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GENERAL PROBLEMS OF CHRISTIANITY IN SOCIALIST COUNTRIES*

by Lubomir Mirejovsky

The Reverend Dr. Lubomir Mirejovsky (Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren) has dedicated his life to serving the Church and the Christian faith, and has made special contributions to the Christian witness for peace and justice. Dr. Mirejovsky, a native of Czechoslovakia, studied in the United States at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia (B.A., 1948), and at San Francisco Theological Seminary (M.Div., 1949). He earned the Th.D. degree at the Comenius Theological Seminary in Prague, and served as the pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren in Tabor, Czechoslovakia, for 26 years. Since 1978, he has served as the Secretary General of the Christian Peace Conference. The CPC, based in Prague, is an international ecumenical organization dedicated to articulating a Christian witness for peace and justice, with member churches and regional committees in over 90 countries. In his capacity as CPC Secretary General, Dr. Mirejovsky continues to contribute to mutual understanding among nations and among Christians seeking peace.

The relationship between Christianity and actual socialist structures has been described and analyzed by many authors, Christian as well as secular, and some controversial aspects of it keep on making headlines in the news. It is not surprising that the reports are usually biased, as the occurrence studied is so complex that it can be understood only from a deliberately chosen perspective. Whoever tries to discuss the relationship between religion and socialism is giving witness not only to the object of his or her interest but, more so, to the choice he or she is taking in history.

The Historical Process Determines the Characteristics of the Problem

A student of the relationship between Christianity and the socialist system must keep several things in mind.

a) Christianity has influenced the life of nations in Eastern Europe for more than 1000 years. It determined their culture (literature, moral values, legal systems, national traditions) and was always closely connected with political and economic power and its changes.

b) The question of socialism, i.e., the criticism of and revolt against capitalism, was introduced in all these countries in the 19th century. The supporters of socialism, although they were primarily concerned with the issues of social change, discovered very early that

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one of the biggest obstacles to their reform and revolutionary zeal was the resistance of the churches. Along with their economic and political deliberations they were forced to respond to the challenges of religious conservatism. At the same time, however, there were religious people who did not have a negative attitude to socialist ideas, who joined the socialist movements in the belief that in them they had discovered some fundamental values of their religious traditions. Precisely these Christian socialists have introduced the dialogue on such problems into the life and theological reflection of their churches. As for the official stand of the major Christian churches, not one of them was ready to welcome or accept the rise of socialism. (Some smaller denominations did not have such problems, as we shall see later.)

c) Another element that has to be kept in mind is the character of the political and economic system and the role of the churches before the introduction of socialist structures. All the countries of Eastern Europe had a capitalist system, some with a more and some with a less developed industry, some with still ruling monarchies with traces of diminishing feudal traditions. Democratic structures were still young or non-existent. The only exception was the GDR which at the beginning of socialism had inherited the ruins of the Third Reich, but which fortunately had a long social democratic and Communist tradition which had not been entirely destroyed by the Nazis. These facts should help us to understand that there are differences in the way in which the old regimes should be evaluated and to understand the reasons for the ways in which the concepts for the future are defined; this, of course, also includes an understanding of the role of the churches.

d) Not less important for the relationship between the Church and society is the nature of the different religious traditions which enter into the process of social change. In the USSR it was not only the dominant Russian Orthodox Church but also Islam in the south and Buddhism and native religions in the east. The Orthodox churches were closely connected with the national aspirations in Russia, Rumania, and Bulgaria. In Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia the Roman Catholic Church played the most influential role for centuries; only in the GDR were the Protestant churches in the majority. It should be noted that Orthodox churches kept up close national and cultural ties. Catholicism and Islam had their power centers outside Eastern Europe.

e) There were quite different ways in which the respective churches formed and shaped their attitudes to the induction of socialism. All the bigger churches, which were interconnected with the power structure of the ruling groups and with the economic interests of the prosperous classes, played their own political game. They
resisted socialism because it threatened their privileged position in society and not because it offered an alternative and more beneficial scheme for the deprived masses. They resented the anti-clerical, atheist, and secular views of the socialists and warned of the danger of the moral destruction of society if the socialists took over. After the revolution the rich and the middle classes sought refuge in the churches and tried to make them a platform for their vested interests on the pretext of defending religion against the tide of secularism.

