

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

Church and Nation in the Slovak Republic

TIMOTHY A. BYRNES

Introduction

Nationalism has returned to the forefront of East Central European politics. From Poland in the west to Bulgaria in the east national identity and national conflict have again become central issues, sometimes the central issue, in the politics of the region. This resurgence of national politics has been accompanied, not surprisingly, by a parallel resurgence of scholarly interest in nationalism. Whereas just recently social scientists were writing of the decline of the nation state, today my bookshelf is stocked with titles like *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, *Europe's New Nationalism*, and *Minorities: The New Europe's Old Issue*.¹

This scholarship offers three basic explanations for the renaissance of nationalism that has followed the demise of communism. The simplest explanation offered is that contemporary nationalism is a reaction to the suppression of national autonomy during the Soviet era. The Soviet Union, this argument goes, suppressed nationalism throughout the region in the name of international socialism, and when the Soviet Union collapsed a reservoir of pent-up nationalism overflowed. A second argument, related to the first, is that the communist governments channelled nationalism but did not suppress it. Caplan and Feffer, for example, argue that far from 'hibernating' during the Cold War nationalism was put to use in support of communist regimes throughout the region.² When those regimes fell in the revolutions of 1989–91 nationalism was standing ready to be expressed much more fully and confidently as an alternative organising framework for postcommunist governments. The third argument advanced is that the rise of nationalism in the period since the Cold War has been the result of defensive political strategies devised and carried out by the old communist leadership.³ According to this argument communist leaders have cynically adopted nationalist rhetoric and programmes, and exploited the aspirations of battered national populations, to prolong their own discredited status and power. Milošević in Serbia is only the most egregious example of what Roszkowski has termed '*nomenklatura* nationalism'.⁴

My intention here is not to enter into this debate over the genesis of postcommunist nationalism. In fact, for my purposes I would stipulate that the explanation is some combination of these three arguments, blended in different measures in different contexts. Communist leaders and functionaries have certainly exploited nationalism for their own political benefit. But they have been able to do so effectively only because of the reservoir of nationalist feeling, and in many cases

resentment, that survived in East Central Europe despite decades of communist domination and manipulation.⁵ The question I *am* interested in exploring here, however, is the role that religion plays in this return of nationalism to the centre of political life. In historical terms, of course, churches and religious leaders have been very closely associated with nationalism in East Central Europe. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Slovakia and the Orthodox Church in Serbia and Romania have been linked with the development and maintenance of autonomous *nations*, with or without the survival of autonomous *states*. And during the communist era religion, where it survived in a vital condition, served mainly as a source of support for national aspirations.⁶ The Catholic Church in Poland, for example, was an influential advocate of Polish independence from Soviet control and an important repository of a distinctively Polish culture.⁷ Following the demise of communism, however, the relationship between religion and nationalism has become far more ambiguous. This is especially true where religious leaders have been faced with governments headed by communists, or ex-communists, who have now cloaked themselves in nationalism. How should Christian churches, led by men who for better or worse are deeply committed to their national history and nationalist cause, respond to such governments? Should they support nationalist governments in order to solidify national political autonomy and advance their individual national culture? Or should they object to nationalist governments because of those governments' tendency to manipulate and exacerbate ethnic conflict as a tool of national mobilisation? In a related sense, should the still recent memory of institutional and personal repression at the hands of the communist system cause religious leaders to distrust ex-communist politicians, regardless of the degree to which those politicians claim to have been reborn as social democrats, nationalists, or some combination of the two?

These dynamic interactions among church, state and nation raise fundamental questions concerning the nature of politics and society in postcommunist Europe. In some cases these interactions bode well for the future; in others they are deeply disturbing. But nowhere is the relationship between church, state and nation more complicated, or more freighted with implications for the role of religion in post-communist politics, than in the Slovak Republic. Church and nation have shared a long history in Slovakia. The Catholic Church played a central role in the creation of a distinct Slovak national identity in the first place;⁸ Catholic clergy led the first nominally independent Slovak state during the Second World War;⁹ and the current Slovak bishops have been, and continue to be, vocal supporters of Slovak sovereignty and cultural autonomy.¹⁰

At the moment the Slovak government is headed by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, an ex-communist who has built his political base on nationalism. Following the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989 Mečiar fanned the flames of anti-Czech resentment among the Slovak population and presided over the 'velvet divorce' from the Czech Republic. Once independence had been secured in 1993 he turned his attention to the ethnic Hungarians who were left on the Slovak side of the old Czechoslovak–Hungarian border. He used the presence of this 'anti-Slovak element' within the borders of the Slovak Republic to solidify his own nationalist credentials, and he placed anti-Hungarian policies like the law on the protection of the state language and the amendment for the preservation of the republic at the top of his government's agenda.

