.

¹⁷ *Reformátusok lapja*, 20 February 1994.

¹⁸ *Reformátusok lapja*, 27 February 1994.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *Reformátusok lapja*, 13 December 1993.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *Reformátusok lapja*, 3 July 1994, p. 5.