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**OUR RESPONSIBILITY IN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS
AN EASTERN EUROPEAN PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE**

Jakub S. Trojan

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There are two aspects to this paper. Its first part is based on a theological reflection on the circumstances experienced by congregations and groups of Christians in individual churches in the areas of communist dominance over a long period of time. It was a unique experience, and as such is the object of considerable confusion, even to the point of mystification, both among those who lived through it themselves, and to Christians from Western Europe. This is understandable; uniqueness defies straightforward comprehension in any sphere.

In the second part I will try to look to the future directing my attention to the tasks and challenges facing the Protestant section of European Christianity. Both when looking forward and looking back, I will be concentrating mainly on the basic theme of political and economic issues. Although I will be examining these two areas from different chronological perspectives, it is my conviction that it is possible to identify a common theme, which Protestant theology must reflect on as its specific quality, and which it is its duty to devote to the service of the entire planetary community.

I. The establishment of communist, or, to be more exact, centrally controlled socialist systems in Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War can be interpreted as an invasion by a foreign element. To some extent, an analogy can be found in the early centuries of European history, when the nations, particularly those in our part of the continent, were exposed to the incursions either of the Huns (from the 1st to the 5th centuries or of the Avars (6th century), and later of the Tartars (13th century). Europe managed to absorb these external shocks. The invading tribes were assimilated, and only left traces behind.

There is, however, another interpretation which I consider to be more correct: the totalitarian systems of the Marxist type were an authentic product of preceding European

history. In them the European spirit manifests itself. They represent one of the mighty branches of the European tree or one of the floors of the European house, which we legitimately occupied for a while. I will limit myself to just a few thoughts to support this assertion.

a) The utopian nature of the doctrine, on which this political and economic practice was based, is a legacy of the eschatological emphasis which entered into the sub-conscious of Europeans from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this tradition, history and the age to come are the stage on which God's promise and human hope become reality. Authentic reality is not connected with the past but with the future. It is not the Garden of Eden but the heavenly Jerusalem which is the goal of our pilgrimage. The golden age lies ahead of us not behind us. History and the age to come are the field on which our activities are to be carried out, through which we are to bear witness to our responsibility for the life of the community, and thus for ourselves as its co-creators.

b) In its emphasis on a participatory community as a matter of priority, socialism was underlining the importance of a communal existence. This was following a tradition which had existed in Europe from antiquity (cf. Aristotle and Plato) and which continued in the community of the Israelite people, the first Christian communities, and the movements of renewal and reform both within the Catholic church and outside it. Along with the Waldensians and the Anabaptists, the Czech reformation as represented in the Taborite community and later the Unity of Brethren may serve as one of the most eloquent examples.

c) A third feature of this attempt to assign a predetermined goal to history is the emphasis on justice and equality, a goal which was proclaimed far more than it was actually put into practice. My own teacher, the Protestant theologian, J.L. Hromádka, attached great value to the ideas of social justice, as advocated by the socialist and communist Eastern bloc. It is not possible here to consider the concept of justice, which is so clearly in the forefront of the biblical message. Leading figures of the communist movement drew their inspiration from this source, too. It was in a synthesis of this ideal with the traditional values of the West, with liberalism, respect for the rights of the individual, technical creativity and a critical spirit, that Hromádka perceived as a hope for the renewal of the post-war order and not only in Europe.

Communism has departed from the European stage. This means, if the thesis that it was genuinely linked with the roots of European civilization is correct, then this has fundamental implications for that civilization, too. It is a challenge to us, Christians from the West and from the East, to look into our past, examine the basis of our spiritual existence, and ask ourselves a number of questions, which will mainly concern three general areas:

