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## CHURCH AND STATE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

with particular attention to Protestantism

by Paul Bock

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Czechoslovakia came into being in 1918 in the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prior to that date, the western lands --Bohemia and Moravia-- had been under Austrian rule and the eastern lands --Slovakia and Ruthenia-- under Hungarian rule. While Czech, the language spoken in Bohemia and Moravia, was the literary language in Slovakia until the middle of the 19th century, the Ruthenians had never had a formal contact with the Czech language or culture until the establishment of the Czechoslovak state. Slovak, which previously was a spoken dialect, became the official language in Slovakia in the 19th century.

Thus in 1918 three different peoples with three different histories, traditions, living standards merged into one state. There were vast differences between them. The western Czech-speaking lands were more advanced in education and industrialization than their eastern partners and enjoyed therefore a much higher standard of living. "Taken separately, Bohemia would have been the third most industrialized country in the world, surpassing all continental states including Germany and Belgium. Ruthenia, on the other hand, represented one of the most backward regions in all of Europe, and Slovakia was not very far ahead."<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, the lack of equality led to friction and conflicts, particularly between Czechs

and Slovaks, which the young state did not have time to solve before the outbreak of the second world war.

Besides the three major national groups, there lived --and still live today-- minorities on Czechoslovak territory: Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, Russians, Jews, and Germans. The last group inhabited primarily the areas along the Czech-German border and was known as Sudeten-Germans. In the 1930's many of them embraced the Nazi philosophy and by their allegiance to Hitler paved the way for the dismembering of Czechoslovakia in 1938-39. The Nazis first overran the Sudetanland and annexed it to the German Reich, then invaded the remnant of Bohemia and Moravia and made it into the so-called "protectorate." The whole of Ruthenia and the southern part of Slovakia were given to Hungary, and the rest of Slovakia became an independent state, a Nazi satellite. Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. After the war, the state was re-established; the Sudetanland, from where the German population was largely expelled, was returned to its historical place within Bohemia, and the parts of Slovakia taken by Hungary prior to World War II were likewise returned. Ruthenia, however, was annexed by the Soviet Union. Thus today, only Czechs and Slovaks make up the bulk of the Czechoslovak population.

#### Religious developments

Although Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in the country, its situation, especially in the western lands, is quite different from that of neighboring Poland. Whereas the church in Poland has long been the champion of the national culture, the Czech Catholic Church is identified with the Counter-Reformation and with Habsburg domination and the accompanying Germanization of Czech culture. When the Czechs were freed in 1918 from the Habsburgs,

there emerged a "free from Rome" movement, and at least a million people left the Roman Catholic Church. Many of them, including former priests, formed a new church called the Czechoslovak Church, now known as the Czechoslovak Hussite Church. It blends Orthodox, Catholic, and Hussite elements with a very liberal theology.

The national spirit is more closely identified with the Protestant, specifically Hussite, history. Thomas Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, blended Hussite and modern democratic thought in developing a distinctive national outlook.

The situation is different in Slovakia. There the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Protestant Church were strongly identified with the Slovak struggle to develop their own national culture over against Hungarian oppression. The conservative Slovak Catholicism has a much stronger hold on the people than does Czech Catholicism. Czech Catholicism is more secular, less indigenous, less influential. There is a saying that "if you scratch a Czech Catholic deep enough, you will find a Hussite there." In the twentieth century there have been a large number of people in the western lands who do not belong to any confession.<sup>2</sup>

There are differences in the Protestant history of eastern and western lands. At the time of the Counter-Reformation, the western lands were dominantly Hussite, Slovakia dominantly Lutheran. After the Counter-Reformation, Protestantism was outlawed, and persecution in the western lands was particularly severe. In 1781 Josef II issued the Tolerance Edict allowing Lutheran and Reformed, but not Hussite, churches to establish themselves. The two churches grew in both Czech and Slovak lands. In 1918 the Reformed and Lutheran churches (predominantly Reformed) in Bohemia and Moravia merged to form the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, adopting Lutheran, Reformed, and Hussite

confessions of faith. In Slovakia, where the Lutherans were more numerous, the churches remained separate. Other churches in Czechoslovakia include Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Brethren, Unity of the Brethren, the Silesian Evangelical Church, and Old Catholics.

#### Post-World War II Developments

If one looks at the history of Czechoslovakia since 1945 one sees a conflict between believers in a distinct Czechoslovak socialism composed of the thought of Huss, Masaryk, and Marx, on the one hand, and believers in a strictly Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist type of socialism on the other. The brief democratic period after World War II (1945-48) was a time when many believed that a distinctive Czech socialism could be formed and that the nation might serve as a bridge between East and West.

