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# A Free Episcopal Election in Hungary; Social Ferment and Religious Revival in Yugoslavia

Paul Mojzes

Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

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A FREE EPISCOPAL ELECTION IN HUNGARY;  
SOCIAL FERMENT AND RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN YUGOSLAVIA

by Paul Mojzes

In some of our past issues we have been reporting about the discontent in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, known popularly as the "Doka case." One of the issues which agitated the Reverend Dr. Zoltan Doka was the dictatorial power and alleged subservience to the state by Bishop Dr. Zoltan Kaldy. The controversy over the role of Bishop Kaldy ceased to be relevant when Bishop Kaldy had a stroke. He died on May 17, 1987.

Subsequently a very encouraging process took place in the Lutheran Church of Hungary which, I believe, is symptomatic of the general trend (and, by definition, not without exceptions) in the religious situation in Eastern Europe in the past several years.

Originally, for the election of the new bishop of the Southern Diocese of the Lutheran Church of Hungary about fifteen candidates were being mentioned in various quarters in the church. Three of them emerged as the leading candidates, namely Agoston Karner, the secretary general of the church, Istvan Nagy, a professor of theology, and Mihaly Toth Szollos, a dean or senior pastor. Bishop Gyula Nagy of the Northern Diocese discussed the acceptability of these three candidates with the State Office for Religious Affairs, since in Hungary the state Presidency must approve the election of bishops. This, it should be noted, is a remnant of the pre-Communist practice that the Hungarian king's approval was necessary for the highest offices in the major churches. All three of these candidates were perceived by many in the church as being conformists in regard to the government ("pro-communist" in the local parlance), perhaps even more so than Kaldy. Karner and Nagy withdrew their candidacy, which made it likely that Toth Szollos would run as the single candidate, as has been the case since 1947 when Lajos Ordass was the last to be elected in a real contest.

But it was not to be. A "dark horse" candidate emerged in the person of Dr. Bela Harmati who has been with the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva many years in various posts, most recently as the head of the Study Department. The Presbytery of the Southern Diocese then recommended that the congregations elect one of these two candidates. This was over the objection of Mr. Doka who urged the congregations to abstain from voting due to an irregularity in the nomination process which was apparently committed by Bishop Gyula Nagy.

Thereupon strong lobbying took place on behalf of Harmati, who is perceived as being independent-minded and conciliatory yet acceptable to the government. Both Szollos and Harmati presented themselves and their ideas in the denominational newspaper, Evangelikus Elet. The congregations voted in July by mailing their ballots, each congregation of the diocese having a single vote. The ballots were opened on August 14, 1987. Harmati had received 114 votes out of the 126. Nine votes were for Szollos, two or three were abstentions. Thus the fifty-one-year-old Bela Harmati became bishop. The installation date is on October 24, 1987.

Another encouraging note is that Robert Frenkl, M.D., a professor of medicine at the High School for Sports in Budapest, will probably become the new lay leader of the same church. Here, too, there were originally three candidates. But one withdrew, while the other was not acceptable to the Presbytery of the Diocese. So Frenkl's election as the church's supervisor seems likely. It appears that he and Harmati will be able to work well together.

This could be a new chapter for Lutheran church renewal in Hungary. Harmati's leadership style will be in sharp contrast to Kaldy's. One may expect far more freedom within the church with Harmati at the helm.

Nor is this a unique case. Dr. Elemer Kocsis, a professor of theology at the Debrecen Hungarian Reformed Theological School, won by a three-fourths majority over Dr. Zoltan Aranyos as the successor of Bishop Tibor Bartha. Dr. Kocsis is known for his biblical and systematic theological studies and has recently participated in Christian-Marxist dialogues. With Bishop Karoly Toth, who has become the senior Bishop upon Bartha's death, and Bishop Kocsis, the Hungarian Reformed Church has now an independent and dynamic leadership. When one adds to this the appointment of Dr. Laszlo Paskai as the new Primate of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church and the Archbishop of Estergom, and the appointment of four additional Roman Catholic bishops (Laszlo Danko, Istvan Seregely, Endre Gyulay, and Istvan Konkoly), then one realizes that the Hungarian churches have received in 1987 a tremendous infusion of new, younger leadership which may steer the churches in a more dynamic and creative direction than the previous generation of leaders who had to cope with the enormous difficulties of the Stalinist period. The Stalinist period is over and the churches need a flexible and courageous leadership to cope with the religious revival which is evident in Hungary. Sociological studies have evidenced a marked revival of religion among the youth, especially the university students of Hungary. How to deal with this increase in religiosity, some of which is not church oriented, will be one of the challenges for the new leadership of churches in Hungary. Greater