(a) Does the end of the Marxist protection of humanist ideals into the future mean the end of all utopias, of all attempts to anticipate the course of history and to actively influence

it? If the attempt of the communists to live in anticipation of the future has failed, does this sound the death knell for all efforts to understand the future as something other than a time vacuum which we burst into under the pressure of whatever forces the present exerts on us, whether it be the invisible hand of the market or other blind forces, to which we surrender ourselves precisely because the lesson of communism has cured us once and for all of any utopian ideals? What are we laying ourselves open to, if we surrender our responsibility for the future? I know that none of us will feel the question concerns us if I phrase it in this way. We are all in favor of responsibility; we are concerned that Europe should have a viable future. But in that case we need to have some concept of what that future will look like--perhaps just a tentative concept, free of any ideology. The eschatological dimension of what the Bible tells us prevents us from reducing the Gospel to a message of consolation for the soul and the individual. We know from the gospel that there is a future in God's plan for history and the entire cosmos. Christ himself and his work have a future. They have a future in this sense, that his work will be demonstrated more fully than it was in the events which the Gospel related. Before us is the heavenly Jerusalem--the city in which nothing impure can enter. How can we fail to be attracted by this, standing as we do in the midst of the devastation into which we are dragging nature today? All of us are subject to the pressure of God's call to transform structures in them. If there is a paradigm which we should put forward, in the light of which we can understand what is important for us today and tomorrow, then it is the model of the Kingdom of God, as a synthetic model, within which the emphasis of the world (i.e. Lutheran and Calvinist) Reformation are to be found. *Justificatio sola fide* undoubtedly has its place within the framework of this paradigm, but it is only one aspect of a model which has many levels and which brings together both the most profound inner questions of faith--such as how do I personally pass muster before God--and the public, indeed cosmic, commitment to which we are all called in the community of the people of God.

(b) There is a second motif which has not disappeared from the scene after the fall of communism, in which it was reflected in a distorted form. In our relationship with God, both in our personal life and in the framework of history, we are not isolated individuals. Here obviously we are all in agreement. I am sure we would all like to overcome individualism, that chronic disease of Protestantism. But we need to project this emphasis on community, which we take for granted in the context of our congregations and churches, into the political and social spheres as well. We need to revive the model of the responsible society, which was current in ecumenical circles in the 1950s and 1960s, and then was pushed aside by other emphases. The idea of the responsible society must be rehabilitated. Here I stress society, not the state. Our experience of the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century is quite clear: a strong state under control of a single governing party, this demonic

concentration of power, is a threat to the very essence of the whole of society. The idea expressed by Martin Buber in Pfade in Utopia is a valid one: society is prior; the state is posterior. If the state is weak, then society is strong. It is from below, among committed citizens, in dialogue both on a personal level and fostered by various associations and organizations, by the press and media, that a complex of ideas, suggestions and motives is formed, on which professional politics can also draw. Without this support from below it becomes stunted and falls into a bureaucratic routine. Politics needs educated and critical citizens, who can communicate together, and form both long-term and *ad hoc* organizations, which can be a forum, not only for local and particular interests, but also for projects and goals of a universal nature. Here the churches, as communities which are not based on short-term goals, but on eternal foundations and the outlook of an eschatologically harmonized faith, can fashion an environment in which forward-looking ideas can be cultivated and perspectives which go beyond the needs of the moment can be developed. The churches can radiate stimuli and suggestions whose main concern will be the needs of the weakest and the marginalized in society; political representatives should know that they will always find support among the churches for sound social programs--who else would be more willing to accept a heavier tax burden than Christians and the churches? And on the other hand, professional politics should be able to count on being critiqued by the churches if they do not devote attention to the weak.

(c) And here we come to the third motif, which was the ideological trump card of the communist rulers: they justified their position of power by reference to social justice. Is this an emphasis which has disappeared from the agenda with the departure of communists from history? On a world level, and today even in the European countries themselves, do we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that justice is a utopian dream, which can only become reality at the price of restricting or even abolishing a whole range of freedoms? Are we condemned to a painful dilemma: either freedom, and then inequality and injustice, or else justice without freedom?