Then came the Communist take-over in 1948, and from that time on, except for the "Prague Spring" (1968), the Leninist-Stalinist view was in strict control. There was no place now for Masaryk's humanistic democratic philosophy. Huss continued to be honored, and was viewed as a forerunner of Communism.

It was to this kind of rule that the churches had to reorient themselves. The religious pattern imposed upon the country was that of Caesaropapism as applied for many years previously in the Soviet Union, that is, of strict control of the church by the state in an effort to abort any interference with the formation of the new socialist man along Leninist-Stalinist lines. A religious affairs office was formed within the Ministry of Culture and was given the right to approve or disapprove many aspects of church life---appointment of clergy, acceptance of students into theological seminaries, right to publish religious literature, etc.

Shortly after the take-over, the government launched a strong attack upon the Roman Catholic Church, confiscating its lands and nationalizing its schools. (In return for the lands, it compensated clergy.) The Catholic Church was viewed as an agent of a counter-revolutionary foreign power, and a strong effort was made to drive a wedge between bishops and the Vatican, and between bishops and priests. There has been an unending battle in regard to the appointment of bishops. Even now many dioceses are without a papally approved bishop. Pressure was placed upon priests to declare loyalty to the state and to join clergy peace groups essentially directed by the state. Even though Archbishop Beran of Prague was highly regarded in the nation as an active participant in the resistance against the Nazis, he was soon isolated from the people, and later allowed to go to Rome.

Perhaps the group that suffered most at the hand of the government was the Greek Catholic Church. It was forcibly united with the Orthodox Church. Many of its priests were imprisoned and some died there. It was not until 1968 that the church was freed from this forced union, but its situation is still a precarious one.<sup>3</sup>

Protestants, being a minority and not duty-bound to a foreign office such as the Vatican, were not viewed as so great a threat as the Roman Catholics, yet they were equally pressured to fit into the new system and placed under the same controls. The Czechoslovak Hussite Church was perhaps the most uncritical in its support of the new government. Reformation Protestants indicated their willingness to work for socialism, but were unwilling to blend Marxism and Christianity or to support dialectical materialism. Before long Protestants, too, were in difficulties. A Baptist minister was imprisoned; the Salvation Army was outlawed. Two bishops of the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Slovakia were replaced with persons who had demonstrated

their loyalty to the government. Their support of government policy did not prevent their local churches from having the same difficulties that other churches were having. Some of their pastors were imprisoned for a time.

Dr. Josef Hromádka, a Czech Brethren theologian and a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, was a particularly influential Protestant leader and an exponent of the cooperative approach. He believed that the church needed to express penitence for its frequent past alliances with conservative or reactionary forces, and that it should be progressive in its social outlook. If it is to be persecuted, he argued, it should be for its faith and not for its reactionary views. He saw violations of people's rights in the new regime and sought to get them corrected by writing to the appropriate government office rather than by public denunciation. He expressed his views on church and society in his writings, a number of which have appeared in English.<sup>4</sup> Another Czech theologian, Dr. J.M. Lochman, has also clarified in his books a Protestant approach to the church's work within Communism.<sup>5</sup>

#### The Prague Spring

Dr. Hromádka had great hopes that the Communist system could be influenced from within. Many people both at home and abroad thought him to be too optimistic and too collaborationist. During the Prague Spring (1968), many of his hopes were realized in the emergence of the "socialism with a human face" of Dubček's regime, only to be dashed in the subsequent invasion by Warsaw Pact armies. In the late fifties Hromádka helped to develop the Christian Peace Conference which enabled Protestant and Orthodox leaders from eastern Europe and also from other nations to meet together and work for peace. After the Warsaw Pact invasion Mr. Ondra, the Czech general secretary of the CPC,

was removed from office under Soviet pressure, and Hromádka himself resigned from it. He also wrote a letter to the Soviet government bitterly protesting against the invasion. It is worth noting that the invasion was officially interpreted as an act "in the interests of peace," performed to prevent "the counterrevolution of western imperialists including the Vatican and the World Council of Churches." Some writers observed parallels between the events of 1968 and the time of Huss. Huss worked for a "church with a human face" and Dubček for a "socialism with a human face." Armies of several European countries converged on Bohemia to destroy the Hussite reform, and again armies of several European countries converged on Czechoslovakia to destroy the Dubček reform. Jan Huss was burned at the stake for his disobedience to the authority of the church. A student, Jan Palach, burned himself to protest against acquiescence in "normalization."

