

**THE CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF THE LUTHERAN EVANGELICAL  
CHURCH IN HUNGARY WITH A VIEW TO CHURCHES OF CENTRAL  
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

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The most important task of the churches in Europe is to collectively preach the Gospel in both word and deed for the salvation of all humankind. We need to work together in the Gospel spirit to bolster the story of Christian churches, a story that is characterized by many good experiences but also by division, and enmity that sometimes extends as far as hostile controversy.

This is the task for the twenty-first century that the churches of Europe, i.e. the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, Protestant, Orthodox and Roman-Catholic, have defined and summarized for themselves in the *Charta Oecumenica*.<sup>1</sup> In the context of present discussions about which role individual churches have played as cooperating entities and as societal majorities or minorities, this article will attempt to illuminate the mutual connections between Church and State in Hungary, looking also at how the churches of central Europe developed a sense of ecumenism after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989/90.

**In the Shadow of the World Wars - Fragmentation and Separation**

Along with other groups in Europe, churches in Central Europe and citizens in these territories were deeply affected by the Second World War. There was immeasurable misery, devastation, ethnic cleansing, and spiritual lethargy (Holocaust, accusations of "collective guilt," the "malenkij robot," (Russian for "a little work") the

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<sup>1</sup> *Charta Oecumenica*, 4/22/2001, Strassburg, II. On the Way to a Visible Faith Community among the Churches in Europe.

Benesh decrees in Czechoslovakia, and so on. In order to better understand these situations, we ought to begin our analysis with the First World War. The defeat in 1918/19 brought with it the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the truncation of the Kingdom of Hungary. As a result of the Trianon/Versailles Treaty the geographical area of Hungary was reduced by one third. Population figures shrank to fewer than a half of the original number and every third Hungarian, out of a population of three million, landed under the sovereignty of a foreign - but not always tolerant - government. Of course the churches in Central European countries had to reorganize themselves as well. The roots of attempts to revive a religiously-motivated nationalist fervor in Central European countries go back to the nineteenth century. These attempts were also the cause of serious catastrophes as in the last wars. This was also the case in the struggles between Serbs, Croats and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia. Among the many things that hold a country or a group together are not simply common values, a common religion, symbols and language but, lamentably, also a common enemy. The new ecumenical plan entitled "Healing of Memories" could help a great deal toward overcoming these historically rooted antagonisms.

Then the Second World War was followed by the well-known Communist dictatorship supported by Soviet military power and in the midst of the many tensions of the Cold War, Central Europe found itself in the so-called "Second World." Only after decades of "Babylonian captivity" did the churches in the former socialist nations regain their freedom (1989/90).<sup>2</sup>

Statistically, we see the following picture of Hungary in the year 1948.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On this subject see also M. Walker, *The Cold War and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 1993). Hans Vorster, Ed., *Ökumene in Ungarn, der Tschechoslowakei und Polen, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau Nr 64* (Frankfurt a. M., 1992). David Reynolds, Ed. *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives* (New Haven: 1994). M. Greschat and W. Loth, *Die Christen und die Entstehung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft* (Stuttgart, 1994). Francois Furet, *Das Ende der Illusion: Der Kommunismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1996). Leslie Lazlo, *Church and State in Hungary, 1919-1945* (Budapest, 2004). *Känderinformationen*. Kirchenamt der EKD. Ed. *Kirchliche Partnerbeziehungen in Europa* (Hannover, 2004). Heinz-Jürgen Joppien. Ed. *Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen in den Konflikten des Kalten Krieges*. Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau Nr. 70 (Frankfurt a.m., 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Lazlo, 346, *Pro Mundi Vita* Dossiers 1984/2, "The Church in Hungary," INFO-Társadalomtudomány, MTA 17/1991, 62.

Roman Catholic	6,240,427	67.8%
Greek Catholic (Uniate)	248,355	2.7%
Orthodox	36,010	0.4%
Reformed	2,014,707	21.9%
Lutheran (Evangelical)	482,151	5.2%
Unitarian	9,447	0.1%
Baptist	18,874	0.2%
Jews	133,862	1.5%
Other	8,674	0.1%
No religious Affiliation	12,291	0.19%

The Roman Catholic majority church in Hungary (and in other countries) remained aloof from the ecumenical movement and made it clear that the “one church”<sup>4</sup> of Christ manifests itself concretely only in the Roman Catholic Church. There were disagreements between Catholics and Protestants about mixed marriages and which religion the children would choose, despite the attitude of many people that we most truly reach the ideal of a “Christian Hungary,” the “country of Mary, the Mother of God” by a united front as Christians using an anti-Communist approach and working jointly to educate people in the faith.<sup>5</sup>