Having learned from the experiences we have gone through, we will not enthusiastically project dreams of social equality and full justice into a historical period which is burdened by guilt and sin. And the main reason for not acting in this way is that we know how appalling for the life of our nations were the consequences of the attempts to achieve justice once and for all by the use of total power. Through not taking sufficient account of sin, to which everybody is subject, and through their blindness to the destructive consequences of the power which they used in order to eliminate social inequality and to establish justice, the practitioners of 'real socialism' simply achieved one thing: the enslavement of everybody. The Protestant concept of *semper peccator*, which was expressed so forcefully by the Reformation, can be seen to be particularly relevant to politics: no one political system should

be allowed to exercise complete control, especially not one which relies on the goodness of human nature. Otherwise, inhuman practices will very quickly spread throughout the country. Uncontrolled power corrupts everyone: both the rulers and the ruled. The only hope of resolving this seems to lie in the division of power and a careful watch maintained by the churches and the citizens of the country.

But nevertheless, does the ideal of social justice belong to the scrapheap of history? Should we reconcile ourselves to the reality of the ruthless competition of the market, which inexorably divides people into the successful and the rich, on the one hand, and the less capable and the poor, on the other? Should we, therefore, in order to protect the freedom of market forces, abandon the prospect of a fairer disposition of social conditions? Even here, I believe, the Biblical message of the Kingdom of God and the good things he has in store for us does not allow us to become resigned. We cannot accept either the doctrine of natural human goodness, which became distorted in practice by power-corrupted Marxism, nor the idea of an economy naturally controlled by market forces, which is now being hammered into our hands. It is here that we need to make use of the second part of our specific Reformation heritage: *simul iustus*. The sinner who is justified before God and is received by God into God's Kingdom--this social dimension must not be excluded from *justificatio*--gives proof of his newly acquired justice by constantly endeavoring to improve social conditions so that, when viewed in the light of justice, they can be declared to be better than previous conditions. The yardstick here is the status of the weakest. Of "the least of these my brethren," to use Christ's words. Justice in accordance with the Kingdom of God is life in all its fullness--everyone is included in it, and nobody is excluded. It may help us here to consider the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Christians, as sinners who have been justified before God, ought to become people who act justly. In this way they demonstrate that they accept God's justice in a different way than if it were simply a legal declaration, which they would just adopt internally. God's justice speaks to us in the form of a powerful appeal to transform both internal and external conditions. If *sola fide, sola gratia* is not to lose its universal dimension and scope, then it must include acts of justice. They are of course carried out by mere sinful humans, who are accepted over and over again through faith to play their part in God's work of renewal. We need to understand the work of those who are constantly being accepted anew into the service of the heavenly lord of the vineyard as the most crucial gain of our Reformation. Only in this way does *simul iustus, simul peccator* lose its misleading, purely individualistic content. Let me repeat once more: the contextual framework for *justificatio sola fide, sola gratia* loses its misleading, purely individual content. Let me repeat once more: the contextual framework for *justificatio sola fide, sola gratia* is the Kingdom of God, as a reality which breaks through this world. The grace of God is an act for us. Melanchton's *Christum cognoscere*

benefitia eius ad nos cognoscere is also along these lies: accepting God's grace as a creative and redeeming act for us is only possible if I am ready to take part in working for the Kingdom of God in this world. This has nothing in common with cultural Protestantism or salvation through merit. The liberal point of this conception becomes blunted once we grasp the fact that the Kingdom of God is coming. It is not coming as a result of what we do, but it counts on us and invites us to participate. A potential strength of our Protestant faith which has not been made full use of until now depends on our applying the principle of *semper reformande* not just to the church, but to the whole society.

We will never achieve complete justice--this is a discovery that we will make when we look into any utopia: *simul peccator!*--and yet we must continually strive to bring it about: *simul iustus!* A reformation without end. But still a reformation: a reformation of the soul, or morality, of spirituality, of the management of human affairs and of church affairs.