In one sense, then, the Slovak Catholic hierarchy is faced with the same questions that face religious leaders throughout the region. How should a national church relate to a nationalist government? Should the Catholic bishops support Mečiar as the

current embodiment of Slovak national aspirations? Should they, as Christian leaders, protest against his use of the Hungarian minority as an instrument of nationalist mobilisation? Should they trust a government so closely associated in its personnel, and some of its policies, with a political system that tried just a few years ago to drive an independent Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia out of existence? At another level, however, the circumstances facing the Slovak Catholic hierarchy are complicated significantly by the fact that a majority of the ethnic Hungarian population living within the borders of the Slovak Republic is itself Roman Catholic. As a result the Slovak Catholic hierarchy, unlike that of many other churches in East Central Europe, is charged with the pastoral care of a largely unasimilated ethnic population that is, needless to say, deeply alienated from the current government. The Catholic Church in Slovakia, in other words, is more than an observer of, or even a participant in, ethnic conflict between Slovaks and Hungarians. It is itself a central arena of that conflict.

Using Slovakia, then, as an ideal case in which to explore the relationship between church and nation in a postcommunist state, I will address two closely related sets of questions. First, what is the current state of relations between the Slovak Catholic hierarchy and Vladimír Mečiar's government? How important are Mečiar's nationalist rhetoric and policies in determining the church's judgment of him and his governing record? Second, does the bishops' relationship with Mečiar and his government affect in any way their relationship with Slovak nationalism more broadly? More specifically, has disillusionment with *nomenklatura* nationalism led the bishops to recast their own attitudes towards Slovak relations with the Hungarian minority, particularly the Catholic Hungarian minority, in their own midst? Once I have provided at least tentative answers to these questions in the Slovak case, I will return at the end of the article to more general considerations of church, state and nation in postcommunist Europe.

The Church and Mečiar

In the beginning, which for our purposes refers to the period of 1992 and 1993 and the establishment of an independent Slovakia, Vladimír Mečiar enjoyed the support of the Catholic hierarchy. The bishops, as I mentioned above, were deeply committed to the Slovak national cause, and they endorsed Mečiar as the leading proponent of that cause in the contemporary context. Over the ensuing years, however, several Slovak bishops have become outspoken opponents of Mečiar and his government. In part this opposition has resulted from the same disillusionment with Mečiar's imperious governing style and suppression of dissent that has dismayed other former supporters of Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. In the case of the Catholic hierarchy, however, this opposition also has a more specific genesis.

In early May of 1995 Prime Minister Mečiar offered to establish a Catholic university on the grounds of what is now the University of Trnava.¹¹ Since this particular university was already quite open to the church's influence the bishops saw no benefit in trading it in for a formal Catholic university. They wanted to leave the University of Trnava as it was, and instead open a fully autonomous Catholic university in the eastern city of Košice, under the independent direction of the Slovak bishops and the Holy See. The bishops also feared the price that Mečiar would exact for his 'gift' of a Catholic university in Trnava, and some of them saw his gesture as an effort to purchase the church's good will and compromise its independence in the days leading up to the pope's visit to Slovakia later that spring.¹²

More importantly in the long run, however, this controversy over a Catholic university took place just as Prime Minister Mečiar was engaged in a bitter power struggle with Michal Kováč, the president of the Slovak Republic. The details of this struggle are beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that by spring 1995 Mečiar was in full attack against Kováč, seeking to eliminate the president as an alternative source of political power and constitutional legitimacy. The Bishops' Conference, under the leadership of its president Bishop Rudolf Baláž of Banská Bystrica, intervened in this struggle on the side of President Kováč. Baláž and a number of his colleagues had grown increasingly concerned about Mečiar's efforts to increase his power. They decided to express their reservations by issuing a public letter criticising the prime minister for his attacks on the president.¹³

