

# *Document*

## **Marxist theologian writes on diakonia theology**

*Over the past four decades a unique theological system has been devised by Hungarian Protestant theologians. The terminology has undergone several changes, but it is currently called "Calvinism of the Gospel" (CG) in the Reformed Church and "diakonia theology" (DT) in the Lutheran Church. According to the Marxist philosopher József Poór, the new system is "of importance not only to the history of the church, but also to secular history". Hungary's Reformed and Lutheran leaders agree and regard its acceptance by the faithful as vital for the well-being of their churches and the Hungarian nation. CG and DT have therefore been established as the official theologies of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches, to which all preaching, teaching and theological study is expected to conform. Moreover, CG and DT have also had a strong influence on the political thinking of the Catholic hierarchy and Baptist leaders. But the new Hungarian theology also has its critics at home and abroad. The former director of the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, Dr Vilmos Vajta, maintains that it provides a justification for conformism to the norms of the state, while the Hungarian Lutheran churchmen, Pastor Zoltán Dóka and the layman Árpád Fasang further claim that it is based on mere slogans and confuses Christian service with servility.\**

*The origins of the new theology may be traced to the years immediately following the*

*Second World War. A group of theologians who had been influenced by Barth — notably Albert Bereczki and János Victor of the Reformed Church and Miklós Pálfi and Gyula Groó of the Lutheran Church — believed that the churches were obliged wholeheartedly to support the government's efforts to diminish the power of the church and to bring about the social transformation of Hungary. This, however, was a minority view. The majorities in both churches were represented by the more orthodox Reformed Bishop László Ravasz and Bishop Lajos Ordass of the Lutheran Church, who were wary of the arbitrary methods and anti-church character of the government's policy. Under their leadership theological pluralism existed with the more traditional evangelical and orthodox elements in the ascendancy.*

*The new Protestant theology gradually gained its monopoly as a result of the Communist Party's success in excluding all real and potential opposition from participation in public life. In 1948, as the party turned its attention towards the churches — by then the only significant institutions outside its political control — pressure mounted against Bishop Ravasz to the point where he felt compelled to resign. Bishop Ordass was removed from the scene only after his arrest and imprisonment on false charges later that year. By the early 1950s the entire leadership of both Protestant Churches was made up of pro-government personnel including several Communist Party members (e.g., The Reformed bishop and later Hungarian Foreign Minister János Péter, the Lutheran Bishop László Dezséry, and the Lutheran lay leader József Darvas).*

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\*For more background detail on this Hungarian theological/political controversy, see *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 130-48 and Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 98-108.

*The CG and DT variations of the new theology differ in that their common view of practical service is based on interpretations of their respective confessions and traditions. But both theologies lead to the same conclusions regarding the church's service in the world: it is the duty of the church to work for the well-being of mankind by acting in harmony with "progressive" secular forces. Those forces are identified in Hungary with the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, and in the world at large with the Soviet Union and her allies. Thus the churches accept the leading role of the party in all matters related to public service. They provide political service by supporting the party programme in word and deed. They also engage in public evangelism and traditional forms of social work, and publicly promote certain Christ-*

*ian ethical values at the request of the government when help is needed to solve social and economic problems that obstruct socialist development.*

*The positive role played by the churches in the construction of communist Hungary has been viewed with interest, and to a large extent admiration, by many of the country's Marxist social scientists. Since the 1970s a host of research projects into the relationship between religion and society have been undertaken. József Poór, lecturer in Philosophy at Debrecen's Agricultural University, has spent years examining Hungarian Protestantism. The following is an abridged translation of Poór's digest of his findings, which was published in the leading journal for Marxist theory, Világosság (No. xxvi, April 1985).*

## On the Way of Diakonia and the Serving Church: Forty Years of Hungarian Protestant Theology

The past forty years have seen the development of two new movements — one Reformed and the other Lutheran — whose purpose has been to accept and undertake the building of socialism (communism) based on Marxist theoretical analysis while safeguarding the Christian faith. Such pioneering work has always carried with it risks of mistakes and failures. Yet it is scarcely an exaggeration to maintain that it is of importance not only to the history of the church, but also to secular history.

