The Relationship Between the Hungarian State and the Hungarian Reformed Church

Joseph Pungar

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol6/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
The Relationship Between the Hungarian State and
the Hungarian Reformed Church

by Joseph Pungar

Rev. Dr. Joseph Pungar is a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Previously he was a minister of the Hungarian Reformed Church and for years he worked at the Foreign Relations Department of the Synodal Office dealing with protocol matters. Having spent six years in teaching ministry in Kenya, East Africa, he is now the minister of the Calvin Hungarian Presbyterian Church, Edmonton, and Lecturer of the University of Alberta. This lecture was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Hungarian Reformed Ministerial Association, Ligonier, PA., September 1984.

In Hungary under the leadership of an openly confesses atheistic anti-religious and antichurch Communist Party, the existence of the Hungarian Reformed Church, its life, and service are in jeopardy. It is possible to liken this situation to the Hapsburg Counter Reformation Period in the Eighteenth Century. Questions arise both from the pastors and church members alike; both at home and abroad. Does the Hungarian Reformed Church fulfill its God-given task to preach the Word of God? Is there compliance with the resulting service stemming from God's word? Does its attitudes and actions truly respond to its mission? Has the church found the freedom to carry out its mandate or has it just become a tool to serve and support the regime's political ambitions? Is there freedom of religion or is the church victimized by the state's cunning political manipulations?

There is also a division of international opinion in this regard. Some say that there is no freedom of religion at all; the leaders betrayed the church and only seemingly sustained it as a window dressing to be used for propaganda purposes. Others state that the church is alive and well; the leaders are striving to achieve their utmost under the circumstances for the present and future life of the church. There is a certain freedom of religion, but it is not allowed to be practiced to the same extent as in the West. Churches in Hungary are open, providing worship services, performing baptisms, funerals, confirmations, publishing books, and participating in the C.P.C., the Eastern block's peace movement.
If one wants to clarify these dilemmas, one needs to analyze the principles, methods, and practices of the church policy of the state and to examine the response of the church leadership in both theological and practical terms.

Since 1948, Hungary has been under communist dictatorship. One party, the Communist Party, is in power under the disguise of different names, namely, first the Hungarian Worker's Party and, since 1956, the Socialist Workers' Party. This means that fundamentally the government's policy toward the church is the policy of the Communist Party. Marx and Engels established the basic communist principles towards religion which were later developed by Lenin. Religion is used as a tool by the ruling classes of the society for the restraint, oppression and exploitation of the masses. Thus, religion becomes a means of control in the hands of the ruling classes. Religion is the opiate of the people which provides some comfort to the suffering and exploited masses. At the same time, religion is unscientific because it is a system of superstitions and idealistic philosophical ideas. Consequently religion is unworthy of modern people in a socialist-communist society. According the communist ideology, religion is one of the characteristics of class societies. Therefore, it must disappear from the classless communist society. Hence, it is evident that churches have no place in communism. The ruling Communist Party in Hungary, with its atheistic structure, is in fierce opposition to the church and religion, with a policy that has been elevated to the level of state politics.

It is extremely important to understand the method applied by the state because those who do not understand this will not understand the state's policy toward the Church. For this reason, many are confused about the Communist Party's religious policies. The method used by the Party is the "dialectical method." This method is being applied in every area of state life including foreign and domestic affairs. With the help of this method, unity can be achieved between opposing factors. The tension of the "thesis" and "antithesis" is dissolved into "synthesis" generating a qualitatively higher formation. The Communist theoreticians think dialectically and their politicians act dialectically. They exploit controversies in world politics in such a way that it furthers and serves the advancement of communism. Also, they are applying this "dialectical method" in dealing with the Church.
We have to make a note here signifying that we Christians, in the face of the "dialectical method" usually employ the "romantic method" that is, we think romantically in absolutes, in black and white, in good or bad, in light or darkness, in God or Satan. This romantic thinking in absolutes is one of the main characteristics of thinking in the West. Consequently, with the help of these romantic categories, neither the politicians, nor the philosophers, nor the theologians are able to understand the essence and practices of communism. This is the source of the tragic division of the West toward communism, which the communists masterfully exploit.

At the present time in Hungary, there is a period of transition from capitalism into communism under the name of socialism. What characterizes this era is that the past is still present in society, namely the manifestations of the vanishing remnants of class society, among them Church and religion. The characteristics of the future society are likewise present, gaining strength and gradually forcing out the remainder of the past. An important function of the Communist Party is to eliminate the residues of the past, among them the Church, and bring about the new communist society with the new communist person who is freed from superstitions, religion and the Church.

