

# Ethical Détente: Marxist-Christian Dialogue in Hungary

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The Hungarian Marxist philosopher Jozsef Poór suggested in 1981 in the official party journal *Pártélet* that the now out-of-date phraseology of "ideological struggle" should be replaced by the more appropriate and up-to-date word "dialogue".<sup>1</sup> This proposed shift of word-usage in political vocabulary clearly reflects a new and ambiguous twist in Hungarian church policy on religion in the 1980s. "Dialogue" has become the established term denoting the approach of Hungarian Marxists to religion.

In Hungary church-state relations are regulated by agreements signed by the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in 1948 and by the Roman Catholic Church in 1950. Dialogue, in a political sense, has been going on ever since, for it has been of mutual interest to achieve peaceful coexistence. Though church leaders consistently supported the programmes of the government, within this framework the integrity and autonomy of faith, doctrine and confession remained basically unchallenged. Yet party policy has firmly and repeatedly stated that "in the ideological sense there is no peaceful coexistence"<sup>2</sup> and a programme of "ideological struggle" has been maintained notwithstanding the adoption of a "policy of alliances" with the purpose of achieving "national unity". György Aczél, said in 1977: "active support for certain aims of socialism is also increasing in the ranks of the clergy".<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the dialogue, according to Aczél is an important factor in the party's strategy for ideological struggle: "The policy of alliances of the Marxists is a firm policy because in the ideological dialogue with their allies they endeavour to make themselves better understood, to understand their partners more fully, and to promote the spread of the scientific ideology outside the party".<sup>4</sup>

Our concern will be the new, narrower sense of the dialogue of the 1980s, which denotes a series of public exchanges of views between Marxist intellectuals and various theologians who, in most cases, are church leaders. Theological or confessional argument is often invoked to justify active support for collaboration with the Marxist state while confrontation on the level of the basically different philosophical assump-



Pastor Zoltan Doka, whose letter to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly drew attention to the overriding influence of Diakonia Theology in the Hungarian Lutheran Church. See *Document* section.

At a world press conference at the Lutheran World Federation Assembly on 27 July 1984, in Budapest, Bishop Zoltan Kaldy reads his prepared statement about Pastor Doka's letter to the Assembly. See profile of Bishop Kaldy on pp. 33-48. (Both photos courtesy Keston College).





Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, See obituary on pp. 89-90. (Photo Courtesy Keston College).

*Below: two Romanian Baptist pastors with their wives, 1982. Pastors Benjamin Cocar (left) and Ioan Stef (right) have been subjected to increasing pressure over recent months. See Chronicle item on pp. 94-97. (Photo courtesy Romanian Aid Fund).*



tions is carefully avoided.

The public dialogue was inaugurated in a television broadcast on 12 March 1981 in which the initiator of the dialogue, leading Marxist philosopher Professor József Lukács, Professor József Schweitzer (Hungarian Jewish Community), Professor Tamás Nyiri and Ferenc Magyar (Roman Catholic Church), Professor László Márton Pákozdi (Reformed Church) and Bishop Gyula Nagy (Lutheran Church) participated.

This so-called "dialogue on the dialogue" was characterised by a polite and respectful acknowledgement of each other and its apparent aim was the mutual gaining of confidence. Ferenc Magyar said: "the ground for the dialogue is the destiny of our country and that of mankind. We have some tasks in common without provoking confrontation and without touching upon basic doctrinal questions."<sup>5</sup> Bishop Nagy emphasised the importance of social ethics: "Both Marxists and believers share the ethical principle that one's neighbour's interest is paramount above one's own interest."<sup>6</sup> Professor Lukács pointed to the need for Marxists to treat religion seriously with a paradoxical remark: "Even though there is no God, he must be somebody."<sup>7</sup>

A more theoretical collaboration may be observed in the long-running project between "Protestant theologians and Marxist researchers of Protestantism". Their first colloquium took place in Debrecen, from 25-26 September 1981. Lutheran Theological Professor Károly Pröhle outlined his thoughts on "Working and Thinking Together". He spoke of the "community sharing a common destiny". In the present situation, he said, "the building-up of socialism and preserving peace are the interests of our people, thus it is a common interest."<sup>8</sup> He quoted the Solemn Declaration of the Lutheran Church issued by its Synod in 1966 as justifying the dialogue:

. . . The Synod declares and confesses on the basis of Scripture and according to the traditions of the Reformation that the Lutheran Church in Hungary lives in the country, and in the community of its people by the will of the God who moulds history; therefore the Church respects the lawful order of the socialism-building Hungarian People's Republic; in accordance with agreements it carries out the task of preaching the Gospel in a spirit of mutual confidence and understanding; the Church participates with serving love in the constructive efforts of our people to live a better and more humane life.<sup>9</sup>

Pröhle stressed that the era of the "ruling church" had come to an end, that this is understood today and that Jesus did not come to proclaim the world-rule of believers but the service of believers in the world.<sup>10</sup> It was important, he said, that dialogue should not be pursued with the missionary aim of converting the other party.