It is hardly surprising that these new movements came to fruition, and continue today, amidst acute domestic and international confrontation in both the theological and political spheres. The initiators of the ecclesiastical and theological renewal had to struggle within their own churches against the temptation to look backward to the Horthy era or to be distracted by the domestic activities of their foreign opponents. In international church forums they have achieved recognition and prestige by sweeping away and repudiating these accusations which have frequently called into question the authenticity of their Christianity and of the theological character of their teaching. These frequent accusations are characterised by the charge that their "service" and "diakonia" are not the service and diakonia of God, but rather service of "the system". The opposition has many times assumed "more subtle" forms,

particularly in Hungary. It has reproached church leaders for "exaggerating" their positive relations with the authorities of the socialist society, and for not standing "far enough away" from secular society. With regard to these accusations we must certainly reflect on the fact that Protestantism, even Christianity as a whole, has in given historical situations correctly accorded, and continues to accord greater esteem to its secular mission than do these domestic Protestant groupings. Perhaps it is enough to refer here to the relationship between the Reformation and the early bourgeois revolutions, and in our own times to the Roman Catholic theology of liberation. What has happened with the Hungarian Protestant Churches during the last four decades is not unrelated to the progressive historical traditions of the reformed churches, which have been the inspiration of the most distinguished Protestant church leaders, theologians and clergymen in interpreting Protestant teachings in a spirit of responsibility for the people and the homeland.

### 1944-1948

Between 1944 and 1949 the fatherland underwent bitter political struggles, as the Hungarian people determined its future and decided between the alternatives of socialism and capitalism. Numerous historical tasks which in the past had been postponed were now placed on the agenda: land

reform, the creation of a republic, and the separation of church and state. The more senior leaders of the Roman Catholic Church opposed the fulfilment of these overdue tasks and all the measures aimed towards socialism. They went the way of so-called political Catholicism, and a certain amount of sympathy with their decision was undeniably shown by the leaders of the two largest Protestant churches. This situation led Imre Révész, Albert Bereczki, János Victor, Benő Békefi and a small group of colleagues to undertake a task of historical significance; they revealed an extraordinary sense of responsibility in becoming the initiators and organisers of the "renewal" in the Reformed Church. In the Lutheran Church Miklós Pálfi, László Dezséry, Ernő Mihályfi, Ivan Reök, László Benczur, Gyula Groó, Vilmos Gyöngyösi, Károly Pröhle Jr., László Scholz, Imre Veöreös, József Szabó and their associates became initiators of a similar undertaking.

This then was the era of the establishment of the new Reformed and Lutheran theology. The initiators recognised that the future fate of their churches was to a large extent dependent upon the realism of their political orientation. The broader socio-political struggles were recognisable in the different conflicting currents and movements of the churches as they re-shaped the foundations of their theological thinking. Thus a progressive and realistic approach gave rise to the development of a new theology which increasingly came into conflict with the political and theological line of the senior church leaders.

The respect of the clergy and the lay people for the senior church leaders was shaken to a certain extent because of their previous attitudes, while those who sought after the new way were unassailable from a theological and moral viewpoint.

I shall try to outline the most important questions confronted by the representatives of the new theology for the first time in the Reformed and Lutheran Churches:

(a) they acknowledged the sins of the pre-liberation ruling élite against the people — e.g. postponement of land reform, exploitation, nationalism, anti-semitism, and pushing the people into war.

(b) they drew up a list of the crimes and sins of omission of the churches — e.g. failing to take a stand for the people's cause, but supporting the ruling élite in its crimes; also treating the smaller Protestant churches not as brothers but as enemies.

(c) the churches must repent and at the same time atone for their shortcomings. In essence this meant that the churches must stand up for the people's cause. The church lives in society, and because of this the church cannot be indifferent to the cause of society. The people's cause is the democratic and socialist transformation of society.