Let us now examine church policies formulated by the Communist Party, which are being carried out by the state. The state basically took two factors into consideration. First, they considered the Marxist dogma, which states that religion and church must eventually cease to exist in a communist society. Second, they noted that there still are a significant number of religious people in Hungary. By applying the "dialectic method" they formulated their church policies. As its consequence we observe a church policy which is paradoxical, which contains both the struggle against the church and allows certain facets of freedom, executed in a way that intends to terminate the existence of the church in the distant future. While the Constitution stipulates freedom of conscience and religion, the Communist Party leaders are doing everything in their power to sever the social roots of the church, to decrease its influence and counteract its views by atheistic propaganda and subtle administrative measures. The complete control of the country's school system greatly aids them in their designs because they are using it for raising a new generation of the so-called "socialist man" which is immune to all forms and aspects of religion. Thus the following situation has developed: certain
freedoms of the Church subsist while at the same time, the struggle against the church is also present. This creates confusion in the eyes of the foreign observer. It is quite possible that if one were to question a church leader from the West, who recently visited Hungary, regarding the freedom of the Church behind the Iron Curtain, he or she may answer that the churches are open and functioning and religious people are worshipping frequently. On the other hand, if a visiting communist were to ask a Hungarian party official about the spreading of atheism, there would be a proud recital of numerous achievements: the dwindling attendance of church-services, the general apathy of youth toward religion and the declining influence of churches.

According to the "dialectic method" the conflict between the "thesis" and "antithesis" results in "synthesis" which represents a development at a higher level. While on one hand the Hungarian state oppresses the work of the church /thesis/ on the other hand the church is allowed a certain measure of freedom /antithesis/ reaching a state of affairs in which the church rallies behind the state and the party, fully supporting the regime's political goals /synthesis/. For the time being, the church, within the so-called People's Front (a loose semipolitical organization which under the auspices of the party is trying to gain the support of the masses for the policy of the party) has been promoting the domestic and foreign political objectives of the regime. Church leaders and theologians, having accepted these objectives, translated them into theological language for further propagation among believers. Quite frequently, the sermons from the pulpit have manifested a peculiar similarity to the speeches made at the meeting of the "People's Front."

The role handed down to the church in Hungary is similar to the one that grandparents had in a primitive extended family. They were regarded as belonging to the past, always looking backward, hard to understand, and inevitably they pass away, sooner or later. What could be done with them? They were not taken too seriously but as long as they had strength they were utilized in housework.

The basic policy of the Communist Party toward the church seems to be that as long as the church exists it must be exploited, that is, utilized for the realization of communist goals. The state uses the church to assist in the creation of a feeling comfort for the masses. Since the people of faith are able to attend church if they wish to do so, even though they are under
surveillance of the secret agents, they live in the illusion of religious freedom. This serves the purpose that the masses become satisfied with the socialist society. Furthermore, the church may provide aid for old people, handicapped children, and alcoholics. Generally speaking, the church may contribute its own religious values in order to elevate society's moral standards. The church may assist in the government sponsored peace movement in order to gain the confidence of the religiously inclined people at home, but most importantly, that of church leaders in the West. In this, the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference plays an important role, trying to influence Western religious peace movements by providing them political analysis, guidelines and purposes which are designed to promote the objectives of the Soviet bloc.

We must also understand that even the restricted freedoms enjoyed by the Church today are being constantly altered by the state depending on its domestic and foreign policy difficulties. Although Hungary has recently been depicted by the Western media as the country of "goulash Communism," few people know the real difficulties the regime is wrestling with. While consumer goods and food may be plentiful in comparison to other Eastern bloc countries, the problems of the majority of people go unnoticed. Low wages and rocketing prices for the majority and luxury goods for the party and government insiders and the few but rich new capitalists are causing growing resentment, disappointment and apathy. In this situation the state obviously needs the church to help alleviate the dissatisfaction of the masses. In return the church receives some concessions. In this context one can understand why each of the four Hungarian Reformed Church districts received permission to erect one building each, or why Raday College in Budapest - one of the two Colleges of the Church with a Theological Academy - was allowed to expand its facilities. However, we must view this concession in the light of historical truth. What they are now returning to the Church as concessions is only a fraction of what they had illegally taken from it in 1952 long after the nationalization of church schools in 1948. The Rakosi regime expropriated the Lonyai High School in Budapest, the Sarospatak and Papa High Schools, and Theological Academies in the early fifties. In the summer of 1956, when the coming storm of the revolution had already been felt, the topic of returning church assets and properties illegally taken surfaced in very serious
negotiations but it came to nothing. After almost three decades, the state reluctantly allowed the church to enlarge some of its facilities primarily with the aid of the Western churches.