This fact does not exclude the other fact that there were Christians and Christian groups who participated actively in the first stages of the formation of the socialist society in the belief that stripping the churches of their power and wealth would only help to free the church work to enable it to become genuine in respect to the fundamental Christian views.

f) Here we have reached the point at which we can articulate the first thesis which should be respected by anyone studying the relationship between Christianity and socialism, namely that there is a plurality of possibilities and that they are determined by the historical process that took place before and after the revolutionary change.

Anyone who desires to understand the situation in any country of Eastern Europe must devote attention to the specific characteristics of the process that took place within it. Dangerous misunderstandings may occur if events and experiences of one socialist country are applied to another one.

Some Common Issues

In spite of such plurality, there are several facts and problems that are common to all the Eastern European countries.

a) In all of them the Christian churches and other religions are continuing their work and life; in none of them were the churches abolished or prohibited.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that all the socialist countries have adopted articles in their Constitutions which guarantee the right to religious life and the activity of the churches.

It might be of interest to compare the Constitutions of two socialist countries. This will reveal on the one hand the general spirit and attitude towards the phenomenon of religion and on the other the qualitatively different understanding of the problem.

I quote article 52 of the Constitution of the USSR: "Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, i.e., the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda. Incitement of hostility or hatred on
religious grounds is prohibited. In the USSR, the church is separated from the state, and the school from the church."

At first glance one can discern the roots of this article. Before the revolution atheists did not have the freedom to publicize their ideas; they were persecuted both by the czarist state and the church. The new Constitution provided them with the same rights as the adherents of any religion. I believe that the attitude defined as "freedom of conscience" is very important and well formulated because it protects the innermost part of a personality, which secures mental and moral stability to any person. The content of this thought projects itself into the other part of the article in which the incitement of hostility and hatred on religious grounds is prohibited. The "freedom of conscience" is in a certain sense limited because it does not allow the individual to take positions which could result in confrontations in society on religious grounds.

Before the revolution the Russian Orthodox Church was heavily financed by the State. This support was greater than the funds for other cultural and social projects. This explains the separation of Church and State because the new regime wished to channel funds into the areas of its interest. The idea is old, it was applied for the first time by the American revolution in the 18th century. In all the schools of czarist Russia religion was a compulsory subject and the principle one in the primary and parish schools. It is not surprising therefore that the indignation of the revolution banished religion from the schools, since it understood it as a tool of the reactionary system.

In Article 32 of the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic one can read: (1) "Freedom of confession shall be guaranteed. Everyone shall have the right to profess any religious faith or to be without religious conviction, and to practice his religious beliefs insofar as this does not contravene the law. (2) Religious faith or conviction shall not constitute grounds for anyone to refuse to fulfill the civic duties laid upon him by law."

The differences from the first-mentioned Constitution are evident. The Czechoslovak declaration is derived from the general understanding of the rights and duties of the country's citizens, which presume that the rights, freedoms, and duties of citizens are performed in harmony with the needs of society as a whole. The relations between Church and State are described by other laws which do not include the separation of Church and State, or Church and school. In Czechoslovakia, the salaries of all priests and ministers are paid by the State and children in primary schools are provided with the possibility to attend religious classes if both parents desire such an education. Theological seminaries are state schools administered by
the Ministry of Culture with study programs prepared in accordance with the needs of the churches whose students attend the institution.