As a result of this unusually direct intervention in Slovak politics by the Catholic hierarchy relations between the prime minister and the Bishops' Conference, particularly as represented in the person of Bishop Baláž, deteriorated rapidly. Charges and countercharges were exchanged. The bishops accused Mečiar of hijacking democracy. Mečiar questioned the bishops' commitment to the development of the Slovak state. Relations hit a new low late in 1995, however, when Bishop Baláž sold a painting, owned by the church, to a Swiss art dealer. The government responded to this seemingly innocuous transaction by launching a criminal investigation of the bishop, alleging that the sale amounted to the criminal expatriation of a national treasure.¹⁴ Supporters of Baláž maintain that the whole episode – the Swiss dealer, the offer of purchase, and the sale itself – was concocted by the Slovak intelligence services for the purpose of embarrassing Baláž and of associating the Bishops' Conference with traitorous 'anti-Slovak' elements in society. The charge of a frame-up has never been proved; but agents of the government did enter and search Bishop Baláž' private apartment, while he was not present, in an effort to find (or plant?) evidence of his allegedly treasonous activities.

Not surprisingly, this episode served only further to alienate many of the Slovak bishops from Mečiar and his government. I interviewed Bishop Baláž during a recent trip to Slovakia, and I was surprised by the passion with which he denounced the 'undemocratic' nature of Mečiar's government and the urgency with which he warned of the danger Mečiar posed to the long-term viability of the Slovak state.¹⁵ He was very forthright in his general opposition to the government.

The Church and the Hungarian Opposition

The fact that Bishop Baláž and a number of his colleagues in the Slovak Bishops' Conference have come to oppose Mečiar and his policies is for the purposes of this article, however, only the beginning of the story. The more important question is whether that opposition has led to any reevaluation of the church's conception of its own role in the Slovak nation, or of the church's own relationship with Slovakia's Hungarian minority. And the answer to this question is much less clear-cut. As I indicated above, nationalist rhetoric and law have been central building blocks of Vladimír Mečiar's rule in the Slovak Republic. The prime minister has used Slovak resentment of Czechs and mistrust of Hungarians to solidify his standing with the public and to brand opposition to him and his programme as 'anti-Slovak'. Over the last couple of years two bills in particular – the law on the use of the state language and the law for the preservation of the republic – have been especially significant in this regard; and in both cases Mečiar has been directly opposed on these bills by the Hungarian parties in the Slovak parliament *and* by the Slovak Bishops' Conference.

The language law, passed in 1995, mandated the use of the Slovak language in all legal and administrative matters within the Slovak Republic, and made the use of other languages (read: Hungarian) in such settings a crime punishable by a sizeable fine. Public support for this law grew out of the deep attachment that many Slovaks feel toward their language; the fine distinctions between the Slovak and Czech languages are after all central to the cultural and political distinctions so dear to Slovaks. One problem with the law, however, is that it seems directly to contradict the Slovak constitution.¹⁶ For that reason the government has from the start promised to reconcile statute law and constitutional law by passing another bill on the legal use of minority languages in public matters. At the time of this writing, however, no concrete steps have yet been taken by the government in that direction, and few people in the Slovak Republic actually believe that such a law will be passed under the current government.¹⁷

The significant fact here, however, is not the government's intentions but rather that the government was opposed not only by the Hungarian community within the Slovak Republic but also by the Slovak Catholic hierarchy. For their part, the bishops reacted very negatively to implications in the original draft bill that all religious ceremonies would have to be conducted in the Slovak language. Along with the Hungarian Bishops' Conference in Budapest and the Holy See in Rome they successfully appealed to the government to exempt marriages, funerals and other religious services from the version of the bill that was finally passed into law. The Catholic bishops' position had nothing whatever to do with the general language rights of the Hungarian population. The bishops simply wanted the church to be left alone by the government to carry out its pastoral duties in the manner and in the language that they, the bishops, thought best. And, to be sure, the urgency of the bishops' opposition receded once their institutional autonomy had been reaffirmed in the bill's final form. Nevertheless, by publicly opposing one of the government's central nationalist proposals the bishops robbed the prime minister of a potentially useful ally in the 'defence of the state language' and offered support, albeit indirectly, to the arguments being put forward in the Hungarian community.