Let us now examine how the church is being kept under government control by the totalitarian state. The leaders of the state and of the Communist Party are well aware that the church is the only organization that legally promulgates an idealistic ideology in opposition to the Party's materialistic ideology. This fact inherently represents potential dangers for the communist system. The state takes this risk under the condition that the church be kept under complete state control. During the past decades, the state authorities built a three-fold controlling system.

Most typical and the first part of this system is the formation of the State Office of Church Affairs. The task of this office is multifaceted. Within the existing political framework, this office is responsible for state-church relationship. This office ensures the curtailing of the religious activity of the Church and it mainly secures the supporting role of church leaders for the state. On behalf of the state, this office still provides decreasing financial assistance to the church and the preservation of a few old churches which are also historical landmarks. Any request from the church leaders to the state must be made through this office. This agency also represents the will of the state in ecclesiastical matters. Furthermore, the task of the State Office of Church Affairs includes the monitoring of church activities and of the Church's influence on society. In addition, this office makes recommendations to the state authority regarding policies connected with the Church and Church personnel.

The State Office of Church Affairs is in constant touch with similar institutions in other socialist countries exchanging views, ideas and sharing experiences. This agency is also connected to other state and party organizations, and its president, with the rank of Undersecretary of State, participates in meeting of the Council of State ministers. The office has a very close relationship with the Communist Party headquarters and the Security Police.

The State Office of Church Affairs' headquarters is in Budapest and it also has branches throughout the counties and towns in each of which at least one person is responsible for church affairs. This office owns a so-called "K"
telephone hot line by which its workers can be reached anywhere and at any time. The workers of the agency constantly supervise the activities of the churches and the pastors. Through the utilization of informers, they acquire accurate information of all occurrences in the churches: what the pastors preach about, their relationship to the flock and with whom they are in contact, whom they visit or visits them. If a pastor poses a problem, that is if he becomes overly active or his congregation is thriving, the state becomes suspicious. At this point, as a first step, one of the officials of the State Office of Church Affairs - usually called the secretary of the Office of Church Affairs - will urge persuasion by his superior: a dean, senior, or a bishop. If this does not work then, as a second step, the secretary of the State Office of Church Affairs invites the pastor for a discussion. At first he warns him politely. Afterwards the warnings gradually become harsher. The secretary of the State Office of Church Affairs politically screens pastors, seeking those who can be made into informers by dangling the bait of certain possibilities of promotion.

The State Office of Church Affairs pays particular attention to the selection of church leaders. At the present time, when one becomes a church leader, he must be a person with proven loyalty to the state. The decisive criterion is neither suitability nor talent but loyalty to the State. The State considers talent a negative virtue. But those church persons who already are in their clutches are the most suitable for higher offices because they can be easily manipulated. The statement can be made with certainty that almost without exception, all Church leaders from the deans and seniors up to the bishops are puppets of the State. There are a fair number of collaborators among the ordinary pastors as well, who, as a reward for their services, hope for higher church office.

The second level of the supervisory system over the Church, as unbelievable as it may sound, is made of the leaders of the church, the deans or seniors, bishops and responsible leaders of the Synod and of the Synod's Office (which is the equivalent of the General Assembly Office in the Presbyterian Churches). These people provide regular reports to their superiors which, in the final analysis, end up in the State Office of Church Affairs. From there they are forwarded to higher government offices and to party headquarters. As a result, these reports play a major role in the
planning of short and long-range state policy towards the church. Similarly, reports are made of the church leaders' political activities abroad. The third level of supervision is the State Security Police. A special division of it deals with the affairs of the Church and the clergy, monitoring their activities with information from their independent network of informers. The State Security Police is in communication with the State Office of Church Affairs as well as with leaders of the Church. If a case is unmanageable by both the church leaders and the State Office of Church Affairs, then the Security Police will commence action.

No one should think that this tri-level control system is of Hungarian origin. One can find this phenomena in other socialist countries as well. This system of control was formed and organized according to the Soviet example.