These two examples illustrate the general fact that in all the countries of Eastern Europe the right to confess a religion is constitutionally guaranteed and that the laws and decrees expressing specific issues of Church and State relations must be derived from it.

b) Generally valid, in all the socialist countries, is the reality that the scope of the activities and influence of the larger churches is substantially limited in comparison with the conditions prevailing before the change of social structures. Only the smaller churches and denominations benefited when they received legal equality with the larger ones. Under previous regimes the smaller churches were either only tolerated or even persecuted. As can be expected, the smaller churches acknowledged the new state of affairs as a positive event for their needs. The bigger churches found the restrictions of their activities in the field of education, health, and social care difficult to accept. Especially hard for them was the loss of property (mostly through nationalization), economic privileges, and direct political influence. Was such interference with the life of the church just? many church members asked. The enemies of socialism said certainly not; the principles of democracy and religious freedom were being violated!

The forces which established the socialist state, i.e., the different workers', socialist, and Communist parties, disagreed! They pointed back to the prerevolutionary situation and argued that at the time when the big churches had enjoyed their privileged position, due attention was not devoted to social rights, that they did not oppose exploitative business actions nor did they resist the repressive power of the administration; on the contrary, they justified the willful decisions of those in power. In managing their property, the big churches pursued profit interests as persistently as any other secular organization. Therefore it was only just that the churches should be deprived of their economic power and influence which had not been used for the needs of the masses of humble and deprived people. Some Christians in the socialist countries try to convince their critics that charity and social services had been offered to the needy by the Church, at a time when no one else had cared for them. This may be true, but in comparison with the developed health services, social and housing projects, education facilities, and work opportunities offered by the well-organized socialist state to all its citizens the old system has little to be proud of.

There are also Christians in Eastern Europe who understand the restriction of the churches' economic and political power as the "judgment of God," a judgment of history in view of the failure of the
new situation as "post-Constantinian." What they have in mind is that through the Decree of Emperor Constantine the Church was endowed with privileges which eventually led it astray from "following Christ" and turned it into a secular organization guided by profane interests. The curtailment of privileges can free the Church to become once again "apostolic" (pre-Constantinian) and to perform unhindered the mission requested of it by its founder, Jesus Christ.

It is my personal experience that those Christians and religious groups who have accepted the latter attitude and applied it to the religious and public life in a socialist society have gained a considerable scope of action and, what is more important, have reestablished a relationship of trust between Christians and those who had been skeptical about the positive role of religion in a modern society. They have not only gained respect but have developed new forms of religious work which are adequate to the needs of society as well as to the challenges of a global character.

Generally speaking, all attempts to restore the prerevolutionary style of religious work are impossible and, in the interest of efficient Christian activity in modern times, unacceptable.

c) A further problem of Christians in the socialist countries and one of the most challenging ones, is the relation between faith and atheism or the dilemma of faith and science. Obviously this question is not new in the history of human thought, but in the countries of Eastern Europe where the whole educational system and moral and cultural values are being consciously built upon a scientific approach and are being theoretically reinforced by Marxist-Leninist philosophy, it has become highly timely. It is no longer an academic question, but is becoming an issue of practical life having far-reaching consequences.

Religious persons, their families and children, are daily confronted with statements that faith and scientific knowledge conflict with each other, that faith is a superstition and an escape from reality, and that as such it is destructive for the healthy development of a human being. Occasionally it may happen that, contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, this strife is accompanied by administrative measures on the one side or a stubborn rise of emotional resistance on the other. Events of this sort may even be noted abroad and a wave of international support, not always well-intended, could contribute to a severe aggravation of the disagreement. It is quite clear that this type of confrontation is damaging to the normal life of society and that no contribution to the solution of the problem can be expected from it. A heavy responsibility rests with any Christians who may adopt theological notions which justify war, even nuclear war,
on the basis of a devious apocalyptic eschatology and who discredit peace efforts or any other human endeavor to build and master this Earth and thereby become ideological tools of anti-Communism. It is in the interest of atheists as well as Christians to pursue actions and develop reflections which will not result in tensions and hatred in society; on the contrary, they should seek ways and means of making dialogue and coexistence possible and define goals for cooperation for the good of all people. There are many issues which both sides may consider important: moral education, responsible human relations, the preservation of peace, the promotion of justice and liberation, and the strengthening of confidence between nations. Only one question remains open—namely, how to join forces and, in spite of different ideologies, to integrate our spiritual and human energies for the purpose of protecting life on this Earth.