Similar circumstances have surrounded the government's push for a so-called law on the preservation of the republic. This law, one of the most controversial in contemporary Slovakia, would make it a crime to criticise the government in certain ill-defined ways.¹⁸ It is a sweeping law, covering many different kinds and sources of dissent, but it is clearly targeted at least in part at Hungarian politicians within Slovakia, and in particular at statements those politicians make while abroad, in Hungary and elsewhere. The Catholic bishops have been prominent opponents of the government on this bill. A number of them released a statement condemning the government's proposal in very blunt terms, and Baláž has cited this proposal as central evidence of the government's lack of commitment to democracy and an open society.¹⁹ Again, the church's opposition to the law on the preservation of the republic is basically unrelated to the rights of Hungarians. The bishops who oppose this law do so not because it will restrict the freedoms of Hungarians, but because, in Baláž' words, they 'can remember how the church was oppressed by similar laws in the recent past'.²⁰ Regardless of their motivation, however, it is again politically significant both that the bishops oppose the bill in the first place and that their opposition to the bill allies them with the Hungarian parties against Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia.

The Church and Nationalism

It is crucial, however, that we neither overestimate the level of comity between the bishops and the Hungarian parties (the level is actually remarkably low), nor misunderstand the church's general approach to Slovak national interests. The bishops' disaffection with Mečiar, and their opposition to some of his policies, has brought them some unexpected Hungarian bedfellows. But that does not mean that the bishops have eschewed their traditional commitment to Slovak nationalism.

First of all, not all members of the Slovak Catholic hierarchy have been as outspoken as Bishop Baláž has been in regard to Mečiar and his policies. Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec of Nitra and Archbishop Ján Sokol of Trnava, to name two, were among the most outspoken supporters of the prime minister in 1992–93, and they remain much more positive in their outlook than do many of their colleagues in the Bishops' Conference. Sokol, it should be added, is often disparaged, both inside and outside the church, for his collaboration with the communist government before 1989; but that does not change the fact that Baláž, as president of the Bishops' Conference, does not speak for the entire Slovak hierarchy.²¹

Even on the level of individual bishops, moreover, it is necessary to distinguish between a bishop's attitude towards Mečiar on the one hand and that bishop's commitment to Slovak nationalism on the other. Indeed, Baláž himself has revealed his own national leanings by expressing his personal admiration for Fr Jozef Tiso, leader of Slovakia's Nazi client state during the Second World War.²² Baláž has said that he has an 'entirely positive' view of this nominally autonomous state, and he has called for 'objective' research into Tiso's deportation of Jews to the Nazi death camps.²³ To Slovaks, and others familiar with the codewords of Slovak history and politics, this endorsement of Tiso also implies support for a particular historical identification between the Slovak nation and the Slovak Catholic Church.

It is this identification, of course, this distinctively Catholic nationalism, that lies at the heart of the hierarchy's relationship with the Hungarian minority *within* the Slovak Catholic Church. If the Catholic bishops' own nationalism is receding, either because of their experience under Mečiar or for any other reason, then we might expect there to be a lessening of ethnic divisions within the Slovak church itself. The available evidence on this question is admittedly limited and impressionistic, but the picture it paints is not a very hopeful one.

Hungarian Catholics in a Slovak Church

The territory that comprises modern day Slovakia was for centuries part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The Slovaks were a linguistically and in part culturally distinct people, but the territory on which they lived was considered an integral part of the Hungarian state. Following the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon, however, that Hungarian state was disassembled and the Slovak people, along with a good number of Hungarians living in Slovak territory (or what they called Northern Hungary), joined the Czechs in the Czechoslovak Republic. This ethnic configuration was problematic from the very beginning, as Slovaks spent the interwar years resenting Czech dominance and, with some justification, fearing Hungarian irredentism. That is why so many Slovaks welcomed the creation of an 'autonomous' Slovakia during the Second World War, regardless of how illusory the autonomy actually was.

After the reconstitution of the Czechoslovak state following the war, and after the

imposition of communism, these simmering disputes, along with any number of other ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia, Romania, and elsewhere, were subordinated in one way or another to the dictates of international socialist solidarity. The Czech–Slovak dispute reemerged in 1989, of course, and resulted in the split of 1993. The Slovak–Hungarian ethnic conflict endures in Slovakia, however, as a result of the fact that the Slovak Republic inherited from the Czechoslovak federation the Hungarian communities stretched along the new Slovak–Hungarian border in the south.

Speaking to Slovaks and Hungarians about this history, and about ethnic relations in today's Slovak Republic, is a dizzying experience. The interpretations that the two sides place on history, and the ways in which the two sides perceive current circumstances, are often diametrically opposed to one another. Listening to these interpretations and perceptions is like reading two entirely different histories or like experiencing two entirely different contemporary realities simultaneously. Significantly, these differences are no less apparent within the Slovak Catholic Church than they are in Slovak society at large. There is no disputing the fact that Slovaks dominate the Catholic Church within the borders of the Slovak Republic. The disputes arise over whether or not that dominance implies repression or mistreatment. Basically, there are three related issues of contention: the lack of a Hungarian bishop in the Slovak Bishops' Conference; the shortage of Hungarian priests in Southern Slovakia; and the availability of services and sacraments for both Hungarians and Slovaks in mixed ethnic communities.

