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Lutheranism in Hungary in the Aftermath of Communism*

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A Wonderful Experience

Anyone whose leg has just been released from plaster feels good to be able to move it freely again. After almost 45 years of communism, churches in Eastern Europe are released from pressure, from plaster on both legs. As the plaster has been removed we are all experiencing the pains, troubles and frustrations of a completely new beginning. We have to learn how to walk and dance again step by step, day by day. It is both a painful and a wonderful experience.

The experience of the past 45 years is not the first such in the history of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. For example, during the Counter-Reformation, in the so-called 'Decade of Mourning' from 1670 to 1680, congregations lived and believed without pastors, church buildings, hymnbooks or the Bible. When the oppression came to an end, the believers were still there: they came to the surface like mushrooms after rain. Congregations were reorganised and church buildings erected. There is, however, a great difference between that experience and our own: our freedom was not taken away, but only limited.

Even with plaster on both legs Christians tried to walk and to dance – in a word, to live. The serious attempts by individual Christians and churches, their leaders included, to do everything in their power to survive should not be underestimated. However, conditions in church life during those 45 years cannot be compared either with those of the previous period or with those of the present day: they are completely different.

The communists who came to power after 1948 gradually tried to undermine and then to ruin church life by nationalising property and church schools, by dissolving and prohibiting Christian associations, by restricting Christian activities to parish buildings, by aggressive atheistic propaganda, by practical disadvantages for committed Christians and by various kinds of oppression and persecution.

Hope Lost and Belief Broken

It has to be stated that what communism replaced in Hungary was not an intact and ideal world. Social structures were unjust and undeveloped. A high percentage of the population was unemployed and lived in poverty, starving and begging. Many people

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felt that the situation had to be changed, and many, including the communists, hoped that a better world was dawning.

However, the Hungarian people did not choose communism. It was the western powers which after the Second World War decided to leave Hungary within the eastern bloc. People were afraid to talk about their sufferings under Stalinism. It is only now that the truth is emerging. Not even the bloody and heroic uprising of 1956, which was crushed by Soviet Red Army tanks, could sow the hope that things would change. Only a modest hope remained that socialism would improve slowly from within; but it was the only hope we had, and the system kept it going somehow. We accepted it because we needed something to sustain us. What is more, most people in the West shared only this limited hope, and the widespread belief that 'the powers of death shall not prevail against the church' was undermined.

Our Heresy

There are many who would like to claim the glory for 'beating' the communist system; but in fact it was not beaten, it simply collapsed.

Here we stand now: not as people who have managed to win a victory, but as people burdened with sin – we lacked faith and hope, we neglected our duty and we lived with a fear we could not overcome. We recognise our human weakness; we were frightened by dictatorship and anxious about the lives and well-being of ourselves and our loved ones. Another question has to be asked: were there theological considerations which misled us and our fellow Christians? Were we unfaithful to the doctrine of the church as we tried to survive and to cooperate with the communist system?

What was our heresy? There were, I believe, five aspects to it.

1 After the communist takeover Christians and the churches were accused of having advocated the former unjust social structures, of having sided with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in the Second World War, and of having failed to oppose unambiguously the Holocaust of 600,000 Hungarian Jewish people. Although a free exchange of ideas and a profound study of these questions were not possible, it was necessary, I believe, for the church to preach repentance. This repentance, however, meant that the mistakes and sins of the new regime were tolerated from the very beginning. Repentance took place in the wrong arena: on the political field, that is, instead of before the living God.

2 The revival movement, which was very active and influential between the two world wars and also after the Second World War, regarded personal belief in Christ the Saviour as a high priority and tended to neglect the social responsibility of the church. Under the influence of the theology of the Word, which stood in opposition to *Kulturprotestantismus*, several Christians became convinced that the only task of the church as a whole was to preach the Gospel. Those Christians who had made wrong political decisions before the takeover and repented of them tried to distance themselves from political life. As a result almost every kind of social activity within the church was prohibited, Christian associations such as the YMCA were dissolved, church-run schools were nationalised and the whole of church life was confined to ceremonies held in church buildings, although preaching the Gospel and distributing the sacraments, thankfully, were still regarded as acceptable activities. There were some non-compromising heroes in every denomination who tried to maintain the variety and fullness of Christian witness and service, but they had little success. Other Christians made their compromises and served within the given framework,

although they quietly tried to enlarge it. In many cases the church made compromises but received almost nothing in return. In many other cases, however, new possibilities arose. In retrospect, of course, and in the light of recent history, all compromises and the bargaining between the communist regime and the Christian churches can be seen as wrong. We should confess that our faith was not always strong enough to convince us that God is almighty and powerful, and that he has the whole world in his hands.