flexibility on the part of the government in both the political and economic realms has brought about more ideological diversity and greater religious freedom, frequent interactions between Christians and Marxists, and a sense of pride in these achievements.

Hungary is not the only country which shows evidence of both social and religious ferment. Reports from East Germany indicate a policy of liberalization, already symbolized by the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. Whereas earlier the official line was that there was no need for Christian-Marxist dialogue in the G.D.R. since cooperation between Marxists and Christians was already highly developed, it is now possible to promote the dialogue itself. In Hungary and in East Germany the policies of perestroika and glasnost of the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, are welcomed by all those in favor of the flexibility and liberalization already achieved in those countries, because in the Soviet restructuring and openness they see not only a confirmation of the correctness of the policies of the past few years but a guarantee that such developments will not be frustrated by a Soviet intervention.

It is not exaggerated to view Gorbachev's reforms as a source of great hope in Eastern Europe. While many are still waiting for a more distinct policy of change toward religion in the U.S.S.R., it is quite evident that in Eastern Europe it has already borne distinctly positive results. Anxiety over possible reactions against Gorbachev by hard-liners in the Soviet Communist Party which would lead to reversal of such reforms is a clear sign of the positive impact which these reforms have already made. Further improvements in church-state relations in Poland may be possible due to lessened anxiety over Soviet intervention. Hard-line political leaders in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania have to reckon with the shifting winds in Moscow. Symptomatic of the new reality is the publication of the full text of the decision of the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party which was published in Rabotnichesko Delo (Sofia) of August 11, 1987, with the provocative title, "On the Necessity of Far-Reaching Changes in the Attributes of Government in Regard to the Decisions of the July Plenum (1987) of the CC of the CPB." The resolution calls for new principles of functioning in the party and government organs, the achievement of a greater degree of humanism and scientific orientation, and a new, higher degree of democratization. The direction of the proposed changes is toward lessening the cult of personality. Changes of this sort often foreshadow liberalization in many areas of life, hence perhaps also in policy toward religion.

Due to Yugoslavia's independence from the Soviet orbit Gorbachev's influence is not felt directly, though the press and media ardently report every Soviet step away from despised Stalinist

practices, which the Yugoslavs feel vindicates their break away from the Soviet bloc. The dynamics of Yugoslavia's development is fairly independent from the Soviet bloc's, yet the socialist nature of the regime creates affinities--and tensions--with the other Eastern European countries. Yugoslavia is in a crisis, with the elements of danger and opportunity both being present in the difficulties which confront them. The crisis is international, political, economic, social, and technological. The Balkans are still the powder keg of Europe, primarily due to unresolved ethnic issues. Yugoslavia's relationship with Bulgaria and Albania are tense. Within Yugoslavia the ethnic tensions, particularly sharp presently between the Serbians and Albanians, brought the country to the verge of a civil war. Often the six republics and two autonomous regions resemble a confederation rather than a federation. Perhaps more accurately Yugoslavia resembles eight feudal fiefdoms run by eight rival communist party bureaucracies. The post-Tito government, planned by Tito himself, has not worked well, and a new constitution, the fourth or fifth since 1945, is being proposed. The old guard bureaucrats are playing musical chairs; more gifted younger people are restlessly watching the inept leadership which is unable to cope with political and economic problems. No one even pretends to know how to solve the problems of galloping inflation, inability to pay foreign debts, mismanaged investments, financial debacles, rampant corruption, increasing numbers of strikes, and vast poverty, especially among the proletariat. This is but a short account of the woes of the country.