First of all, there is no distinct Hungarian diocese in the Slovak Republic. The Hungarian population is spread out along a wide swath in Southern Slovakia, resident in a number of separate dioceses. Moreover, there is no bishop of 'Hungarian blood',²⁴ explicitly authorised to serve the specific pastoral needs of the Hungarian Catholic community. That community, or to be more exact, elements of that community, have expressed dissatisfaction over the lack of a Hungarian bishop. Petitions calling for either a Hungarian diocese or a specially constituted Hungarian bishop have been circulated and sent to the pope; pressure has been applied on the Slovak hierarchy to support these requests; and annual prayer meetings in southern Slovakia have turned into mass demonstrations in favour of the establishment of a diocesan seat in the city of Komárno.²⁵

The response of the Slovak Bishops' Conference to these efforts has been a collective shrug of the shoulders. There is simply no need for a Hungarian bishop, they argue, because the needs of the Hungarian communities are being met perfectly well by Slovak bishops. They point out that the diocese of Trnava, which has a high percentage of Hungarian residents in the areas surrounding the cities of Bratislava and Komárno, already has two auxiliary bishops, Bishops Tóth and Filo, who speak perfectly good Hungarian.²⁶ And they conclude that the whole question of a Hungarian bishop on Slovak territory is (a) a political provocation on the part of Hungarian politicians both in Slovakia and in Hungary itself, and (b) moot, since the Holy See has clearly refused to structure diocesan jurisdiction on ethnic lines.²⁷

This argument over a Hungarian bishop also stirs up sharply divergent interpretations of the history of Slovak Catholicism under Hungarian rule, particularly in the nineteenth century. Hungarians tend to stress that many Slovaks rose to the rank of bishop in the old Hungarian state, and that at least one Slovak bishop even served as primate of Hungary. Slovaks, on the other hand, prefer to point out that these Slovak bishops advanced only because they spoke the Hungarian language and accepted Hungarian cultural hegemony. Indeed, they argue that advancement in the church

was used as an instrument of 'magyarisation', the carrot offered with the stick of forced assimilation of Slovaks into the Hungarian nation.

The second dispute, closely related to the first, concerns the shortage of ethnic Hungarian priests within the Slovak Republic. Some Hungarians argue that the shortage is a result of Slovak discrimination, both during the communist era, when the Slovak hierarchy kept Hungarians off the very short list of young men admitted to seminaries, and today, when those seminaries continue to refuse to offer theological training in the Hungarian language. The Slovak bishops and their supporters argue that the problem, insofar as they admit there is a problem, results from one simple factor: a lack of priestly vocations in the Hungarian community. The reasons offered for the shortage vary from a low Hungarian birthrate to Hungarian secularism and anticlericalism, but all agree that the vocation crisis is driven by factors internal to the Hungarian population rather than by Slovak discrimination.²⁸ The bishops maintain that Hungarians are welcome at Slovak seminaries (to study in Slovak, of course), and that Hungarian candidates are free to travel to Budapest for training and then to return to take up pastoral duties in the Hungarian and mixed communities of Slovakia.²⁹

Finally, there is the issue of the actual provision of services and sacraments in the ethnically mixed cities, towns and villages of southern Slovakia. Again, some Hungarians contend that the Slovak priests assigned to these communities speak little or no Hungarian; that services in Hungarian are either not offered at all or offered at inconvenient times; and, in an echo of earlier Slovak complaints of magyarisation, that the church is a witting instrument of assimilation rather than a voice in support of ethnic diversity. Slovak Catholic leaders counter that all Slovak priests assigned to the south speak Hungarian competently; that sufficient services are offered in both Slovak and Hungarian; and that the Slovak priests are instructed by their bishops to treat all their parishioners, Slovak or Hungarian, equally, as members of one Slovak church. Some outside the Bishops' Conference, clearly with a political axe to grind, go even further and argue that it is actually Hungarian priests who are discriminating against Slovak parishioners in these ethnically mixed communities.³⁰