The Protestant attitude was based on the Reformation conviction that “the one holy, catholic and apostolic church” is found not within the boundaries of a specific church but “in, with and among” churches of all denominations. The famous solution of the Movement for Practical Christianity Life and Work Conference in Oxford in the year 1937 was cited as follows: “Let the Church be the church!” What this means is that “the church has no more important task and can serve the world in no greater way than to be truly a Christian church.”<sup>6</sup>

Included in that statement is the church’s essential mission. It is necessary to

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<sup>4</sup> The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Par. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Tibor Fabiny, *Bewährte Hoffnung* (Erlangen, 1984), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Rouse, R./Niell, St., *Geschichte der ökumenischen Bewegung 1517-1948* (Göttingen, 1957), II, 248.

have church unity in order to carry out the mission mandate for Jesus' sake. And missionary dedication to the world was always viewed as including the social and humanitarian services of the churches that work toward eliminating the gruesome aftereffects of the world war. Such "secular ecumenism" emphasized the fact that we must not understand God's desire for unity as only or primarily directed towards the church. It should also be seen in its social and cosmic breadth. Surely the most important thing here is to discover the means to be effective together in the world and not allow questions of confessional doctrine or liturgy to impede us.

A lively debate took place about the prophetic witness of the church in society and Karl Barth's critical remarks directed at the German Protestant churches were of importance in Hungary. Barth visited the Hungarian churches in 1948. He certainly affirmed the new direction of the Hungarian churches in social matters and defended the agreement of the reformed churches with the state. "But when he heard the details of its interpretation of the history of God, which in his opinion viewed the historical events as a source of divine revelation and thus identified them with God's will, he expressed a warning to Albert Bereczky," the bishop of the Reformed church<sup>7</sup>, in a letter.

We also need to mention the meaning of the church's undertakings on behalf of the Jews in this context. There were pastors, congregations, and different church groups, that saved thousands of Jews. The Reformed and Evangelical Lutheran churches dared to take a common initiative by writing a Protestant pastoral letter as well as a memorandum to the Prime Minister (June 25, 1944).<sup>8</sup> We can ascertain that

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<sup>7</sup> Vilmos Vajta, *Die 'diakonische Theologie' im Gesellschaftssystem Ungarns* (Frankfurt/Main, 1987), 14. Révész Imre, *Vallomások*, Ref. Szinati Iroda (Budapest, 1990), 102, 152. Karl Barth, "Abschied 1933" in *Der Götze wackelt*, 1951, 66.

<sup>8</sup> "We hereby notify the congregations, that on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June of this year after many verbal representations and repeated written documentation, both churches of the Gospel have lodged a formal protest and petition addressed to the royal Hungarian prime minister. In this memorandum they indicated what a deeply regrettable event the persecution and deportation of Hungarian Jews represented, whether or not they professed the Christian faith... This type of solution of the Jewish question violates the eternally binding moral commandment of God...As witnesses of the word of God we condemn every kind of treatment of Jews that is contrary to human dignity, justice and compassion and that visits the judgment of innocently spilled blood upon the Hungarian people...At the same time we urgently request that the Hungarian government make an end to the horror...With heartfelt pain we must admit that we can recognize no result stemming from our request. .. We challenge the community to repentance and the entire

anti-Jewish campaigns had a strongly religious underpinning and the inner conflicts of the churches between the two world wars prevented them from expressing strong opposition to the government's inhumanity.

**Process of Losses, New Construction, Oppression and Accommodation (1948-1956)**

After WWII, a provisional national assembly and a government were formed. In the 1947 elections the middle class parties prevailed, but then in the summer of 1949 the Communists attained a fictitious majority. In the presence of Soviet troops there was a process of purging in political parties, the bureaucracy, the army, and the police. The Parliament suspended the constitution of the Hungarian republic on the twentieth of August, 1949. But at that time the Hungarian people did not know the allied Western powers had sacrificed Hungary by treaty to the Soviet sphere. There were very unfavorable consequences for the churches in the takeover of private holdings by the state, the suspension of spiritual communities, and especially the nationalization of parochial schools (June 15, 1948) as the following figures demonstrate:<sup>9</sup>

	Removed from church to state control	All schools
Kindergarten	202	1,246
Primary Schools	4,262	7,016
Middle Schools	197	555
College preparatory	87	173
Post-secondary	30	42

In the transition to the new social order many priests, church employees and church officials were arrested, particularly the people who protested against the secularization of schools, for example Bishop Lajos Ordass (Evangelical-Lutheran Church) on September 8, 1948, and Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty on December 26, 1948. Because of their past association with capitalism and fascism, the churches were viewed as a

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Hungarian people to humility under the mighty hand of God and pray to God to grant grace and continuing favor to our Hungarian people." T. Fabiny, *op. cit.* 63.