In general church people of all denominations wholeheartedly supported the Dubček revolution. There was a new freedom of expression in the land, and also in the churches, such as they had not experienced since 1948. At this time also the Christian-Marxist dialogue reached its peak. But precisely because churches had been actively involved in the reform, they, along with other supporters, were punished in the period of "normalization."

#### Indoctrination of Atheism

The Prague Spring showed that 20 years of Leninist-Stalinist indoctrination had not been sufficiently effective. Thus, in the normalization period a far more thorough effort was made to develop the "socialist man" and to indoctrinate atheist thought. The campaign to spread atheism and to reduce the influence of religion was manifested in many varied efforts. There was a campaign to reduce the number of children signed up for religious instruction in the schools or enrolled in



catechism classes. The process of signing up was made more difficult, and the penalties for doing so increased. Teachers were required to talk parents out of signing up their children for religious instruction.

Another aspect of atheist indoctrination included the periodic distribution of questionnaires to school pupils. The introduction to one of them said that some people, despite scientific education, still have illusions about life after death and about the existence of supernatural beings. Among the questions the pupils were asked were these:

"Did the school instruction through the building of a scientific worldview give you enough insight and help in the battle against religion, against its burdensomeness?"

"In case you are religious, do you know that your religious affiliation will be a great hindrance to you in the realization of your future vocation?"<sup>6</sup>

Church leaders continued to make clear their loyalty to the government and to testify to their willingness "to build socialism." In 1975 Dr. Jan Michalko, a bishop of the Slovak Evangelical Church, expressed his views in an interview at a meeting of the Christian Peace Conference held in Budapest. He claimed that the laws affecting the church have not changed, and that the churches could still engage in significant Christian activity without breaking the law. His church, he said, had developed a Theology of the Diaconate which focused on serving people in their situation, that is, in a socialist society.<sup>7</sup>

During the Dubček era the director of the secretariat for religious affairs was Dr. Erika Kadlecová, a sociologist who took a somewhat pluralistic view of society and who was relatively open-minded in matters of church and religion. After her ouster, Karel Hruža took over the position. He expressed his philosophy in an article "The Socialist State and Religion," which appeared in the Czech press. He

began by pointing out that church-state relations were based on Leninist principles, and that the constitution contains the following points:

"1. Religious freedom is guaranteed. Each person can confess any religious faith or be without religion and also engage in religious practices, as long as he does not violate the law.

"2. Religious faith or religious conviction cannot be a basis for the refusal by a citizen to carry out his civic duties, which are prescribed by law."

He claimed that the state has assumed responsibility for the religious needs of the people, that it pays clergy salaries and provides for the upkeep and repair of church buildings. He noted that there are 8,228 churches within the country, six theological schools enrolling 470 students, and various church publications. He quoted Gustav Husák, general secretary of the Communist Party, who said, "The socialist state respects the religious feelings of the believers, and appreciates the fact that the vast majority are actively engaged in constructive activity."<sup>8</sup>

Several writers, however, have noted that the first article of the constitution stresses the religious freedom of the individual far more than that of the religious community, and that the second article protects the state from the religious individual rather than the religious individual from the state. Regarding state support of the clergy, it should be noted that they are the lowest paid people in the society.

The same Dr. Hruža who proclaimed religious liberty in the above-quoted article stated on another occasion the importance of turning everyone into an atheist. "The socialist man, active and conscious creator of the new society," he wrote, "must be freed from prejudices and obscurantism. To these belongs religion, which for centuries has been identified with social oppression....Therefore it is important to carry on a program of atheistic propaganda and education, the purpose

of which is to free the believers from spiritual oppression and to deepen in them the consciousness of their own power, ability and understanding....During the whole period of the building of the socialist society we will engage in a battle for the conscience of man, so that he may become an active creator of his future. In this realm there is and always will be an unbridgeable difference between the ideology of Communism and the ideology of the churches and of religion. This battle we will patiently fight, and we will do all that is necessary so that in the course of building socialism atheism will be established in the conscience of each Czechoslovak citizen."<sup>9</sup>

By the mid-seventies, normalization had presumably taken place. Life looked normal in Czechoslovakia and the economy was going reasonably well. People seemed to be satisfied; consumer goods were in good supply. But the writer Václav Havel wrote,