From this it is already discernible that the question of working out such profound changes was already looming. On the one hand, these changes made necessary the radical correction of the theological social ethics represented by the previous church leadership. On the other hand, in connection with this, they placed a new interpretation of all other theological disciplines on the agenda. I would like to illustrate this with just a few examples. The Lutheran theologians had to go back to the Luther's teaching about the two kingdoms\*, and they had to show that secular matters and events cannot be irrelevant to the Lutheran Church and its theology, just as they were not matters of indifference for Luther himself. They had to show also that Luther believed it possible for the church, and not only individual members, to commit errors and sins. From the theology of both churches a new socio-ethical and an associated dogmatic interpretation had to be worked out in the sense that they should be able to show what could be called sins against the people on the basis of an authentic Protestant theology in the middle of the twentieth century. Furthermore, it was an important theological task to devise a Protestant interpretation of the connection between the Old and New Testaments which proved the theoretical untenability of theological anti-semitism on the basis of reformation principles. Perhaps these few examples are enough to make clear that the new Protestant theology looked for realistic answers to questions of *hic et nunc* (the here and now) in such a way that it did not follow the theological errors of the Deutsche

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\*The Lutheran doctrine of "two kingdoms" or "two realms": in the Kingdom of God, the Redeemer rules all regenerate believers through Christ and the Gospel in personal faith and love; in the kingdom of men, the Creator rules all sinful creatures through Caesar and the law in civil justice and obedience. As both Redeemer and Creator, God is at once the Lord of both kingdoms, while as both righteous and sinful, the Christian is at once a subject of both kingdoms.

Christen; it formulated its answers on the basis of the Scriptures that were regarded as the biblical revelation.

1948-1958

The signing of the agreements\* was an important event for both Protestant churches and for the Hungarian People's Republic. On the theological-historical level, it encouraged a more complete, more detailed and deeper working out of the new theological teaching in both churches.

After the signing of the agreements the second period of Reformed and Lutheran church and theological history began. The new Reformed teaching was most frequently called the theology of "the narrow way" — a term coined by Albert Bereczky in 1950. Gyula Groó called the new teaching of the Lutheran Church "the theology of the serving church" in 1945, while others called it "the theology of our way". In the Reformed Church wide-ranging theological work continued, at the centre of which stood the question: how to make believers yield to God while participating in the construction of the socialist society. To this end it was necessary to undertake an analysis of the realistic theological alternatives of socialism and capitalism, and to clarify the practical problems of war and peace in the midst of the international conditions of cold war. Parallel with this they had to form their response to the issues currently being posed by socialist construction, because there were still political conflicts and rival tendencies within the churches and in the country as a whole.

For the Hungarian Reformed theologians Christo-centrism, especially the Barthian variety, was a driving force. In social ethics, however, they went beyond the social analysis of Barth. The renowned Swiss theologian concluded in the midst of cold war tensions that the churches must stand "between East and West". Bereczky, however, placed the true situation of the Hungarian churches at the root of his theology by stressing that the Hungarian church is in the East. Bereczky and the Czechoslovak Professor Hromádka reached the conclusion at about the same time that the church is not bound to social systems — i.e., capitalist society — and thus it can fulfil its

mission in socialism, but in an entirely different way than previously. The Reformed theology reached an important result when — recognising the connection between peace and socialism — it formulated that the causes of peace and socialism are invisible. And if service to the people is the cause and mission of the church, then the promotion of the cause of socialism and peace is the organic task of the entire church. Social changes placed the theological understanding of property on the agenda for revision. A solution was reached in the form of compensation of collective, socialist property on the basis of theological law. An equally major problem was the working out of a theological response to the progressive, secular movements. This was a question of relations with a Marxist movement based on a materialistic and atheistic world view. János Victor found an authentic Calvinist answer in terms of "the grace of God working from the outside towards the inside" as understood in the context of the universal Calvinist doctrine of grace. This was an important further development of Reformed theology from an ecclesiological viewpoint in respect of the realistic understanding of the situation of the church. The transformation of "the glorious church", and "the ruling church" to "the serving church" was gradually achieved on this theoretical basis.