<sup>9</sup> Statisztika Evkönyv, in *Beszélő*, 27 April 1991, 11.

subversive force and a “fifth column.” There was also a polarization within the churches when they received governmental directives about censorship of radio sermons and church publications and when the regime made political frontal assaults on church administrations. This was because there were elements in the churches who viewed this loss of power and privileges as an emancipation from crippling societal imperatives and political obligations.

A central question was the separation of church and state. The Reformed Church (October 7, 1948), the Evangelical-Lutheran Church (December 14, 1948), and the Roman Catholic Church (August 30, 1950) entered into agreements with the state. These accords were not traditional agreements. They were acknowledgments about common interests, a kind of *modus vivendi* or accommodation. These treaties determined the boundaries of church authority in the socialist society and gave a certain “guarded freedom.” It is true that the new constitution of 1949 had guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, but the governmental bureaucracy closely scrutinized church affairs and the life and influence of the churches. School and education were supposed to demonstrate a secular character and Marxist-Leninist ideology. The state determined the amount of financial support the churches received for payroll and upkeep of church property. Religious instruction was permitted outside of the regular public school day and individual churches were also permitted to have secondary schools (six high schools for the Roman Catholic Church and one for the Reformed Church.)

With the help of these agreements, the state forced all of the churches into line and created an ecumenism suited to the interests of socialist society.<sup>10</sup> Pastors, the hierarchy and church officials were supposed to swear the following oath to the

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<sup>10</sup> In this context we also cite from the agreement between the state and the Catholic episcopate: “ In the matter of citizenship obligations, the episcopate recognizes and supports the civil order and the Constitution of the Hungarian People’s Republic...We condemn every kind of activity promoting rebellion against the civil and social order of the Hungarian People’s Republic from whatever quarter it may come and declare that we will not tolerate the use of the religious feelings of Catholic congregations or individuals for anti-governmental purposes. We call on the clergy in particular to refrain from any opposition to the establishment of agricultural communes...we support the struggle for peace...condemn every incitement to war and the use of the atom bomb...” Eugen Voss (ed.), *Die Religionsfreiheit in Osteuropa [Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe]* [Zurich-Zollikon, 1984], 264ff.

Hungarian People's Republic and its Constitution: "I swear that I will be faithful to the Hungarian People's Republic, its population and its constitution, that I will support the Constitution and constitutionally constituted laws, that I will keep official state secrets, serve the interests of the people in the exercise of my duties and that with all the power of my being, I will strive to foster and strengthen the development of the Hungarian People's Republic."<sup>11</sup>

The politically-colored debates about the future direction of the churches also resulted in definitive changes in church administration, The Communist Party wanted administrations that were inclined to turn a deaf ear to discussion of the "legacy of an oppressive past (for example, student minister László Dezséry as successor to Bishop Lajos Ordass)." In the Protestant churches the "official" position was affirmation of cooperation with socialist society as a form of prophetic service. However, the "servant" church changed without protest into an "obsolete" church!

Despite variations in local, national, cultural and geopolitical contexts from country to country, for example, a national Orthodox church in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, a Roman-Catholic majority church in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Croatia, there can be no doubt, that the socialist governments of Central Europe carried on a very determined ideological battle against church and religion.

### **Ecumenism and Revolution (1956-1958)**

As in other socialist nations, after Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech before the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in Moscow on February 25, 1956, a political thaw took place in Hungary, replacing the Stalin years. The government tried to carry out a policy towards the churches that would bring with it the good will of the international community. One result was the annual meeting of the Church Ecumenical Advisory Committee in Galyateto in the summer of 1956. In 1955 Roman-Catholic Archbishop Grösz had been released from prison and Cardinal Mindszenty was allowed to trade a prison cell for house arrest. Politicians, artists and philosophers were no longer persecuted. The Western delegates who came to the conference of this central

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Vetö, *Vom Aufbau der Kirche in Ungarn* (Hamburg-Volksdorf, 1955), 97.

committee, namely Bishop Lilje, President Frey, the general secretaries Visser't Hooft and Lundquist, influenced a new policy stating that Bishop Lajos Ordass, who was also vice-president of the Lutheran Council of Churches, "together with his colleagues was free from all civil and religious opprobrium."<sup>12</sup>

After the Polish Uprising in June 1956, to begin with there was a significant demonstration in Budapest on October 23, 1956, with political slogans against the government. When the demonstrators were fired upon, the demonstrations turned into an armed uprising. We can only summarize the dramatic happenings that occurred between October 23 and November 4, 1956. It was no longer a question of reforms under the leadership of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, but this was revolution, a transformation of society. Cardinal Mindszenty was liberated and those colleagues or leaders who had previously been removed by the state were reinstated in their positions. This was true for the Reformed as well as the Evangelical Lutheran Church. On November 4<sup>th</sup> when Soviet troops put down the revolution at the cost of life, there was a great stream of refugees.

