

Analysis or Slander?

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A strongly worded protest from the leadership of the Hungarian Lutheran Church has been issued in the form of a Declaration signed by Bishop Gyula Nagy and four senior ecclesiastical officials — not including the presiding Bishop Zoltán Káldy. The leadership express their shock concerning churchmen in the West who "attack and slander the theology of our Church, her relationship to the State, her leaders, and — above all — our presiding bishop Dr Zoltán Káldy". The wrath of the Hungarian Church is directed in particular against an eminent and respected theologian, the former Director of the Lutheran World Federation's Theology Department in Geneva and of the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, Dr Vilmos Vajta, who has written a critical analysis of the "theology of diaconia", the official theological system of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. This theology was formulated to fill the void created by the theological stagnation experienced by the Church during the "Stalinist" era and the political upheavals connected with the 1956 Revolution. The main architect and proponent of this system is Bishop Káldy.

In my short evaluation I shall limit myself to Professor Vajta's article and its "rejection" in the above-mentioned Declaration. I shall do this in the light of the recent history of the Hungarian Lutheran Church and in the context of the development of the "theology of diaconia".

Historical Background

The Second World War created a new situation for the East European Churches. The continuation of church life was conditional on the goodwill of the new governments. The main task before the leaders of the Church was to be partners with whom new arrangements were supposed to be made.

During the early post-war period it was desirable to have a relatively undisturbed ongoing church life. Thus in Eastern Europe the only new theological orientation came through the peace movement initiated by the late Professor Josef Hromádka in Czechoslovakia. Church leaders in other East European countries had no alternative but to participate in this effort and some Western sympathisers also joined the campaign. The result was the Christian Peace Conference, as it is known. Its theological horizon was limited and it remains so to this day: to evoke and maintain Christian engagement in the Churches in close linkage with government policies.

Within a few years of World War II the situation in Hungary turned dramatically into a problem of church-state relations. Most people in the

West have failed to notice that the primary test case here was not the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty. Instead the authorities turned their attention to the smallest Protestant community, the Lutheran Church, and its leading bishop, Lajos Ordass. In the Autumn of 1948 he was sentenced by a special court for violating the country's currency laws. He spent two years in prison and was afterwards placed under a sort of "house arrest". Personal contact with him was made difficult. The leadership of the Lutheran Church was seriously weakened because of a number of suspensions, and the acting church leaders did not discuss the judgement of the special court, but officially removed Bishop Ordass from office "because he was not able to carry out his duties as a bishop and because this circumstance seriously affected the interests of the Church". A new bishop was "elected" in the person of László Dezséry. He held office until the end of October 1956. All these events have an important bearing on our understanding of the situation in the Hungarian Lutheran Church. According to official terminology, the "Stalinist" era came to an end in Hungary at this time. It is therefore also important to note that after the imprisonment of Bishop Ordass, no new theological orientation was forthcoming.

When the World Council of Churches Central Committee met in Hungary during the Summer of 1956 — that is, before the October revolution of the same year — officials of the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation (including Dr George Bell, Bishop of Chichester; Dr Franklin Clark Fry, American Church President; Bishop Hanns Lilje, Presiding Bishop of Hanover; and Dr Carl E. Lund-Quist, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation) began negotiations with the government about the rehabilitation of Bishop Ordass. They succeeded, and the court judgement was declared invalid. It comes as no surprise to learn that the Church did the same, although Bishop Ordass was not able to return to office before the October revolution. He remained in office until Spring 1958, when the state officials declared his return illegal. From that time until his death in 1978 Bishop Ordass lived in almost complete isolation in his flat.

It is necessary to recall this background in order to understand developments in the Lutheran Church especially since 1958. While Bishop Ordass was in fact innocent of the charges upheld against him in the Stalinist era, he was not allowed the freedom to oppose cooperation with some of the discredited church leaders who had held responsible office during that period. His office was once again declared vacant and the only candidate, Zoltán Káldy, was formally elected as his successor.

No one should be surprised at the fact that the tasks facing Bishop Ordass' successor were not easy. It is, however, surprising that the new church leadership made no effort to revise its attitude to Bishop Ordass. His case remains to this day an irritating element which has hindered any sensible development in the Church. When Bishop Ordass died in 1978

his obituary was written by his successor, but it made no mention of his unjust trial and the process of his rehabilitation. These were facts which simply had to be forgotten. The whole issue was never digested either by the Church or by the State. It was played down as an isolated case, and Bishop Káldy was an eager advocate of this explanation. The truth was nevertheless that a large number of leading church personalities, amongst them professors of theology and eminent pastor-theologians, were silenced or removed to small congregations far away from their previous posts.