"Outwardly life goes on in a normal fashion. One eats and drinks, sends his children to school, goes walking or dancing, celebrates holidays, and goes to work...But why do people act as they do? I believe ....they are driven by fear....Everyone has something to lose, and therefore everyone has reason to be afraid...Hopelessness leads to apathy, apathy to compliance, compliance to routine subservient behaviour.... Order is brought about. At the price of killing the spirit, dulling the heart, and devastating life. An outward consolidation is achieved. At the price of a spiritual and moral crisis of the society."<sup>10</sup>

#### Charter 1977

That some of the spirit of the Prague Spring continued to live after 1968 became evident a decade later when the so-called "Charter 1977" appeared. It was a document calling for the observance of human rights guaranteed in the Czechoslovak constitution and provided for in

the Final Act of Helsinki. It bore 143 signatures of men and women prominent in various walks of life. In April, 1978 the Charter movement founded a "Committee for the Defense of the Innocently Persecuted." In spite of personal risks, more signatures were added to the charter; in 1981 there were 1200. Among the signers were a number of Roman Catholic and Protestant priests, pastors, and laymen. Great pressure was then placed upon church leaders to disown the Charter and its signers and, to a large extent, they complied.

Also in 1977 a document signed by 31 members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren was presented to the government. It called attention to the violation of religious liberty and listed specific cases of infringement of civil rights. The introduction stated flatly that atheism as the official philosophy of the government was being administratively forced upon the people, that churches were simply tolerated communities, designed to be reduced and eventually liquidated. Then ten types of violations of religious liberty were listed: (1) Reduction of congregational activity. Permission for church activities must be sought at the state office for religious affairs and is very often denied. (2) Reduction of ecumenical activity. Seldom are churches allowed to do anything together. (3) State permission for the discharge of pastoral work. The names were given of pastors whose preaching licenses were revoked, of seminary graduates to whom preaching licenses were not issued, and of prospective theological students whose right to study was cancelled. It was noted that in Czechoslovakia there were 800 theological students in 1969 but only 400 in 1977. (4) Harassment of pastors in active service. They are visited by secret police, constantly watched, pressured to give information. Their contacts with foreigners are restricted. (5) Reduction of and pressure in the area of religious education. In 1969 there were 10,700 Czech Breth-

ren children in religious education in the schools; in 1977 there were only 576. (6) Discrimination in occupations. Christians are discriminated against in industry, civil service, and in public education. (7) Opportunities for education. Children from Christian homes are often denied entrance into universities and high schools. (8) The New Orientation. An informal pastors' group of this name which studies theological and ethical questions has recently been persecuted. (9) Restriction of publication activity of the church. Church publications are censored, financially restricted, hampered in many ways. (10) Lack of freedom at assemblies and synods. These are constantly watched and pressure is brought to bear upon them by the government to take action against various dissident groups within the church. At the end the document lists the cases of discrimination against Protestant church people.<sup>11</sup>

One of the violations of religious liberty was quickly illustrated. Pressure was brought upon the church leaders to discipline the signers of the document and upon the theological seminary to point out the error of their ways. The seminary did make a vague disclaimer, which angered the signers as well as many theological students and other church people. The church was caught in a vice between government and dissenters. Like the signers of Charter 77, the 31 signers of this document suffered discrimination, hostility, and loss of jobs.

The New Orientation group referred to in the Petition of 31 was an influential pastors' group that studied various issues and then took actions. In its statement issued in 1962 it affirmed that its purpose was to draw consequences from the theology of Josef Hromádka, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, responding to the Biblical message and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to develop a social interpretation of the gospel for society and for the world. In the late 60's and

early 70's the group stimulated the Synod to speak out against the injustices, but later the synod became more compliant and did not respond to their requests. Meanwhile these pastors, some of whom signed the Charter 77, were singled out by the government for particular oppression.

The types of discrimination listed in the Petition of 31 of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren exist in all other churches as well. In 1973, for instance, more than 500 of 3500 Catholic priests lacked the state-issued license to serve churches. Thus 1600 parishes were without priests.<sup>12</sup>

#### Church Publications

Church publications continue to serve the churches. There are 27 of them as compared with 151 in 1948. They carry on their work under strict censorship. It is virtually impossible to carry on a discussion or debate on some current issue. Church papers essentially do two things--praise current developments in eastern Europe and print inspirational articles on church history and the Bible.

A very significant development in publications has taken place in recent years. Both Czech and Slovak Protestants produced a new version of the Bible. The Czech version, prepared by an ecumenical committee, is being published and distributed also by the Czech Roman Catholic Church. This work has been done with the help of the Bible Society.