Cardinal Mindszenty fled to the American Embassy in Budapest and stayed there for seventeen years. At first the Protestant churches got a breathing space. In the summer of 1957, Bishop Ordass was permitted to travel with a delegation to Minneapolis in the United States for the plenary session of the Lutheran World Federation. But later first the bishops and leaders of the Reformed Churches, and then also of all the other churches, who had taken office during the Uprising, vacated their offices, in accordance with the law.<sup>13</sup> Despite all ecumenical protests from outside the country Bishop Ordass had to give the office of bishop back to Lázló Dezséry (June 24, 1958), who immediately announced his resignation from the position. Elder Zoltán Káldy was then installed as the new bishop (November 4, 1958). In the Reformed Church Bishop János Péter of Debrecen did not return and Bishop Tibor Bartha became

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<sup>12</sup> Szépfalusi Istvan, Ed, *Ordass Lajos, Onéletrajzi Irások, I-II*. EPMSZ Bern, 1985,1987, II 469. L.G. Terray. *In königlicher Freiheit, Bischof L. Ordass, 1901-1978*. Erlngen, 1990. The ministers whose reputations were restored along with Ordass were: György Kendeh and Dt. Andras Keken.

<sup>13</sup> Law #22 of the People's Republic, dated March 24, 1957, and retroactive (!) to October 1, 1956 stating that incumbency in leadership roles in the churches takes place only with the consent of the state.



his successor.<sup>14</sup>

A strengthening of socialism followed the Uprising and a wave of Terror swept the country. People who had played an active role in the event were arrested, clergymen among them. There were two factions, those with a “revolutionary” and those with a “counterrevolutionary” orientation. “The struggle between the old and the new in the church makes it clear to us that even today the demarcation is not between believers and unbelievers but between friends and enemies of Socialism. (Bishop E. Ottlyk)”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Struggle toward Coexistence and Dialogue (1958-1989)**

We must now analyze over thirty years of “the church during Socialism” After the time of brutal Stalinism and the wave of Terror as a response to the 1956 Uprising, socialist governments steered a somewhat milder course. A study by the Lutheran World Federation investigated the socialist countries between 1970 and 1978<sup>16</sup>, and there was worldwide interest in the problems of church and state in Socialism.

Between 1981 and 1987, with the help of studies about the interaction of religion and fundamental values for people, nation, and state, study committees of the Lutheran World Federation, including socialist countries, analyzed the conclusion of the American sociologist, Robert N. Bellah, that even “civil religion” should be taken seriously as a religious dimension of society, that it has its own integrity and merits as careful an analysis for its understanding as any other religion. Unlike the situation that pertains from case to case, from country to country it is not possible to decide about the meaning of this religious dimension as it pertains to the social situation on the one hand and on the other, about a theological perspective as a starting-point for preaching

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<sup>14</sup> These dismissed bishops, Dezséry and Péter, received civil positions, Dezséry at Hungarian Radio and Péter as a representative to the Parliament and also as Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of Hungary.

<sup>15</sup> Ernő Ottlyk, *The Path of the Evangelical Church during Socialism* (Berlin, 1962), cover page.

<sup>16</sup> Gerd Decke, (Ed.), *The Encounter of the Church with Movements of Social Change in Various Cultural Contexts*. LWF. Geneva 1977. *Theological Reflections about the Encounter of the Church with Marxism in Various Cultural Contexts*. Working Session of the World Council of Lutheran Churches, Aarhus (Denmark)

or for a prophetic protest.<sup>17</sup>

As at the time before the uprising of 1956, now, too, there were a variety of possibilities: conformity, ideological distinctiveness, opposition, a ghetto existence, or critical solidarity. There were also different dimensions of religious cooperation in the life of socialist society: for example, from person to person, through the religious institutions and structures that still existed (congregation, religious instruction, Sunday school, official actions, and so on), through the use of social structures, (organizations, as for example, the Patriotic People's Front or the parliament), or by means of the social influences of the church (diaconal institutions, and so on), and there was an important development on the way from conflict to official dialog.