3 The idea of the 'Two Kingdoms' was also significant as it stated that God has power not only over believers and disciples of Christ but also over those who do not believe, and that those who do not believe in God, the Father of Jesus Christ, nevertheless have to serve him if he so wills. God has the power. We live in his world and not Satan's. Even 'evil' unbelievers (Luke 11: 13) can, at least sometimes, give good gifts to their children. If the Persian King Cyrus was 'anointed' of God for the sake of Israel (Is. 45:1), why could not also the communist regime be a servant of the Lord for the sake of his people? I am sure that today we all see the temptation and danger of this way of thinking but at that time it was a great comfort and strength to many.

What was wrong or heretical about these thoughts? I believe it was that the possibility of receiving good gifts from evil people was taken almost for granted, as was God's willingness to work for us just as he did for Israel through Cyrus. The regime and all that it did was somehow legitimised in this way.

4 In encounters between Christians and communists, the Christians were blamed for preaching but not observing God's law over their 2000-year history, and in many cases they found themselves unable to justify their mistakes, both past and present. Critical observations by Christians on the running of society or on the behaviour of non-believers were condemned as a political attack against the regime. In order to avoid conflicts or controversy of this kind and to make missionary outreach more effective, a good solution seemed to be to preach the Gospel as the Word of God and not to refer to the Law. The result was that the Word was not fully preached and missionary outreach suffered.

5 As a result of Marxist and communist criticism of the church Christians tried to improve themselves by being better Christians and better disciples than those of former generations. In this way, the challenge produced positive results. However, to prove to the world that we are better Christians, more perfect disciples, or even better human beings, is an impossible task: even if we were able to perfect ourselves, which is not the case, the effectiveness of our witness and our preaching is not in our hands.

In this context, the church placed emphasis on the New Testament concept of *diakonia*. There are, of course, other concepts in the New Testament, such as salvation, liberation, redemption, reconciliation, forgiveness and ransom, which might be seen as more central both because of their frequent occurrence and because of their content. The word *diakonia* describes the manner in which Jesus (Mark 10:45) or the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 5:18) fulfilled their ministry. It expresses the fact that God acts for the sake of human beings. It has much to say to us today. By using this Greek word Christians tried to express the fact that the message they believed in and proclaimed was meaningful even for the socialist world of that time. The concept also implies that Christians should not be arrogant representatives of Christ, but humble servants of the Lord. Many Christians would agree with this.

So what was wrong with the 'theology of *diakonia*'? Unlike a theology which does not care about those to whom its message is addressed and which confines itself to simple reiteration, the theology of *diakonia* was keen to represent its message in communist society in such a way that, although the other side did not believe in it,

the usefulness of the Christian message would at least be recognised. However, in the event, stress was laid selectively on certain aspects of the message, and so the whole meaning was to a certain extent lost.

The Old Challenge Has Not Disappeared

Many viewed the theology of *diakonia* as the 'official theology', or the only theology permitted, in the Lutheran Church in Hungary under communism. If by this it is meant that words like '*diakonia*', 'theology of *diakonia*', 'service to mankind', 'peace', 'welfare of human beings' and 'socialism' were expected to be used, then this is correct. I believe that these kinds of words can be used in sermons in a theologically legitimate way. Not everyone took the trouble to use them in this way, however, so the 'theology of *diakonia*' became an empty, though compulsory, slogan. It was, however, possible to use these concepts legitimately, and many pastors succeeded in doing so.

The great public sermons drew most attention from bishops and state. Critics of my sermons might accuse them of being too loyal, too weak. My bishop was never satisfied with the sermons I prepared for the opposite reason. He always read and edited them first. Before one sermon he had read was broadcast he told me that this kind of sermon was not appropriate for a socialist country since I did not mention the theology of *diakonia*. After listening to the sermon, however, he conceded that the theology was there. On another occasion the manuscript of my sermon was returned to me and on reading through it I was shocked to find that a new page I had not written had been included. It turned out that one 'hand' had written a new page in order to insert the word 'socialism' into just one sentence, and that another 'hand' had subsequently blacked out this very word.