II. "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (John 6:28)

So far as our responsibility in the political sphere at the end of this millennium is concerned, I would like to stress first of all the problem of power. The disastrous failure of the Marxist experiment can to a certain extent be put down to an inability to understand the demonic character of power. The communist regimes saw power simply as a convenient instrument for enforcing the ideas they wanted to see established in all areas of society. In choosing this method, they were following the example of despots throughout the ages, including the Christian ones. The main fault which the churches of Central and Eastern Europe can be accused is that they did not devote enough effort, even at the cost of bearing a martyr's witness, to warning the plotters of the new order against the temptation of uncontrolled power. The failure of power based theism and clericalism in the past should have been a sufficient incentive for them to resist this new manifestation of manipulative power, now under a secular guise. It was all the more reason why Christ's example of sacrificing himself for others should have had an effect on them. The havoc wrecked on the lives of those who got caught up in the wheels of the machinery of power can also be laid to their account. But the churches in our part of Europe were motivated more by a desire to survive. Only a few Christian groups and individuals overcame the passion for self-preservation. Our friends from Western Europe should not be under any illusions here. They would be mistaken if they imagined that all those who underwent adversity deepened their faith. We discovered that no rules can be laid down; it is not just affluence which corrupts, but discrimination and adversity corrupt as well, especially if they last an excessively long time. The church which is deprived of power and social privileges, the Post-Constantinian Church, as we used to call it, is not necessarily free of the temptation of exploiting its status. If it is dominated by an instinct of self-preservation, and if it is cunningly driven to this by

the systematic administrative pressure of an atheist state, then the Church starts to moderate the message of the Gospel. It acquires a ghetto-mentality; it abandons its responsibility for public issues, and it allows itself to be pushed to the fringes of social events. This is then followed by intellectual and spiritual sterility. It wastes away and loses its inner vitality. The Church can only think and live in a truly post-Constantinian way in a free and democratic society. In such a society it is not exposed to slights and adversity; on the contrary, it is respected as an equal partner in dialogue. This is what we must strive for; this is our aim.

Another task facing us in the political awareness among the general public. This includes recognizing clearly that political acts on the legislative and executive level have their often imperceptible origins in the motives and perspectives which grow to maturity in family circles and groups of friends, in various communities, among artists, journalists, writers and citizens of all classes. Professional scientific and political opinion must listen to the spiritual and moral pulse of society because new questions and problems arise on the lower levels, among the ordinary people. What people's views are, for example, on the judiciary, on capital punishment, on termination of pregnancy, and on social priorities; what are the moral ties and spiritual currents in society like--all this is exceedingly important for the decisions which are made on the professional political scene, in parliament, and in political parties. It is a question of linking what might be called non-political politics with the political machine.

Politics is the concern of the community. It therefore affects all citizens. The professional politics of parliaments, governments, and political parties needs a partner in dialogue in a committed general public. This is where the civic movements and forums which were protagonists in the fundamental changes which took place in our part of Europe in 1989-90 continue to act as a stimulus for the established political scene. From time to time the democracy of the streets is also needed, with appeals to the public and rallies on the streets, in squares, and in churches. Without this, the growth of bureaucracy is a threat in all areas. It is a question, then, of the systematic regeneration of politics, which is so essential if we are to cope with the extensive tasks with which we are faced in a civilized world. It is only possible if there is discussion with those who are affected by all the decisions that are made at the top. The churches must play an important role in this dialogue. The very nature of this process makes it something close to them. After all, they have been entrusted with a universal message for the earthly community. They are not of this world, but they are for this world.

One of these tasks in the political sphere is responsibility for economic life. A wide ranging discussion on this has been going on in the world ecumenical movement for a

number of years, if not decades. Economics as a matter which concerns our faith is a very topical theme.

I will mention two problems here. The first concerns money in the framework of the market economy. Criticism is growing of the monetary system which has dominated the European continent and North America more or less since the seventeenth century. It is characterized by the general legislation and recognition of the moral justification for interest and compound interest. We know from the message of the Bible and from economic history that the subject of interest has been a moral problem for centuries. This can be seen in the prohibition of usury in the Old Testament, and in strict opinions, or at least uncertainty, about the practice of usury on the part of the reformers. A ban on charging interest on money lent to those in need applied practically without exception throughout the Middle Ages. The canon lawyers formulated rules whereby the person lending out capital (needs for example for seed to be sown to produce next year's crop) would be a participant in the enterprise they were investing in, and would share in the risk of profit or loss. It is interesting that this participatory system, where money does not automatically earn interest, is, as far as I know, a basic tenet of Islamic law. But in Christian countries, especially since the period of overseas expansion, the principle of interest gradually came to be established. We only need to think of the constantly increasing debts of the poorer parts of the world to realize how many problems this has brought about, problems which are often extremely difficult to resolve. A further moral problem arises when we consider that money itself, if placed in a bank or savings bank, brings forth money. The economist may object that these deposits, too, are used for investment purposes--they are being put to work; they are producing something--but nevertheless those who are providing the money make a profit out of this money-go-round regardless of their actual involvement in the risk, and they do so simply because they can claim to be the owners of that money. Further research is needed here to determine whether this financial *perpetuum mobile* is not, as is suggested by the notable thinker and economic reformer, Silvio Gesell, in his book Natürliche Wirtschaft, one of the main causes of the breakdowns and shortcomings which national and world economies are suffering from at the present time.