The history of dialogue between Christians and Marxists in Europe rests on the foundation of worldwide ecumenical groundwork. The world conference "Church and Society" which took place in 1966 in Geneva published the following excerpted statement: "Between Christians and non-Christian exponents of socialist ideologies direct dialogue is certainly possible. We ask the Ecumenical Council of Churches particularly and urgently to begin an informal conversation with Marxists all over the world on an international basis."<sup>18</sup>

The International Paulus Society organized the first conferences in Salzburg, Herrenchiemsee, Mariánské Lázně/Marienbad and Bonn. In Hungary the first theoretical dialogue took place in 1981 (Debrecen). In the course of the dialogue conversations about the following themes took place:

- The connection between faith and knowledge in contemporary Christian teachings
- The concept of the human being and the personality
- The social-political teachings of contemporary Christianity

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<sup>17</sup> Béla Harmati, "The Church and Civil Religion: a Study Project for the Lutheran World Council, 1981-1987" in *Epd-Documentation*, Number 18/87 (Frankfurt/M) 1-12. H. Kleger and A. Müller, eds. *Middle Class Religion: Civil Religion in Europe and America*. Munich: 1986. Rolf Schneider, *Civil Religion: the Religious Dimension of Political Culture*. Gütersloh, 1987. B. Harmati, "Civil Religion" in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. Geneva, 1991. M. Tomka-P. M. Zelehner, eds. *Religion in the Reform Countries of Eastern and Middle Europe: God after Communism*. Ostfildern, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *Call to the Churches of the World*. Stuttgart: 1957, 259.

- Absolute and relative boundaries between Marxism and Christian theology
- The possibility of dialogue between Marxist philosophers and Protestant theologians and its limitations
- New possibilities for common endeavors and common thought
- The ecumenical and international perspectives of Marxist –Christian dialogue

We can state among other things, that one of the results is that “the dialogue helped to lessen the criticism of religion in that it emphasized how we can recognize not only the negative aspects of religion but also its positive historical meaning, that, therefore, the world-view of a Christian, although it comes from religion and faith, is not the primary revelation of religion.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, we need to learn that dialogue means at least listening and respecting one another. For this reason, God was not “entirely dead” for the Marxists in the same way as Marx was not “entirely dead” for the theologians.

It should be noted that the dialogue was often not so much carried on as “quoted.” In socialist societies there was a chasm between the language of religion and of ideological Marxism. There was no common conceptual clarity. A justified criticism that was heard was: “We are creating something like a divided community, in which everyone is the prophet of the others and in which the pervasive conviction of an inclusive commonality was always conjured up but never really put into practice.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time the international dialogue meant theological stock-taking and an ecumenical rapprochement among European churches about social questions.

The deliberations and the closing ceremonies of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki, 1973-1975) were enormously meaningful for East-West relations. The following are signs of thawing: the participation of the delegates from socialist countries in ecumenical conferences, possibilities for contacts between the churches, stipends for young theologians and religious workers, conferences of ecumenical organizations in socialist countries, and so on. A high-point

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<sup>19</sup> “ Hungary: Marxist-Christian Dialog about Religion” in: *Lutheran World Information* (Geneva: Number 49/81), 4.

<sup>20</sup> “Dialog in Marienbad” in *Neues Forum* (Vienna: June/July 1967), 459.

of ecumenical contacts was the plenary session of the World Council of Lutheran Churches in Budapest (July 22-August 5, 1984). The bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church Zoltán Káldy was elected president of the World Council.<sup>21</sup>

In this connection we must mention the question of “theology of diakonia.” In the Reformed Churches of Hungary it was preceded by a new inner orientation as “theology of the servant church” (Imre Révész, Zoltán Tildy, Albert Bereczky), but theology of diakonia really became an ecumenical problem in 1984 in connection with the plenary meeting in Budapest and because of the critical letter of the Hungarian minister Zoltán Dóka against Bishop Káldy.<sup>22</sup> “Theology of Diakonia” was a key concept in locating the church in the socialist society of Hungary; it determined all of official Hungarian ecumenism and influenced the international activities of the Christian Peace Conference in Prague.

We find a systematic summary of the theology of the servant church in the declarations of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary of 1967. For the ecumenical movement Bishop Tibor Bartha recognizes this theology as an important “specific and autonomous Hungarian reformed theology and as evangelical Calvinism.”<sup>23</sup>

Among the fundamental questions of this theology the ecumenical ones that we should emphasize are the problems of service in the interest of peace. Not only the very active international Christian Peace Conference in Prague but also the national peace organization under the leadership of Cardinal Lékai and Bishop Bartha have organized ecumenically meaningful conferences in Hungary.<sup>24</sup> From the point of view of church politics, the complex of problems was approached not only with the goal of finding a

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<sup>21</sup> “From World Council to Community: A History of the World Council of Lutheran Churches 1947-1997” edited by J. H. Schjöring, P. Kumari, N. Hjelm. Hannover, 1997. “Budapest 1984” in *Christ-Hope for the World*. LWF-Report Number 19/20. Stuttgart: 1985.

<sup>22</sup> P. Phillippi-Th. Strohm, ed. *Theology of the Diaconate*. Heidelberg, 1989. V. Vatja, op. cit., 101 ff. Dóka Zoltán, “Nyílt levél” in: *Eros Vár*. Cleveland, 1984/5-6, 5-7.