Some people believe that all the theological mistakes, weaknesses and heresies of the communist period resulted from the theology of *diakonia*. One might just as well argue that Arius, Pelagius or even St James were all early representatives of the theology of *diakonia*. This is not just a flippant remark. The challenges, temptations and sins of the church as a whole and of individual Christians in the communist period were quite similar to those of previous centuries. It was not the pastors, theologians or bishops who created the situation. On the contrary, the situation 'produced' these people, and these people were then capable of making the situation more difficult in quite unexpected ways. They, or rather we, turned out, willingly or even unwillingly, to be tools which the system could use in one way or another.

That is why there is one concern above all which makes me feel uneasy, even at this wonderful time of rebirth. The communists needed great political power and rough tactics to take the property of the church and to ruin church life, and they had to frighten Christians in order that the latter would pervert their message. I am anxious that our message, or at least the basic elements of it, which was entrusted to us to be proclaimed, will not be betrayed by us of our own accord, without pressure, just for the sake of our own peace of mind. Nazi Germany had the German Christians, *Deutsche Christen* (DC), who opposed the Jewish roots of Christianity. For 40 years we were endangered theologically by a 'red DC'. All of us are endangered by the DC of our times.

Whom Do We Mean by 'We'?

I do not use the first person plural accidentally. I know that many people do not like

it because they feel that this kind of language does not reflect the differences among people and plays down individual responsibility and the role and weight of an individual's sin. I am aware of this. I know people of heroic steadfastness. I honour them. There were also people who made bad or reasonable compromises, and tolerable or intolerable concessions, who conformed out of selfishness, fear or even stupidity. There were those who had real reason to fear and those, too, who were simply afraid. Maybe most people were not clearly of one type or another, but rather a mixture of all these things.

If it were possible for a court to make distinction unambiguously between perpetrators, victims and other kinds of players, and could call the guilty to account, then this should be done. As far as I am concerned, however, I would definitely not accept the role of judge. I would be ready to be questioned, but would be glad not to hold trials in the church, preferring to proclaim the Word, the Law and the Gospel, because the Word of God, as I understand it, can do more than any court sentence.

> For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Hebrews 4: 12–13 (RSV))

About the Present

I should like to end by reporting on two areas of my own responsibility.

The Theological Academy of the Lutheran Church in Hungary is the institution where our pastors are trained. I have been teaching there for the last four years. We are delighted that 140 students, including 24 new entrants, will be studying there in five classes from September onwards. About ten years ago we had only 50 or 60 students, and in one or two years only one new application was received. One of the main problems is that some of the students, being 'recent converts' (1 Tim. 3:6), do not have a Lutheran or church background of any kind. Another problem is poor knowledge of modern languages, which makes an approach to theological literature in English or German very difficult. Moreover, because of a shortage of pastors in the church we have not been able to increase the teaching staff in proportion to the number of students. Most of the students are young, and so recent history and its personalities are unknown to them, a part of the past about which they have to learn.

The Synod of the Lutheran Church in Hungary is a unique institution, because it is clearly a legislative body. It makes the laws, or the constitution, of the church. Together with a layman, I have been elected as one of the two chairmen of this Synod. The last constitution of the church was passed in 1966, and it defines the central power of the bishop which is being criticised today. What is more, this constitution is unfamiliar to us, because it has never really been respected. The establishing of trust and confidence among our members could be considered the main task within our church. The Synod faces the very difficult task of establishing this trust and confidence by constructing a new church law. We are in a learning process: we need to learn democracy, to learn to speak out and to listen. The criticism that the Synod is working too slowly is correct but it is slow only because of the need for this learning process. People generally had very high expectations. They thought that after the collapse of communism and the restoration of full freedom to the church everything would work smoothly, almost automatically, that there would be no

struggles or problems. We have to learn, and to realise that even in this wonderful new era it is necessary to work, to fight and to find compromises.

After the slavery in Egypt came freedom; but at first this involved long years of wandering in the desert.