This gradual realistic social orientation was proceeding in the Lutheran Church also, aided, as in the Reformed Church, by certain figures in the church leadership. Looking through the church literature of the period it is apparent that greater debates and sharper confrontations took place in the Lutheran Church in the first half of the 1950s than in the Reformed Church. This may largely be explained by the remarkable personality of Albert Bereczky and the prophetic character of his work, which buried the opposition in his church. The most important Lutheran writers of the time — Lajos Vető, László Dezséry, Imre Veöreös, Ernő Ottlyk — contributed to the further development of the new theology with their polemical essays. From their writings we can also get a picture of the other factions and schools of thought within the church. The most important among these were Pietism, otherworldliness, orthodoxy, and theological conservatism. Their representatives often criticised the "new way" very severely indeed. The new Reformed

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\*The 1948 concordats between the Reformed and Lutheran Churches and the new communist government.

theology also had to face a similar, but more subtle opposition. It is impossible not to recognise the political doubts, and even opposition, underlying the criticisms of the new theology.

The adaptation of Luther had one important role in the new Lutheran theology during this period. An authentic interpretation of the teaching about the "two kingdoms" came to the fore. The fundamental task of interpreting Luther must be to develop real answers to the real questions of the age while proceeding in Luther's footsteps. That is to say in the words of Veto: "Not back to Luther, but rather forward with Luther." In this spirit there began an examination of the alternatives of socialism and capitalism. The progressive Lutheran theologians took one particularly important saying of Luther: "Christian man does not live for himself, but he lives for faith and for his brethren in Christ through love," but the concept of brethren and brotherly love had gained new content, precisely as in the Reformed theology, during the period of socialist construction. And just as in the Reformed Church, the theological interpretation of war and peace also became significant in the theology of the Lutheran Church. The problem was approached in this way. War threatens human life and the progress of the people's cause. Because of this the church's service to the people should encompass the service of peace. The church must stand on the side of peace.

In the Lutheran Church important socioethical perceptions were also reached. The starting point was similar to that in the Reformed Church: one must recognise, confess, and repent of the short-comings and sins of the old society and of the Lutheran Church within it. In the debate which continued between Barth and a large part of the German Protestant leadership about whether the church, or only individual members, could commit social sins, the new theology of the Hungarian Lutheran Church followed in the path of Barth. Following Luther it confessed that the church is always a "suffering and struggling" church. Through repentance it was discovered that the source of old mistakes was the failure to recognise that the church's mission is not the exercise of ruling power, but service. The church is responsible for the world, for the people and for the Fatherland. It must serve in this spirit.

*The uprising of 1956 disturbed the process of cooperation between the church and the secular progressive powers. Poór states that the new theologians justly drew the conclusion that the uprising had been a counter-revolutionary attempt.*

1958-1985 .

After the political consolidation which followed the counter-revolution the new theology developed into "the theology of the serving church", and since 1983 into "Calvinism of the Gospel". Tibor Bartha coined both terms using New Testament references. We should, above all, take note of the continuity between "the narrow way" and "the theology of the serving church". The following fundamental principles are valid for each: "*sola Scriptura*" (the Scriptures alone), "*solus Spiritus Sanctus*" (the Holy Spirit alone), a Christo-centric interpretation of the Gospel, a new direction in ethical thinking, and the "turning of the church toward the world and fellowmen". The theology of the serving church is a further development of the narrow way, and has increasingly become the theoretical basis of the entire life of the Reformed Church. Previously Hungarian Reformed theology counted as a peculiar, but at the same time peripheral version of the classical western theological schools of thought. The working out of the theology of the serving church, however, would seem to be entirely original. And if we examine it in connection with social progress, we can see that a theological construction arose in an independent Hungarian church, which further developed its classical theoretical inheritance. The pattern of development in the Hungarian Lutheran Church is analogous to this. Lutheran writers most frequently refer to the new Lutheran theoretical teaching as "*diakonia theology*" after the example of Presiding Bishop Zoltán Káldy.