A theoretical justification of the dialogue between Marxists and Protestants was also attempted at the conference by the Marxist philosopher Ferenc L. Lendvai. His argument is worth summarising. According to the Marxist evolutionary view of religion, Christianity is the peak of religious development because it negates and transcends mythical religions. Protestantism is a more developed form since it transcends mythical (i.e. Catholic) Christianity. In a more progressive phase of development, Protestant thought shifts into secular philosophy (Kant, Fichte, Hegel). And Marxism after all negates and thus transcends all philosophy. Lendvai argues, "Marxism is not only the inheritor of philosophy but ultimately that of religion. It preserves and supersedes this heritage by lifting it up to a higher level." Accordingly, Marxist-Christian dialogue is not a vain attempt. On the contrary, "it is a mutual struggle against the world of alienation, though on different grounds and in diverse forms . . . towards the same goals. The ultimate watershed is not between Marxists and Christians. Rather, they are together on the one side and on the other side are those who do not want to realise the human essence, who are submerged in an everyday level of existence demanding limitless 'freedom' and 'democracy' for themselves and refusing any higher ideals with regard to the individual and the historical perspective of human existence . . ." "As a matter of fact," Lendvai concludes, "Marx also could have uttered the words of Jesus: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matt 5,17)." There is no evidence that this idea of Marxism as the fulfilment of Christianity was challenged either from the Christian or the Marxist side.

In October 1983 a scholarly symposium was organised in Sopron (Western Hungary) to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. This occasion was considered the opening of a new chapter in the Marxist-Protestant dialogue. In his introductory lecture, József Lukács remembered "the two great revolutionaries" who were commemorated in the scholarly world that year: Martin Luther and Karl Marx.<sup>12</sup> He emphasised that "an enormous moral effort, similar to that of Luther, is demanded, with a hitherto unknown degree of individual responsibility, to prevent catastrophe looming over our heads."<sup>13</sup> Bishop Gyula Nagy (Lutheran Church) spoke about "The Value and Perspective of the Dialogue". Having stressed "common human tasks" and "efforts for a better coexistence", he appealed to Luther's radically new understanding of the "world". Luther, he said, restored the respect for a world long neglected by Christianity due to the Platonic thought of Augustine. For Christians today, who live in a socialist society, "the Marxist assessment of Luther and of the Reformation has reflected the ethical and socio-ethical message of the Reformation from a new angle."<sup>14</sup>

A new theological justification of the dialogue was provided by Cal-

vinist Professor Elemér Kocsis. Challenging the idea of mere coexistence in space between Christianity and Marxists, Kocsis appealed to the "Protestant principle", namely that the transcendental element of the Christian faith appears in time in a prophetic mode and thus Protestants have always allied themselves with progressive efforts in society. He argued that the prophetic function of religion must be acknowledged by Protestants today: "If the inheritors of the Reformation want to be faithful to themselves they must choose socialism as an ally since socialism is the most progressive of the social movements."<sup>15</sup> Marxists and Protestants, he continued, "have come to understand that both are the descendants (though in a different way), of Humanism."<sup>16</sup>

The Marxist philosopher József Poór praised the efforts of "our Calvinist" and "our Lutheran" churches for having elaborated the principles of the Theology of Service and the Theology of Diakonia, because "analogies have emerged between their doctrines and the social theories of Marxism-Leninism."<sup>17</sup>

During the conference Professor Pröhle delivered a lecture on "The Past and Present Image of Luther". He also took up the theological issue of "Christianity and the world". Like Bishop Nagy, he emphasised that for Luther the whole world is God's domain and the believer can freely cooperate with the unbeliever. However, Pröhle — albeit parenthetically — mentioned the special mission of the church in the world.

It is only the church, the community of believers, which has inherited the Gospel of Christ . . . Luther did not want to change the world but invited the church and the Christians to repent. Where Luther's voice was listened to and understood, the church and Christianity became a blessing, a source for life and regeneration even for the world. This is our image of Luther and we think that this image is up-to-date even today.<sup>18</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church is also engaged in elaborating the principles of dialogue and cooperation. The Catholic intellectual monthly *Vigilia* devoted one issue (November 1983) to the problem. In his article "Coexistence, Convergence, Dialogue", the Marxist philosopher Pál Horváth stated: "The dialogue was not brought about by pragmatic, merely tactical considerations with some underlying manipulative intentions but by the very fact of coexistence of people with diverse world-views."<sup>19</sup> In 1984 the Rome-based Catholic theologian, Ferenc Szabó, published a critical study on Marxism and Christianity in *Katolikus Szemle* (Catholic Review). He analysed the possibility of a Christian-Marxist dialogue from a western perspective and concluded with a quotation from Paul VI. The Pope declared in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) that in countries which "fight against us with their ideologies and in practice oppress us . . . the dialogue becomes very difficult . . . almost impossible".<sup>20</sup>