A person who does not know the intellectual milieu in the Eastern European countries might easily believe, especially if he or she is not able to free him or herself from the influence of the adverse propaganda generated by the ideological struggle between the East and the West, that an atheist must be a primitive, vicious barbarian. Fortunately the opposite is true. A conscious and mature atheist or Marxist-Leninist philosopher is not only well-educated but he or she is profoundly devoted to the ideals of humanism, reverence of life, truth and justice, and high moral standards. Atheists consider their aims to be the continuation of the mental activity and reflections of a long line of thinkers such as Thales, Herakleitos, Lucretius, Giordano Bruno, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Ludwig Feuerbach, and, naturally, Marx, Engels, and Lenin—to mention only a few of the names one encounters in reading the atheists' works. They respect and do not hesitate to quote distinguished Christian authors; in Czechoslovakia they acknowledge their affinity with the ideas of John Huss, the Czech religious reformer, and Bishop Jan Amos Comenius, the Czech Christian universalist and pioneer of modern education. In other words, Marxists and Christians share and benefit from the common inheritance of humankind. The only difference is that Marxist-Leninist thought is principally monistic and derives its system from the time-space dimension, whereas Christian reflection tends to be dualistic since it recognizes the vertical dimension of eternity and the spirit as being qualitatively different from the horizontal dimension of time and matter.

Anyone who ever attempted to contemplate the mystery of the origins of being, life, and humanity knows how difficult these questions are. In the past, attempts were made to solve them by imprisonment, banning, expulsion, or execution. It is beyond the dignity of modern society to return to such methods or even to believe that a
nuclear war might answer the question. In the socialist countries a considerable number of atheists and Christians are engaged in a productive dialogue which should contribute to the solution of national as well as global problems and eventually open up an enquiry in the realm of metaphysics.

Churches in a Developed Socialist Society

If an attempt is made to forecast the future development of the countries of Eastern Europe, the following characteristics should be noted: the socialist societies will continue to improve their economies and intensify their political life with a view to ensuring an efficient socialist democracy, i.e., structures will be developed which will provide for broad participation in decision-making as well as control. This process need not be necessarily congruent; critical periods are natural parts of any human activity and even the most well-meaning socialist cannot avoid them. A regression back to capitalism, to free or unplanned economies, to liberal democracy based on the bickering of political parties is impossible.

There is no reason to believe that the activity of the churches and religious groups will cease to exist. The hopes of the early revolutionaries that the elimination of those conditions which produced exploitation and social injustice and the appropriation of economic facilities would naturally end the existence of the churches did not come true. The churches, therefore, will have to find their place in the changed society. For such a search there are no historical precedents or models; the churches will have to make their own decisions and establish their own correlations with the life of the society in which they live. All conclusions should be arrived at from a perspective which is relevant to the dominant currents of contemporary history. Everything seems to bear witness to the fact that interconfessional and interreligious quarrels and disputes between faith and science, or religion and atheism, and even the confrontation between different social systems, are losing their significance and force under the very real shadows of a global threat to the very existence of life. There are more weapons available than are needed for the entirely irrational annihilation of the whole biosphere, while further plans for the militarization of outer space are being prepared. The world's population is growing faster than the supplies of food, the gap between the prosperous elites and the hungry masses is becoming wider day to day, the emissions of modern industry and technology are contaminating the environment with endangering rapidity. Under such conditions can there be anything more important than new ways of thinking and acting which would protect life on Earth and
which would replace national and regional interests with a sense of global responsibility? Now is the time for radical change.

In the socialist countries, Marxists and Christians must stop wasting their energies in senseless strifes and must concentrate their motivations and energies on generating moral support for global responsibility and solidarity. I am very happy that in the Christian Peace Conference this understanding has become an indispensable part of its activities.