Yet, the opportunities for increased democracy are astonishing. The press and the media publish just about everything; there are practically no more taboo topics. Bookstores are brimming with new books which describe, analyze, and criticize nearly everything. Many Westerners remember the courageous criticism by the Praxis philosophers and the banning of their journal. There is no more need to regret the dissolving of the Praxis group; nearly everyone in the country now thinks and writes like the Praxis people. Even the government! TV interviews with workers candidly show massive dissatisfaction and resentment against the government; government officials are forced to resign under public opinion pressures. The press wages battles against certain officials, and so do officials among themselves, in the press. One old-time communist leader publicly shot himself in protest against what he saw as the disintegration of the country. New publishing houses are emerging constantly. Belgrade has 50 publishing houses and Zagreb thirty! Small towns have publishing houses; books are published even privately without being labeled as samizdats. Practically every church has extensive publishing activities. Glas Koncila (Voice of the Council), the Zagreb weekly Roman

Catholic newspaper, openly engages the daily press in debates whenever the press attacks the Church. Neither side is pulling any punches.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty, in which all traditional values have been given up in the public arena, the young people in particular are experiencing a dramatic increase in religiosity. A study by a group of sociologists led by Dr. Srdjan Vrcan of Split, which was shared on the TV by means of a long interview, shows that in 1967 one-third of high school students admitted to being religious, while in 1987 well over half the students claim to be religious; practically double the number of twenty years ago. About 80% of workers' children are religious, which is about double the proportion of the children of intellectuals. Twenty-five percent of children of workers who are members of the communist party are religious, while only 5% of children of intellectuals who are communist party members indicate religious interests. Dr. Vrcan states that the figures may vary from region to region in Yugoslavia, but the trend is the same in the entire country. Some of the young people are fascinated by Oriental religions and a whole slew of books have been published on Eastern mysticism and yoga which are enthusiastically bought by young seekers, especially in Serbia. In the Catholic regions of the country religiosity is more channeled through the church. The alleged apparitions of the Blessed Virgin in the small village of Medjugorje in Hercegovina bring controversies among theologians but also a steady stream of both domestic and foreign pilgrims, over 5 million since 1981. Their enthusiasm for the miracles and messages which young teenagers receive on a daily basis seems unbounded. Not only Catholics go to Medjugorje; Orthodox, Muslim, and even atheists (including communist party members) visit and claim great benefits. Currently Medjugorje is the single most massive international religious manifestation in a socialist country.

During a recent visit to my hometown of Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, I witnessed the visit of the ecumenical patriarch Demetrios I on September 12, 1987, to the Serbian Orthodox cathedral. A long procession of black limousines with militia escort contained Patriarch German of the Serbian Orthodox Church and a large number of bishops. With church bells tolling a spontaneous crowd of several thousand people warmly greeted the arriving guests. People of all ages waved and applauded, even climbed on fences to see better the illustrious visitors. The church was packed for the long liturgy on that Saturday morning. An even larger number of people went to greet the patriarchs when they visited Kosovo--the region of embattled Serbian and Albanian nationalism. Here nationalism and religion are still ancient allies in a tangle of conflicting interests that no one knows how to solve and which at any moment could become as hopeless as Beirut. A sign of

hope, and of true ecumenism, was the suggestion by a Serbian Orthodox priest, reported in a Belgrade newspaper, that if a Serbian should hurt or attack an Albanian the local Orthodox priest should go to apologize publicly to the aggrieved. And vice versa, the Albanian Muslim Hodza should apologize to the Serbian victim when an Albanian attacks a Serbian. It is unclear whether such a suggestion will be either acceptable or implementable. One can think of many reasons why it may not work; but at least it was a reconciling rather than an antagonizing gesture.

Thus the role of religion in the future of Eastern Europe is on a significant upswing. Yet it is still riddled with ambiguities and contradictions, some stemming from its own inner predicaments, others due to its social context. No one knows whether this opportunity will be used creatively or destructively. What we do know is that they need our prayers and support in this moment of kairos.