The second problem is that of unemployment. We know that the present situation on the labor market, with relatively high numbers of people without work in Western European countries and the USA, is basically different from the unemployment which existed during the great economic crisis of the 1930s. We speak about structural unemployment. Nevertheless, society as a whole regards unemployment today in basically the same way as it did then. We know from many sources that the unemployed feel marginalized, suffer psychologically, and meet with a lack of understanding and condemnation from those around them, often even from their own families and relatives. Not frequently a gradual decline

takes place, finishing in homelessness, addiction to alcohol and drugs, and total degradation. A series of objective and subjective factors combine to make unemployment a painful phenomenon of modern society.

It is my view that we are faced with the task of completely revising the way we look at unemployment. At the moment, the whole mentality of society is based on output. People value work and output and attach considerable prestige value to them. But this attitude makes the crisis worse and stands in the way of any solution to the problem. Here once again we must apply the Protestant emphasis on *sola gratia*. In God's economy (*oikonomia tou theou*) we human beings are accepted before we achieve any output. This acceptance precedes any deeds on our part. This must lead us to regard those who do not work in a radically new way. "The unemployed will always be among you." Humanity must come to this fact. This is a new task for social psychologists, and the churches can also play a significant part in dealing with it. We must start from the assumption that the efficiency of modern electronic civilization will make it possible--provided there is no nuclear or ecological catastrophe--to provide for the needs of an increasing world population, without all those of a productive age having to work. It is time that we realized that in recent decades remuneration and wages have been losing their qualified relationship to work and output. Our civilization is moving into a historical phase, in which we can start to implement the values of the parable of the workers in the vineyard: everybody will receive remuneration, which will secure their livelihood, without everybody having deserved it to the same degree. The productive capacity of the manufacturing system which is being developed throughout the planet is immense. From a technical point of view there is nothing to prevent the entire human race living in relative plenty. Should this not be the case, then the reason will lie in the politico-economic organization of the planetary conditions in which the human race lives.

And this leads me to my final remark, after the collapse of 'real alcoholism,' there was a call in some ecumenical circles for us in Central and Eastern Europe to follow the so-called 'third way.' They warned us against the market economy. Some of them even regard it as the ultimate evil. They do not even consider the democratic character of the developed market economies to be sufficiently acceptable, and their skepticism does not stop there. I have to say quite clearly that in my opinion there is no 'third way' in the current situation; that is, there is no alternative which would be essentially different. In addition, the Christians in our countries do not only lack the political position which might enable them to get a different alternative accepted; they also lack the intellectual strength--the communists 'privatized' the education system for themselves so thoroughly that it was not possible for specialists in economics, politics, sociology, or philosophy to develop who might have a different orientation than was allowed by the official ideology. The new democratic

forces in Czechoslovakia and the other countries of our region are suffering as a result of this amateurism and immaturity. Under such circumstances there is only one thing we can do: accept the economic system which has established itself in Western countries, integrate it into our cultural setting, and draw on the sources of our moral and spiritual traditions to influence it. However, we can assure the ecumenical community that we are under no illusions: we do not consider either the market economy or the democratic system which is linked to it to be the Kingdom of God. *Semper reformada* applies here too. Examination of the sovereign standards of the Kingdom of God leads us to the sober conclusion that repentance in our personal lives goes hand in hand with the never-ending transformation of the social order. This is something we are committed to as Christians coming from Protestant churches land as Europeans.