It is a generally known fact that the church participation has declined since 1948. This, of course, is true not only of most eastern European countries but of most western European countries as well. Since 1948, accurate statistics on church membership are not available. Only estimates can be given. The total population of Czechoslovakia is 14.5 million. In 1948 there were 9 million Roman Catholics. In 1972 it was estimated that there were 7 million. In that year approximately 60 per cent were identified with a church. Estimates of membership in

various churches and per centages their members represent in the total population are as follows:

Roman Catholic	7,000,000	48%
Czechoslovak Hussite Church	650,000	4.5
Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren	270,000	1.9
Slovak Evangelical Church	400,000	2.8
Reformed Church in Slovakia	100,000	.7
Silesian Evangelical Church	50,000	.3
The Brethren	9,000	
Unity of the Brethren	8,000	
Unity of the Baptist Brethren	5,000	
Orthodox Church	200,000	1.4
Greek Catholic Church	200,000	1.4
Old Catholic Church	8,200	
Jews	8,000	

(For both the Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches the estimates vary from 20,000 to 200,000.) It is estimated that about ten per cent of the church members in Czechoslovakia take part regularly in worship.<sup>13</sup> There are two Roman Catholic, one Orthodox, and three Protestant theological seminaries.

The concerns expressed in Charter 77 continued in the early 1980's. In 1980 the charter signers issued a proclamation and evaluated developments of the preceding three years. They wrote:

"As we think about the first three years of the existence of the Charter and try to evaluate its workings, we can hazard the statement that--in spite of all possible mistakes and the permanent, in recent times escalated efforts of the political leaders to destroy it--it

lives and works. We have actually come to the view that a steadily increasing number of people in our land understand its meaning and its actual mission....We believed and we still do believe that through a direct defense of human rights the Charter 77 could build a dam against the general demoralization that manifests itself everywhere, and that it could become a new hope for our people. After three years we can perhaps dare to say that the Charter has basically fulfilled its purpose, even though there are places where its path is marked with casualties."<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, it seems apparent that Czechoslovakia is one of the countries of eastern Europe where the churches are experiencing the greatest difficulty. In some other Communist-dominated countries it is openly acknowledged that Christianity contributes to the work ethic, to morality in general, and to the building of society. This is not the case in Czechoslovakia. The country continues to pay dearly for the short freedom of the Prague Spring. The screws are being turned very tight. The party leaders are not ready to believe that the churches can be truly trustworthy partners in building the new society.

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## Footnotes

1. David W. Paul, The Cultural Limits of Revolutionary Politics: Change and Continuity in Socialist Czechoslovakia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 140.
2. Trevor Beeson, Discretion and Valour, The Religious Situation in Eastern Europe, (London: Collins Publishers, 1975), p. 191.
3. Ibid., p. 197.
4. Josef Hromádka, Theology Between Yesterday and Tomorrow (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957).
5. J.M. Lochman, The Church in a Marxist Society (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Encountering Marx (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
6. Staatsatheismus in der Tschechoslowakei, (Zürich: Institut Glaube in der 2. Welt, 1980), p. 21.
7. Church Within Socialism, (Rome: IDOC, 1976), pp. 167-170.
8. Ibid., pp. 184-185.
9. Staatsatheismus in der Tschechoslowakei, p. 24.
10. ČSSR, Zur Lage der Evangelischen Kirche der Böhmisches Brüder, Eine Dokumentation (Zurich: Institut Glaube in der 2. Welt, 1978), p. 5.
11. Ibid., pp. 7-18.
12. Milena Kalinová, "The Religious Situation in Czechoslovakia," Religion in Communist Dominated Areas, Vol. 5 Nr. 3, 1977, pp. 152 and 155.
13. ČSSR, Zur Lage der Evangelischen Kirche der Böhmisches Brüder, pp. 3-4.
14. Adolf Müller, "Die Antwort der Machtlosen: Opposition in der ČSSR," Osteuropa 32 Jahrgang, January 1982, p. 38.

## Notices:

It is possible to subscribe to Communio Viatorum, a theological quarterly published by the Ecumenical Institute of the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology, Prague. Articles appear in English, French or German. Address: Communio Viatorum, Jungmannova 9, 11000 Praha 1, Czechoslovakia.

Glaube in der 2. Welt is a research group dealing with religion in eastern Europe and supported by Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. It issues booklets on particular topics and also newsletters. The publications are in German. Its address is: Glaube in der 2. Welt, Bergstr. 6, CH-8702 Zollikon, Switzerland.