<sup>23</sup> T. Bartha/L. Makkai, eds. “Tanulmányok a Magyarországi Református Egyház történetéből 1867-1978” (*Studia Acta Ecclesiastica V*) Budapest, 1983, 592.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the conference undertaken with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, February 28-March 1, 1984, “The Responsibility of Mankind in the Contemporary World” with Marxists and well-known theologians like Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Erwin Fahlbusch.

*modus vivendi*, but also as one with theological claims. Bishop Káldy asserted confidently “With the guidance of the Holy Spirit our Evangelical-Lutheran Church is embarking on the path of the deaconate. The discovery of this path and the first steps along the way as well as thinking it through and its scriptural basis is connected in the Lutheran church with my name. I assume this.”<sup>25</sup> But we can also discern the mood of a “companion liturgy” to the power of the state. “There is no contradiction between the theology of service of our church and the socialistic order of society. After we were emancipated from the capitalist social order, we recognized Christ as a servant savior and imitated him in the church as well as society and in the larger family of humanity. (E. Ottlyk)”<sup>26</sup>

Only this presumed “official theology” was to serve as an all-inclusive interpretation of the Christian faith to be set against the false path of opposition from Bishop Ordass and Cardinal Mindzenty and show to ecumenism a positive picture of prophetic service.<sup>27</sup> Using study editions for the plenary sessions and conferences of the World Council of Churches, the world councils of the various faiths and the Christian Peace Conference, Hungarian ecumenism tried to document how it progressed from the conflicts of the year 1956 to coexistence and dialogue in the seventies and eighties. (Geneva 1966 and all the plenary assemblies of the WCC, LWF and WARC).<sup>28</sup> But the picture of a unified responsible socialist society was destroyed by the occupation of Czechoslovakia by socialist countries in August of 1968.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Process of Conquering the Past and a New Orientation, 1989-2005**

After decades of “Babylonian captivity” the churches in the former socialist countries attained a new freedom. As was the case with the past and the ecumenical situation of the individual countries, so now the new wave of political and societal

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<sup>25</sup> On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his consecration as bishop. Z. Káldy, “Vallomás az elmúlt 25 évről [Witness of the past twenty-five years]” in *Lelkipásztor*, Budapest, 1984, Number 1, 3.

<sup>26</sup> E. Ottlyk, *op.cit.*, 150.

<sup>27</sup> V. Vajta, *op.cit.*, 101ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. Geneva, 1991, 379-80.

<sup>29</sup> Josef Smolik, “Ecumenism from the Perspective of Prague” in H. Joppien Ed., *op.cit.*, 199-205. H. Vorster, Ed., *op.cit.*, 71-106. Heinz Joachim Held, “Ecumenism in the Cold War: in H-J. Joppo, Ed., *op.cit.*, 21-161.

change had no unified timetable. In Hungary we can perhaps view the death of Bishop Káldy in 1987 as the beginning of definitive change in the church and in society (formation of the first opposition groups with the goal of peaceful systemic change, new bishops like I. Seregély and B. Harmati in the churches). The political and economical restructuring took place from 1989 on (dismantling the barriers at the Austrian border and opening the borders to refugees from the German Democratic Republic, revising the events of 1956 from “counter revolution” to a revolution and folk uprising, seeing the abdication of the Socialist Worker’s Party of its constitutionally-based leadership role, and the transition to a multi-party parliamentary democracy).<sup>30</sup>

A new religious law was passed by the parliament on January 24, 1990, that retained the separation of church and state, but granted the free exercise of religion for every citizen, and abolition of the church-state agreements of 1948 and 1950. The State Office of Church Affairs was disbanded. The government set aside first the agreements with the Roman-Catholic Church and then with the Reformed and the Evangelical Lutheran churches (February 26 and March 19, 1990). The first free parliamentary elections in forty-four years took place in March 1990 and the government negotiated with the churches for the return of all state-appropriated properties (Law number XXXII, July 22, 1991). New church schools, secondary schools, universities and institutions as well as places for deacons were opened. The Soviet Army withdrew from the country in 1991 and Hungary resigned from the Warsaw Pact. In 1994 the country became a member of NATO and on May 1, 2004, Hungary became a member of the European Union.