The great task of revising the entire theological system of the Reformed Church started in tandem with contemporary social changes. Of great significance was the Jubilee Synod of 1967. It provided a long-term theological programme for the church. Perhaps one of its most important consequences was the realistic recognition of the new position of the church in the socialist society. In the second half of the fifties and at the beginning of the sixties the so-called "*Constantinian spoilage*" of the church, or, in other words, the concept of the ruling church, remained the target of severe

theological criticism. The church voluntarily accepted the "last place" in society, and disavowed its mission to Christianise, or to transform it into a Christian society. A corresponding radical revision of the traditional concept of mission also took place. Mission should not serve the self-interest of the church, but the will of God. It is a serving function that is inseparable from the affairs of God or of mankind. Reformed dogmatics conclude that not only the churches and believers, but everyone — including atheists — can perform the service of God in as much as they work for the elevation and wellbeing of mankind. Any church, or any believer that wishes only to serve the will of God, and not humanity, betrays God's cause.

The Reformed theologians' interpretation of eschatology is particularly worthy of attention. They maintain the validity of judgement, heaven and hell in both the present and the future on the basis of the principle of "the redeemed but sinful" (*simul iustus, sed peccator*) new life. The church must represent the future glory of God in the present through serving God and man. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret this to mean that one must work toward the self-fulfilment of believers, while at the same time moving toward the time of future judgement (Károly Tóth 1983). The second coming of Christ will not be a cosmic catastrophe. The Bible does not explain when and how it will take place. Furthermore, I must mention that the Reformed theologians have tried to clarify the connection between science and theology in a correct way. On the one hand they begin from the position that science and theology are essentially different from each other, and that their respective methods diverge. Because of this theology cannot be measured by the standard of secular knowledge. On the other hand, they exert mutual influence on each other. Theology cannot dispense with scientific methods, concepts and knowledge. At the same time, science cannot replace faith or theology.

On this basis a completely new picture of Marxist-Leninist theory has been developed by Reformed theologians. They recognise that at the heart of Marxism-Leninism stands a secular social eschatology, the aim of which is the establishment of a benevolent society which neither Protestant theology nor its eschatology would be able to oppose. Referring to materialism and atheism the theologians emphasise

their differences of view, which, however, cannot be an obstacle to undertaking and realising collective service on behalf of mankind. In this way, they reached the stage of undertaking socialism rather than just accepting it. Thus we can say of the theology of the serving church that it is not an apologetic doctrine, but a theology of dialogue.

The speech of Zoltán Káldy at his episcopal instalment in 1958 was an important event in the history of the Lutheran Church. In it he spoke about his basic perceptions of the new theology. He saw that the church must continue to promote the building of good church-state relations. He also established the important theological thesis that the Scriptures are the standard in matters of faith, while in social and political questions believing Lutherans must listen to sober reason "in accordance with the principles of faith". The Scriptures cannot be interpreted by means of orthodox confessional methods. One must be ready to accept what the Holy Spirit says, through preaching, to believers and to the church on matters of current importance. He also made the important point that the sacred and secular spheres of a believer's life are inseparable. The worship of God continues outside the church. Sermons are not theologically deficient if they also address contemporary ethical questions. Káldy also emphasised that serving God and man — i.e., diakonia — embraces the entire life of the church.

A multi-faceted relationship has developed between Protestant theologians of Hungary and the West. Both the theology of the serving church and diakonia theology are geared to the cultivation of these contacts. But at the same time, they are wary of accepting the conclusions of foreign theological work without first examining it to see whether doctrinal interpretations applied to one or another social situation can be regarded as a valid result in our particular situation from the perspective of autonomous diakonia theology or the theology of the serving church.