Basically, what can rightfully be said is that the Church is under a modern "Babylonian captivity" in a country where the Constitution clearly stipulates freedom of speech, conscience, and religion. This is how a Communist State interprets religious freedom dialectically.

Let us now examine on what theological basis the Hungarian Reformed Church has formed its policies towards the State. In the first period from 1948 to 1956 Bishop Albert Bereczky formulated the so-called "narrow way" theology which the church leadership found most appropriate for that time. To briefly summarize, this theology professed that God pronounced judgement on the past conduct of the country, including that of the church, during the war years. Only a "narrow way" was given to the church which meant a limited activity for the church under the new communist system. This theology was suitable as an excuse for the State to nationalize church properties and schools, and also to take away two of the four theological academies including the Lonyai and Sarospatak High Schools several years later. This theology also allowed the Church to extinguish the post-war religious revival and silently to endure the molestation of the clergy and congregations and the deportation of many believers. In the fall of 1956, amid revolutionary political events, God's judgement of this theology was manifested and its most prominent representatives faded out of the limelight in the church.

Since 1957, the church has been living in the so-called "Theology of Service" (or diaconia) era. This theology was worked out by Bishop Tibor
Bartha and his co-workers. The basis of it can be found in Luke 22:27, "I am among you as he that serves." This "Theology of Service," in reality became a "Theology of Servitude," thus, a sell-out theology. This theology acknowledges the goals of the atheistic state and coerces the Church to co-operate in order to achieve these goals. The church became a collaborator as well as an arm of the state in building socialism.

There are at least three critical remarks that should be made regarding this theology. First, the premise of this theology is false because Christ directed his words to his own disciples and followers and not to Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire. The Lord did not encourage his disciples to accomplish the objectives of Rome but encouraged them in the building of the Kingdom of God, among those nations that lived under the Roman yoke /Matthew 28:18-20/. His point of view regarding the power of the empire is known in Matthew 22:21, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's." Paul speaks in Romans 13 only of the acknowledgement of the higher powers and intercessory prayer relating to the same, but does not speak of the church being subservient to the political objectives of the state's higher powers. It may be mentioned that the church has responsibilities toward society. No one doubts this. First of all, it is the church's ministry to preach the Gospel and help the outcasts and victims of society by diaconical work. But the question arises, should the church become an arm of the state in order to achieve so-called "good" objectives? If in any church the priority is on secular goals, that institution no longer fulfills its God-given mandate.

The second remark is that basically the "Theology of Service" is a liberal political theology and its representatives want to cover it with an orthodox theological sugar coat. It is liberal because it equates the Kingdom of God with socialism and perceives the arrival of the former through the realization of the latter. Before the First World War, we saw a liberal theology which advocated the reachability of the Kingdom of God by the progressive advance and development of humankind. In liberal theology, problems emanate from its roots, namely, that its premise is not based on the Word of God but on vain philosophy and ideology of human beings. The temptation story of Jesus adequately proves that the Tempter is also able to use the Word skillfully - how much more able are the theologians! Everything can be technically proven from the Bible. What decides the authentic usage of the Word of God is the way
and method Jesus used in his defeat of the Tempter. Today, for the leaders of the Hungarian Reformed Church, the "Divine Revelation" comes from the State Office of Church Affairs. Many theologians are working to transform state-political directives into theologically disguised forms. The history of theology shows that these kinds of liberal theologies are under the judgement of God.

Third, let us point out the precarious situation into which the church has been led by her leaders. The theoreticians and leaders of society in which the church lives presently, openly admit to not having any future plan for the Church in the communist society which is to come. At the same time, the church contributes to the building up of this society by fervently joining the builders of socialism. This means that the church prepares the way for its own demise to the point when it is no longer needed. The Church leaders, by their behavior, want to merit a position for the Church in the future communist society. But those who are familiar with the Marxist-Communist ideology and practice know the realities. Should the political difficulties of the State ease, domestically and internationally, the time may come when the regime will liquidate the Church with the declaration, "She has done her duty, she may depart now." Secularly speaking, the church exists today because the regime is battling enormous internal and external political problems for which the assistance of the Church is absolutely imperative.