A New Theological Orientation

It was in this situation that a new theological orientation was elaborated by Bishop Káldy. According to the "theology of diaconia", the aim of the Lutheran Church is to offer service to humanity in a socialist society without formally adopting the tenets of Marxist-Leninist ideology, and at the same time remaining true to confessional creeds. The idea is that the Church will on the one hand avoid a ghetto-like isolation in society and on the other conform to the norms set by the State. This type of diaconia was conceived of as broader and more universal than the traditional diaconia of the Church, including political engagement in "the great questions of humanity", especially that of peace among nations.

Since the early 1960s this theology has become not only the official theology of the leaders of the Church, but also obligatory for the pastors of the Church as well. It has in fact become the only legitimate form of theological thinking. It has a monopoly, and any other theological orientation has been rendered impossible. The church press and the numerous religious publications which exist in Hungary have had to move into line with the theology of diaconia and are supervised and corrected accordingly. A remarkable effort to produce New Testament commentaries has proved no exception here.

Important though this theological phenomenon is, arising as it does in a socialist country, no particular reaction has been forthcoming from the international Lutheran or Protestant scene. It has always been representatives of the Hungarian Lutheran Church who, when abroad, have alone propagated their theological orientation. References to "service" have often been evident, giving the impression that the Church has chosen the correct theological solution in a difficult situation.

Theological Analysis

In Professor Vajta's article we have for the first time an analysis of the "theology of diaconia". He has pointed out its deficiency as far as christological foundations derived from the Bible are concerned. Obviously he is questioning Bishop Káldy's own writings (although he is not criticising

the Bishop personally). He suggests that by dint of the strong authority which characterises this theology it has in fact become an ideology and therefore does not tolerate any criticism or analysis. The indisputable consequence of this "theological ideology" is that it will manifest itself in one simple way: instead of producing christological arguments to justify its willingness to serve the world and society, as might be expected from a church "theology of diaconia", this particular theology produces a content corresponding to the political programme of the Hungarian government.

In order to illustrate the strong possibility that Vajta's analysis is correct, may I refer to an interview with József Cserháti, Roman Catholic Bishop of Pécs and Secretary of the Hungarian Episcopate: "The relationship between Church and State in Hungary is balanced, and the limits of coexistence have been established. On the basis of the freedom of religion, the State recognises the freedom of activity of the Churches and religious communities, and in return Churches accept the social targets and structure of the socialist people's society. The Church makes resolute efforts to promote the construction of the socialist people's State." And further: "The present is characterised by another stage of development: coexistence has been replaced by the state of working for each other."*

Professor Vajta also refers to a recent Marxist analysis of this "theology of diaconia". A leading Marxist philosopher and professor at the University of Debrecen, József Poór, has pointed out that though this theology has christological presuppositions, its practical consequences are in complete harmony with the "scientific Marxist-Leninist" analysis. Although the theologians might not be acceptable from the scientific perspective, their position can be tolerated temporarily because of their usefulness. This Marxist philosopher adds in all honesty that this is the first time in history that a theological system and consequently a Church (or Churches) can agree with the Marxist programme, a fact which might force Marxists to rethink some of their inherited presuppositions about religion. (József Poór, *Századunk és a Protestantizmus* (Our Century and Protestantism), Budapest 1981, pp. 166-84.)

Professor Vajta's short analytical article has caused, as we have seen, a vehement reaction from Lutheran church leaders in Hungary. In the press release entitled "Slanders rejected" it is however surprising that they give no theological answer whatsoever to the serious theological arguments advanced in the discredited article of Dr Vajta. Instead the signatories of the Declaration have chosen to question the credibility of the author who has lived outside Hungary since 1941. Moreover, they reject the parallel with the "German Christians", although Vajta's article does not say anywhere that Communist ideology and the Gospel are

* *Kritika*, 21 September 1983.

mingled. Knowing how sensitively Hungarian theologians have occasionally reacted to this point, the author simply mentions that the "theology of diaconia" has found a way to arrange a theological compatibility with Marxist ideology, as German Christians in their time did with Fascism. The Hungarian Lutheran Church has turned down theological dialogue on this whole issue at a time when world Lutheranism is preparing to go to Hungary on the occasion of the Seventh World Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation.

The article by Vilmos Vajta was first published in German in *Lutherische Monatshefte No 3 (March) 1983*.

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