I do not intend here to determine or even to assess the veracity of these claims and counterclaims. Such a task, to be done properly, would require lengthy residence in southern Slovakia, and careful examination of schedules of masses, linguistic skills and pastoral practice. I will, however, say that on the face of it both sets of contentions appear to have some validity. Hungarian politicians both in Slovakia and in Hungary certainly do use issues like the lack of a Hungarian bishop or the shortage of Hungarian priests as tools in an ethnic mobilisation programme that has little directly to do with the pastoral needs of Hungarian Catholics. Indeed, many of the arguments I have recounted above were made most forcefully to me by Hungarian politicians in the Slovak Republic. On the other hand, however, the Slovak bishops' claims of evenhandedness, comity and pastoral concern for 'their' Hungarians seem rather disingenuous, if not patronising.³¹ The petitions to the pope, the entreaties to the Slovak Bishops' Conference and the mass prayer meetings, to cite a few examples, are not made up by Hungarian politicians. They are real. In an important sense, however, any independent judgment I might offer on these three areas of conflict would be largely beside the point. The very fact that the arguments I have recounted take place – and they do – is enough to establish that ethnic conflict persists within the Catholic Church in the Slovak Republic. Even discounting for Slovak platitudes and Hungarian hyperbole, we are left with a church that continues to divide itself institutionally, linguistically and pastorally along ethnic lines.

Conclusion

What conclusions, then, can we draw from this review of relations among church, state and nation in the Slovak Republic? First of all, it seems clear that the leadership of the Slovak Catholic Church, or much of it anyway, has grown weary of Vladimír Mečiar's rule and has become willing, even anxious, to express forthright opposition to the prime minister and his policies. Some bishops do remain close to Mečiar, but for the formal leadership of the Bishops' Conference neither Mečiar's nationalism nor his attempts to ally himself with the church's institutional interests have inoculated him from criticism. On the contrary, the proposals and policies that are most transparently designed to excite the national pride and resentments of the Slovak people (for example the language law and the law on the preservation of the republic) are just the proposals and policies that have been opposed most strenuously by Bishop Baláž and his colleagues. Indeed, this fact may be the most hopeful aspect of the whole scenario in terms of the prospects for ethnic reconciliation between Slovaks and Hungarians. As I mentioned above, the church's statements and actions pertaining to these issues have robbed the government of a potentially influential nationalist ally. Béla Bugár, chairman of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement in Bratislava and Ján Gábor, director of the Slovak Foreign Ministry's Division of 'Countrymen and the Human Dimension', agree on very little, particularly when it comes to ethnic relations in the Slovak Republic. But each used the same word – 'calming' – to describe the effect they thought the church was having on ethnic tensions in the south.³² At the same time, however, the leadership of the church, including Baláž and his supporters, seems still to be wedded to a kind of national Catholicism that reflects rather than reconciles ethnic divisions. The bishops, in short, remain deeply committed to the Slovak national cause, and to the special historic relationship between that cause and the Catholic Church. As a result, they are willing to tolerate the Hungarians in their midst, and even happily to offer them pastoral services – so long as those Hungarians remain members of a *Slovak* Catholic Church. In practice, then, the Catholicism that unites so many citizens of the Slovak Republic has apparently not overcome the national identities that divide them.

It seems to me that this last, less hopeful, observation is the aspect of the Slovak situation that is most directly relevant to the relationship between religion and nationalism in postcommunist Europe more generally. The Slovak Catholic Church, after all, would seem to be among the *most likely* of churches to play a constructive role in the ethnic politics of postcommunist Europe. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, Orthodox Serbs square off against Catholic Croats and Muslims in Bosnia. In Romania, Orthodox Romanians have to live and come to terms with the Calvinist and Catholic Hungarian populations of Transylvania. The fact that religious identity has not been able to subordinate national identity in Slovakia, where much of the majority and minority belongs to the same church, does not bode well for the potential influence of religious leaders in these other cases where the religious and national cleavages reinforce each other.

Religious leaders in other states may join Slovak Catholics in rejecting ex-communist governments and their *nomenklatura* nationalism. In fact, they have done just that in both Serbia and Romania. But the experience of the Catholic Church in the Slovak Republic suggests that those religious leaders are not so likely to reject the nationalism and ethnic divisions that those ex-communist governments have manipulated so successfully. Renewed conflict between church and government, in other words, does not necessarily imply new distance between church and nation.