As to the shortcomings in church leadership, let us mention only three. First, there is a noticeable lack of prophetic voice. It is understandable that the church tries to find its own pathway within the socialist system and agrees with certain political goals on a humanitarian basis. The church leaders, however, should raise a prophetic voice toward those goals and practices of the regime from which both Christian and national points of view are questionable. Some of the areas which should be of concern to church leaders are the problems of a decreasing population, the question of abortion, the escalating rate of suicide, alcoholism, the oppression of Hungarian minorities living in the neighboring states, the Eastern block's arms race, and the deployment of new rockets. The critical voice of the church leaders is not heard, or more precisely, their critical voice is not allowed to be heard, at all in that totalitarian system because it is not interested in any form of criticism, let alone ecclesiastical. The directives of the Communist Party can
be commended but never criticized.

Recently, we have witnessed the latest sin of the church leaders, commonly called "disinformation"; the willful misleading of Church followers in regard to certain important matters. Apparently, this is supposed to substitute the prophetic voice. Let us mention one example. In one of his speeches, Bishop Karoly Toth said that "The State for social peace and for political gain is capable of minimizing some aspects of its own ideology." (in "Reformed Church", June 1984). A statement of this caliber or one like it has never been nor could be uttered by a responsible party or government leader. History factually demonstrates that the Communist Party, under no circumstances, will deviate as much as an iota from its ideology, for by doing so, it would give up the basis of its existence. This dogmatic unyielding loyalty to ideology is the guarantee of communist victory in the world. If a bishop has the courage to make such a statement within ecclesiastical circles, he is leading people into false security. The party and the state authorities grant temporary political concessions in hard times but never ideological ones.

It should be mentioned that the church leadership developed a neo-baroque absolutistic type of leadership in a church that professes to practice a synodal-presbyterian system the church actually fell into the hands of a leadership clique. Since the state leadership is highly centralized the church leadership was obliged to follow the same pattern. This is how the present style of church leadership, which can be labeled as an episcopal system of church government, came about. It is easier for the State Office of Church Affairs to work with a few bishops, who are known and are obligated to it and who have a long term in office, than with moderators taking turns annually. Thus, assuredly, the neo-baroque church leadership perfectly suits the leaders of the proletarian dictatorship. In the early sixties, (this may not be widely known) one of the senior ministers began a movement for the restoration of the synodal-presbyterian principles and system and the abolishment of the office of bishops. This bold move cost him his office from which he was removed within days. This neo-baroque church leadership, which in many respects is anachronistic, is in the final analysis two-faced. It possesses an absolutistic and a democratic face. The absolutistic face of Church leaders is shown to subordinated pastors. A democratic face is put on in discussion with
important domestic and foreign dignitaries.

In conclusion, how are we to perceive the Hungarian Reformed Church? It is necessary to differentiate between the Church leadership and the Church; the two are not synonymous. The Church leadership has developed a wrong theology in relation to the State and consequently has been practicing misguided church policies for which the church is paying dearly. A theology which leads to a close union with a regime, which holds to an atheistic ideology and is involved in a systematic and fervent combat against the Church, must be judged as defective. The regime, gradually and systematically, elevates itself to the same plateau as God, claiming to be omniscient, omnipresent, almighty and the fount and giver of all things. It neither requests nor tolerates criticism because within its domain it ascribes to its view all wisdom, power and glory. The church leaders live in an illusory world with momentary advantages and with the euphoric enjoyment of their delegated power. Either they are unable or unwilling to observe the fact that they are helping to build up a ruthless socialistic society which will eventually terminate the existence of the Church.

At the same time it must be observed that the majority of congregations and of the parish pastors live plainly and in the faith. It is their devotion to God and dedication to their faith which still keep the Church alive. The preaching of the Word of God, even if it is done in uncertainty and sometimes vaguely, is still being heard. Even if the Word of God is preached in this manner it is still an alternative to the propagation of the atheistic ideology. The Church in its condition is still preaching the gospel of mercy and forgiveness and new life through Christ. By doing so the Church helps to preserve Hungary's own national characteristics and awareness.

For the Hungarian Reformed Church members living in the West there is a special mission to the Reformed Church in Hungary. This was drafted by the late Bishop Laszlo Ravasz. The task of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the West is the same as that of the princes of Transylvania who, as the rulers of the Principality of Transylvania, helped the people of Hungary under Turkish and Austrian occupation during the sixteenth and seventeen centuries. The task is to speak for those who cannot, to say the things they cannot utter, to criticize those whom they cannot criticize; and most importantly, to cry out for the Church and its members. Last but not least it is our sacred duty to pray to God, for God's suffering Church in Hungary.