Finally, *The New Hungarian Quarterly* reported recently: "The Hungarian Academy of Sciences arranged an academic conference between 28 February and 1 March 1984 on 'The responsibility of man in the world today'. Participants were Marxists from socialist and capitalist countries as well as Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish theologians and philosophers from all parts of the world. The participants in the conference were agreed that the responsibility of man in respect to danger of human life has grown considerably in the world today."<sup>21</sup> At the conference József Lukács spoke of "the shouldering of responsibility" by both Marxists and religious believers, saying "we are both interested in opposing individual and group-selfishness, moral complacency . . . an unsociable drive for material things"<sup>22</sup>; he stated "the issue of issues, the risk of risks is the danger of thermo-nuclear catastrophe,"<sup>23</sup> and stressed that justice is inseparable from peace by paraphrasing the ancient maxim: "*Si vis pacem para justitiam*". Arguing against the logic of the cold war, he cited Hungary, and especially its Marxist-Christian dialogue as an example to be followed elsewhere:

I do not claim, of course, that the country which is now receiving you with love and friendship has fully realised this aim but by the joint efforts of people of different views it has achieved results in this area which are difficult to gainsay. In furthering such aims the Christians and Jews of Hungary are one with Marxists.<sup>24</sup>

The Marxist historian of religion, Gusztáv Gecse, assessing the results of the international conference in an article, presented a slightly different image from the one suggested by *The New Hungarian Quarterly*. As regards consensus, he said: "we must be modest because beneath the surface agreement on some basic issues there was disagreement on many aspects (e.g. the causes of world conflict)."<sup>25</sup>

To sum up: the Marxist-Christian dialogue in Hungary is a peculiar, complex phenomenon of Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Is it true that the age of "ideological struggle" has come to an end in at least one relatively open communist country, or is the struggle still going on under the more refined and civilised disguise of "dialogue"? These questions are difficult to answer categorically, but some characteristic features of the dialogue may be noted.

The official party-policy of "religious freedom but ideological struggle" which has been pursued for more than three decades in Hungary, has put Christians on the defensive. In the fifties this policy included the use of violence and intimidation. This has resulted in a measure of intellectual and social inferiority among many church-members and leaders. This development is reflected in the theology of service of the Protestant churches and the nameless theological position of the Catholic *Opus Pacis*, all of which have long emphasised the church's subservience and

service to the Marxist state. Both give support to the political programme of the party in such forms as the Patriotic People's Front, Parliament and the National Peace Council. Now this fundamentally unchallenged political power has invited different church leaders to be partners in the dialogue. The conditions for their participation are the abandonment of zeal for conversion, and the exchange of a prophetic voice rooted directly in the Scriptures for political judgements ultimately based on Marxist-Leninist theories. In the absence of their *differentia specifica*, the dialogue is no longer an exchange of views but a monotonous approval and affirmation of a consensus view that produces only theological justifications for the *status quo*. Moreover, there is a danger inherent in using language to structure thought; the dominating Marxist phraseology has been adopted by churchmen and the process fails to work in reverse.

"Dialogue" is one facet of Hungary's "policy of alliances" which recognises the "analogous but not convergent moral norms" inherent in the otherwise mutually exclusive Marxist ideology and Christian faith. Gyula Kállai, the Chairman of the National Council of the Hungarian People's Front, in a lecture entitled *The Party's Policy of Alliances and the Development of National Unity* given in 1976 stated: "With patience and tact, we should help the greatest possible number of people to reach the standard of Marxist-Leninist consciousness."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Professor Poór refers to his published article in an interview he gave to the Seventh-Day Adventist Dean Jenő Szigeti in *Theologiai Szemle*, No. 6, 1981, p. 382.

<sup>2</sup> György Aczél: "The Socialist State and the Churches in Hungary", in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, Summer 1977, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Világosság*, July 1981.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 462.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 461.

<sup>8</sup> *Világosság*, December 1981, p. 737.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted *ibid.* p. 740.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 737.

<sup>11</sup> *Theologiai Szemle*, No. 6, 1981, p. 379.

<sup>12</sup> *Világosság*, January 1984, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Vigilia*, November 1983, p. 812.

<sup>20</sup> *Katolikus Szemle*, No. 1, 1984, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. XXV 1984, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Világosság*, May 1984, p. 318.

<sup>26</sup> Gyula Kállai: *The People's Front Movement in Hungary*, Budapest: Corvina Books, Corvina Kiado, 1979, p. 259.