In the course of constructing a new system of Lutheran theology important analogies with the Reformed theology of the serving church became apparent. The analogous elements existed primarily in the following areas: the establishment of a theological understanding of new social relationships, the acceptance of socialism, and the active promotion of socialism. These analogous lines have developed

while confessional differences have been safeguarded. The Reformed theology answers social and ethical questions on the basis of *in nomine Dei* (in the name of God). The Lutheran theology regards the real solution of new social questions as possible on the basis of both *in nomine Dei* and *coram Deo* (the presence of God). In diakonia theology, just as in the Reformed theology, important corrections of dogma took place and these were organically dependent on social and ethical corrections. I will merely mention here that in diakonia theology the correction of a Christology based on the principle *totus Christus* (the whole Christ) is unavoidable. According to Diakonia theology, secular social entities and organisations are present in society as *larvae Dei* (larva or seed of God). Only the Holy Spirit can convince believers, through the proclamation of the Word, to accept the moral values of these, or to see in them the opposite of these. Believers are capable of deciding on the basis of reason controlled by faith. The fundamental criterion is whether or not they serve the cause of progress and the interests of humanity. In the area of ecclesiology important corrections have also been made. The church cannot work out a secular programme for society or the world. Neither can it organise society. However, it does take part in the shaping of society and it helps in that process in its own way. Diakonia theology also interprets in a new way the relationship between scientific scholarship and theology. It avoids the problems associated with the conflict between science and theology. It does not try to make science a tool of theology. It has thus broken its apologetic connection with science as has the theology of the serving church. At the same time it accepts to a certain extent the results of scientific scholarship. Moreover, it makes use of it in theological work. The Lutheran Church, like the Reformed Church, has developed a doctrine which realistically examines and interprets Marxist theory without prejudice. Like the theology of the serving church, diakonia theology does not and cannot agree with Marxist materialism and atheism. It does, however, recognise that a programme for the building up of a really humane society, with which it not only agrees, but which it also actively supports, stands at the centre of Marxism.

Since the beginning of the 1980s the way has been open for theoretical dialogue and cooperation between theologians and

Marxist-Leninist researchers of religion. Our differences of world-view do not exclude the possibility of theoretical representatives of the two systems of thought seeking together the clarification of areas of agreement, and the identification of the fundamental dividing lines between the two systems of thought. The aim of the dialogue is to establish the theoretical basis of everyday development of the work of church policy on the basis of a mutual understanding and familiarity. It is not an undertaking established for its own end. Nor is it an effort at some kind of convergence by means of dialogue and cooperation.

Having referred to the fact that the theology of the serving church and diakonia theology have domestic and foreign opponents, I must also mention that the analysis of Protestantism by Hungarian Marxist researchers is also not without opposition and antipathy. Because the results of this research into religion are essentially compatible with our government's policy toward the churches, there are critics who make the claim that some kind of concession of principle or ideological compromise has taken place. My experience tells me that such critical remarks are not based on a real acquaintance with the facts, and do not take account of what has happened over the last forty years in Hungarian Protestant theology. Certain prejudices are largely responsible for these critical observations. Such prejudices are closely associated with a one-sided interpretation of the classical inheritance of Marxism-Leninism in the first half of the 1950s in Hungary, and there are those who still have not completely opposed the one-sidedness of this period with regard to the interpretation of religion. Because of this, it is important to draw the attention of the public to the fulfilment of important theological efforts of the two largest Protestant Churches over the past forty years, and to the fact that these efforts have not only proved the vitality of these churches at home, but have also won significant respect for them throughout the whole of Christendom. Thus I think that the Hungarian Marxist movement can be glad because the decisive majority of the clergy, theologians and leaders not only openly promotes the social programme of Marxism, but also sets an example that causes frank and sincere Christians living in different social situations throughout the world to take notice.

*Introduction and translation by John Eibner.*