Notes and references

- ¹ Charles A. Kupchan (ed.), *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995); Richard Caplan and John Feffer, *Europe's New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1996); Ian M. Cuthbertson and Jane Leibowitz (eds), *Minorities: The New Europe's Old Issue* (Institute for East–West Studies, Prague, 1993).
- ² Caplan and Feffer, 'Introduction', in *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ³ Kupchan, for example, writes of 'irresponsible leaders' 'pandering' to publics undergoing 'painful transformations'. See *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- ⁴ Wojciech Roszkowski, 'Nationalism in East Central Europe: old wine in new bottles?' in Paul Latawski, *Contemporary Nationalism in East Central Europe* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1995), p. 22.
- ⁵ In a somewhat similar vein anthropologist Katherine Verdery argues that the 'scape-goating' of foreigners and ethnic minorities by ex-communist elites has been made possible by a deeply ingrained tendency in the former communist nations to organise notions of self and community around 'external aliens seen as them'. See Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996), p. 97.
- ⁶ There is, of course, an extensive literature on this subject. See, as a review, Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987), and especially Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1989). See also Dennis J. Dunn (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1987).
- ⁷ See, as examples of the literature on the church in Poland, Bogdan Szajkowski, *Next to God ... Poland: Politics and Religion in Contemporary Poland* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1983), the chapter on Poland in Eric O. Hansen, *The Catholic Church in World Politics* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987), and Ramet, *ibid.*
- ⁸ For the role of the church in the emergence of Slovak national identity, see: Eugen Steiner, *The Slovak Dilemma* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973); Peter Brock, *The Slovak National Awakening: An Essay in the Intellectual History of East Central Europe* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1976); and the classic R. W. Seton-Watson, *Slovakia Then and Now* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1931).
- ⁹ On the development of the heavily Catholic Slovak People's Party, see James Ramon Felak, *At the Price of the Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, 1929–1938* (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1994). On the wartime republic, see Yeshayahu Jelinek, *The Parish Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, 1939–1945* (East European Quarterly, Boulder, 1976).
- ¹⁰ The Slovak church was the subject of a particularly repressive antireligious programme under the communist government in Czechoslovakia. See Sabrina Petra Ramet, 'The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1948–1991', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, no. 24, 1991, pp. 377–93.
- ¹¹ A review of discussions between the church and the government concerning a Catholic university appeared in 'Mečiar seeks Christian university against church's will', Foreign Broadcast Information Service–Eastern Europe (*FBIS–EEU*), 3 January 1997, and 'Bishops insist on autonomous Catholic university', *FBIS–EEU*, 10 January 1997.
- ¹² The president of the Slovak Bishops' Conference said that 'gifts must be paid for, and the church cannot afford this gift of a Catholic university because freedom cannot be bought'. Rudolf Baláž, bishop of Banská Bystrica and president of Slovak Bishops' Conference, interview with author, Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic, 9 January 1997.
- ¹³ The content of the letter was rather blunt. The bishops said that President Kováč was fulfilling his oath of office properly, that the presidency was an important pillar of the Slovak state, and that attacks upon the office constituted attacks on democratic procedures and the constitution. See 'Senior clergy voice full support for president', *FBIS–EEU*, 14

November 1995.