Diplomatic relations between Hungary and the Vatican were reestablished. New Roman-Catholic bishops and cardinals were named and in the Protestant churches there were new elections (B. Bábel, M. Mayer, A. Veres, P. Erdő, L. Hegedüs. B. Bölcskei, I. Szebik, J. Itzész). The status of Cardinal Mindzenty and Bishop Ordass

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<sup>30</sup> Dalos, György, *Hungary from the Red Star to the Crown of Saint Stephen*. Frankfurt/M. 1997; Molnar, Miklos, *The History of Hungary*. Hamburg, 1999; Lendvai, Paul, *Hungary-A Thousand Year History*. Munich, 2001.

was rehabilitated posthumously.<sup>31</sup> The churches received access to mass media and the charitable acts of churches on behalf of the state (help for refugees, addicts, and so on) were extended with ecumenical cooperation (founding of the Ecumenical Aid Society).<sup>32</sup> The situation showed signs of a Christian awakening (an increasing number of baptisms, also of adults, movements toward the deepening of spirituality, liturgical renewal, a new translation of the Bible, youth encounters and proselytizing, new foreign partner church contacts. Founding of a Protestant Christian theater, a Roman-Catholic radio station and so on).

There were and there are differences of opinion as to whether we are delaying coming to terms with the past. The history of the last sixty years is still too fresh and complex to judge objectively. A comprehensive analysis and evaluation of this period in history can only take place from a corresponding distance and as the result of a broad consensus. Certainly there were many attempts at a reckoning. As one example we can cite the declaration of the Southern Diocesan Presbytery of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church.<sup>33</sup>

In the process of the "Healing of Memories" additional problems arose within the framework of world ecumenism. A great debate occurred about the freedom of the churches and the minorities in Romania and Yugoslavia, also about how world ecumenism handled these questions (i.e. Ceausescu's times with pressure on the

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<sup>31</sup> "Civil reinstatement of Bishop Ordass on April 23, 1990, religious reinstatement on May 17, 1990" in Szépfalusi, *op cit.*, II, 782-785. Baer, H. D. *The Lutheran Church in Communist Hungary: Quest for Moral Integrity*. Texas University Press, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> "Faith in the Second World: Focus Hungary" *Zollikon-Zurich* No. 7-8/1990, 21- 37.

<sup>33</sup> " in the recently ended period of history, our church operated within the framework of a totalitarian state which destroyed our institutions, handicapped our mission, robbed us of our freedom and limited our lives...Under this regime our church became a government puppet instead of being faithful to its prophetic mission and taking upon itself the task of becoming the conscience of society...We also abandoned the victims of society, those who were displaced, the refugees, our brothers and sisters who were reduced to the level of kulaks, the victims of the reprisals after 1956...We should guard against narrow perspectives. God's Holy Spirit was still at work among His people in those difficult times...Not everyone is equally responsible for the sins of the past. Some were the slaves of power; others were its victims. Some did violence to their consciences for the sake of career advancement, others, actuated by fear, because of anxiety about their own fate or that of their family or community...Each individual needs to examine and evaluate his own responsibility, admitting where and to what degree he has incurred guilt. ...Affirming the continuity of our mission, as the Southern presbytery of the diocese, we do penance for these sins. We ask the ministers and congregations to do the same..." (March 17, 1990) *Faith in the Second World, op.cit.*, 33ff.

churches, national minorities, abrogation of human rights, destruction of villages, influx of refugees, the Balkan War, the Ecumenical Council in the “straitjacket of ecumenical diplomacy,” and so on).<sup>34</sup> There were also signs of reconciliation, as the 1990 convention of churches from Romania and Hungary shows.<sup>35</sup>

Looking back on the last 50-60 years we can speak of a hunger for transcendence in Central Europe. But this does not mean that we encounter a hunger for the church as an institution. There are many different religious elements that remain vital in the form of folk-church traditions, in the relationship between the church and the nation and as the fundamental structure of basic values. Today many people are warning us against increasing attempts to revive a religiously-based nationalistic fervor. In the German Democratic Republic, the year 1983 demonstrated how a socialist state attempted to interpret its historical national heritage on the occasion of the Martin Luther anniversary celebrations and through this to assume a legitimizing influence on the social unity of the people.<sup>36</sup>

The difficulty of post-Barthian theology to harmonize with religion in general might swamp the church, considering the plethora of exotic and esoteric new religions that are appearing in Europe, since basically we have not too little, but in fact a great searching for “too much religion.” In Hungary today there are more than 140 registered churches and religions. Theological studies need to revisit the theory of secularization, considering how, where and in what way “the myth” of an “era without religion”<sup>37</sup> is

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<sup>34</sup> Heinz Joachim Held, “Ecumenism in the Cold War” in H-J. Jopplen, ed. *op. cit.*, 82-132. G. Besier-A. Boyens-G. Lindemann, *National Protestantism and the Ecumenical Movement: Church Actions in the Cold War (1945-1990)*. Berlin, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> On the invitation of the Conference of European Churches, Reformed Evangelical-Lutheran, Orthodox Churches and the Baptist Union set up a conference in Novi Sad (Yugoslavia). They declared “in the spirit of genuine repentance we regret deeply all our failings and all the compromises we entered into in the past...” At the same time they called for resistance to all kinds of national divisions and attempts at one-upmanship, because there is “no other way than that of reconciliation.” A life of freedom in our common future is only possible on the foundation of guaranteed human rights. Should there be instances of compromising the rights of ethnic minorities, in the future the church would no longer be silent, but would plead for solidarity. In *CEC News*. Geneva, November 8, 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Neubertt, Erhart. “Recasting Religion in GDR Society” *Epd-Documentation* (Frankfurt/M) Number 35-36, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> G. Sprondel, “The Myth of the ‘Era without Religion’ in GDR society” in: *Lutherische Monatshefte* 1985, 12 ff. Ruthven, Malise, *Fundamentalism- The Search for Meaning*. Oxford, 2005. *Religious Freedom in East-Middle Europe after the Fall of the Berlin Wall* ÖRK in Hungary, Budapest, 1998.



to be understood today. Statistics from the year 2004 give the following picture of religious affiliations in Central Europe.<sup>38</sup>

	Church Membership in %	Population
Estonia	26-28%	1,430,000
Latvia	55-58%	2,330,000
Lithuania	87-89%	3,430,000
Poland	92-93%	38,741,000
Romania	95-96%	22,458,000
Slovakia	87-88%	5,408,000
Czech Republic	48-49%	10,300,000
Hungary	75-76%	10,187,000

The contemporary situation in the churches carries the signs of an ecumenical awakening. The churches could only perceive new social possibilities for service “with and for each other.” There were groups that gave high priority to speedy organizational reforms in the church (“*sola structura*”). But they soon realized that organization and structure in the church are always secondary. It is not the financial autonomy of the church (“*sola pecunia*”) and the retention of traditional privileges that define its “*proprium*,” but its “spiritual and sacred dimension,” the revealed Word of God. The difficult question remains: how can we make this “*proprium*” understandable when we are still carrying around with us the omissions of the past?

The Papal visit to Hungary from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1991 marked the turning point of Hungarian ecumenism. The historically negative posture of Protestants and non-Christians toward Rome was diminished. An ecumenical service took place in the Reformed Church of Debrecen and the Pope spoke in prayer with “healing recollection” of Protestant martyrs, who had been sold to Naples in 1675 as galley slaves. We ought to mention that the Hungarian Reformed and Evangelical-

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<sup>38</sup> “Information about the Countries-Church Offices of the EKD.” ed. “*Church Partner Relationships in Europe*. Hannover, 2004. M. Tomka-P.M. Zulehner, Eds. *op. cit.*, 27. 183. 206.

Lutheran Churches perform refugee work together as well as having a common communion altar society, thus overcoming the period of suffering of the bloody Counter-Reformation. The signing of the Leuenberger Agreement in 1975 made this cooperation official.<sup>39</sup> Within the framework of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary (founded as early as 1943) there are work agreements, theological dialogues, and ecumenical programs “in reconciled individuality” with the Roman-Catholic Church as well (for example, further work on common declarations of the doctrine of justification by faith, Augsburg, 1999; receipt of ecumenical documents about dialogue and so on). Admittedly there has not yet been further progress in questions of a common Eucharist, the reciprocal recognition of ordination, etc.

The *Charta Oecumenica* of 2001 reminds us: “In the spirit of the Gospel we must work together to write the story of the Christian Churches.” Those who hold worldly authority have always been tempted to construct totalitarian societies by rewriting the end of the Lord’s Prayer to read: “Mine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever,” while the Church is always tempted to erroneously support worldly authority with accommodating “liturgies.”

#### INFORMATION ABOUT HUNGARY

Area 93,030 sq. kilometers Population: 10, 187,000,

Official language: Hungarian (Magyar), Ethnicity: 96.9% Hungarian

National minorities: Roma, Germans, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Romanians, etc.

Form of government: Republic on a parliamentary foundation

Currency: 1 Forint (HUF) = 100 Fillér

International memberships: UN, OECD, NATO, OSCE, WEU, EU since May 1, 2004

Capital city: Budapest with 1,695,000 inhabitants

Religions: Roman-Catholic and Greek-Catholic Churches (58-60%), Protestants: Reformed, Ev. Luth, Baptists, Methodists (17-20%), Orthodox (.3%), Jews (.2%)

*The Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Hungary*: 300-330,000 members, 3 districts with 3 bishops (North, South and West Districts), 16 regional ecclesiastical areas (Seniorat) with deacons, 256 main congregations with branch congregations, 330 ministers (men and women).

National offices: HU-1085 Budapest, Üllői út 24, Ruling bishop and concurrently Bishop of the Northern District: Imre Szebik (2005).

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<sup>39</sup> “Position of the Hungarian Protestant Churches, 1973” in: *Theológiai Szemle*, Budapest, 1973, 90ff.