- ¹⁴ A review of the controversy surrounding the sale of the now notorious triptych appears in 'Bishops allege scheme by Slovak government to discredit Catholic Church', *The Prague Post*, 27 December 1995.
- ¹⁵ Baláž spoke repeatedly of Slovakia's 'so-called democracy', and warned that Mečiar was leading the country back to the 'brutal and stupid Russians'. Interview with author, 9 January 1997.
- ¹⁶ Article 34 of the constitution of the Slovak Republic states that 'the citizens of national minorities or ethnic groups shall, under provisions fixed by law, also be guaranteed: (a) the right to be educated in a minority language, and (b) the right to use a minority language in official communications.'
- ¹⁷ The government's failure to propose a new minority language law has led recently to renewed tension between the Slovak Republic and Hungary. See Sharon Fisher, 'Hungary urges Slovakia to pass minority language law', *Open Media Research Institute (OMRI) Daily Digest II*, no. 24, 4 February 1997.
- ¹⁸ The bill would make it a crime, for example, 'to disseminate false information abroad dangerous to the republic, or organise public rallies judged to be subversive'. Quoted in *The Independent*, 1 April 1996.
- ¹⁹ The bishops compared the bill to similar laws during the communist era under which 'hundreds of thousands of innocent people were convicted, imprisoned, and tortured, sometimes to death'. If passed, the bishops said, the bill would place policemen and judges in the same position as 'the criminals of totalitarianism'. See Sharon Fisher, 'Slovak bishops protest draft law on the protection of the republic', *OMRI Daily Digest II*, no. 61, 26 March 1996.
- ²⁰ Rudolf Baláž, interview with author, 9 January 1997.
- ²¹ Baláž himself was quite forthright in acknowledging the fact in his discussion with me. He described the Slovak hierarchy as divided into three groups: those who were out of the country during the communist era; those who 'were not discriminated against' during communism; and those, like himself, who 'felt the pain of communist repression in their skin'. This third group, he said, 'should be allowed to speak for the church in a free Slovakia'. Rudolf Baláž, interview with author, 9 January 1997.
- ²² In response to the opening of a Jozef Tiso Memorial Hall in Bytča, Baláž called Tiso an 'exceptional and outstanding personality'. Quoted in 'Bishop Baláž calls Tiso exceptional personality', *FBIS-EEU*, 13 November 1996.
- ²³ The full quote is: 'I am not a nationalist; I am against nationalism. But I am patriotic and I want this history to be evaluated objectively. I know what the situation was [with regard to treatment of Jews] in Holland, Austria, Germany, Poland and more recently Russia, but some have concluded that the Slovak state was the most drastic and cruel and we did the worst crime. And they say that only because the president of the state was a Catholic priest.' Rudolf Baláž, interview with author, 9 January 1997.
- ²⁴ This unfortunate phrase often arose in my discussions concerning the matter of a Hungarian bishop in the Slovak Republic. It refers to the crucial difference cited by both sides between a 'Hungarian' bishop and a bishop who speaks the Hungarian language, or even a bishop whose family lineage is 'Hungarian'.
- ²⁵ On the petition, and the general agitation for a Hungarian bishop, see *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 3 April 1995. The Komárno meetings were described to me, from rather sharply divergent perspectives, by Béla Bugár, chairman of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (an ethnic Hungarian party within the Slovak Republic) in an interview in Bratislava, capital of the Slovak Republic, on 7 January 1997, and by Dominik Tóth, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Trnava, in an interview in Trnava, Slovak Republic, on 8 January 1997.
- ²⁶ After an hour of answering questions forthrightly on other matters Bishop Tóth's response to my direct question on a Hungarian bishop was to ask *me* in an incredulous tone if I thought one was necessary. Interview with author, 8 January 1997. Bishop Baláž main-

tained that a Hungarian bishop inside the borders of the Slovak Republic would be 'an anomaly' and 'unnatural'. Rudolf Baláž, interview with author, 9 January 1997.

- ²⁷ Anton Neuwirth, Slovakia's ambassador to the Holy See, reports that the Vatican is more open to the notion of an auxiliary bishop of 'Hungarian blood' than it is to a separate stand-alone 'Hungarian diocese' in Komarno. Interview with author, Bratislava, Slovak Republic, 8 January 1997.
- ²⁸ Bishop Tóth's views on the Hungarian vocation shortage are particularly pointed: 'Where there are no children, there are no vocations'. Dominik Tóth, interview with author, 8 January 1977.
- ²⁹ This matter of men training in Hungary for priestly service in Slovakia is another bone of contention between Slovak Catholics and Hungarian Catholics, both in Slovakia and in Hungary. The director of communications for the Hungarian Bishops' Conference, for example, dismissed the programme as very small and, in its effects, insignificant. Fr László Lukács, interview with author, Budapest, Hungary, 3 January 1997.
- ³⁰ This position was expressed most vehemently to me by Ján Gábor of the Slovak Foreign Minister's office of 'Countrymen and the Human Dimension', interview with author, 9 January 1997. However, Gábor told me that he got his information on the church from Bishop Dominik Hrusovsky, perhaps Mečiar's most outspoken supporter inside the Slovak Bishops' Conference.
- ³¹ Even some people who are otherwise slow to condemn the bishops' role in Slovakia dismiss these claims. Ambassador Neuwirth, for example, explained much of the division in the church by citing the bishops' 'immature nationalism'. Their attitude to the Slovak state, he said, is analogous to the emotions of 'a teenager in love'. Anton Neuwirth, interview with author, 8 January 1997.
- ³² Béla Bugár, interview with author, 7 January 1997 and Ján Gábor, interview with author, 9 January 1997.