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**THE HERITAGE OF J.L. HROMADKA FOR THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY  
OF THE CHURCH IN EAST AND WEST, TODAY AND TOMORROW**

by Károly Tóth

Dr. Károly Tóth is the senior bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church with residence in Budapest. He is a former secretary general of the Christian Peace Conference and its current president. Bishop Tóth is a well known ecumenical leader, active both in the European and the World Council of Churches. He is known for his support of theological education, particularly of Radday Theological Seminary in Budapest.

On June 9, 1989, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of Professor Josef L. Hromadka. In Prague, on June 9th, a seminar was dedicated to his memory, and in other countries consultations and meetings have been held to honor his memory and evaluate his theological heritage. This meeting is a further contribution to this process of commemoration. The fact that it is taking place here in Princeton is a clear indication of the worldwide recognition of Professor Hromadka's theological oeuvre. We can also now look back upon his theology and his heritage from a distance which helps us to evaluate his work.

Although his person and theology have never ceased to be controversial and exposed to debate and criticism, still, there cannot be any doubt that Hromadka was one of the greatest theologians of our century. He was the student of great teachers like Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch, and a contemporary and friend of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others. He was one of the greatest ecumenical personalities along with Nathan Söderblom, William Temple, W. A. Visser't Hooft, and Martin Niemöller.

I.

When speaking about J. L. Hromadka, the first task we face is to look for what is common in his heritage with all those mentioned and what is his special message.

I think that his uniqueness can be explained by the controversy about Hromadka's theology. This controversy was both necessary and, I believe, a positive phenomenon.

I, myself, as the successor of Prof. Hromadka in the Christian Peace Conference, and one

of those who was privileged to know him and to work with him personally, am convinced that his teaching and his prophetic views have not lost their relevance. They are also of importance today; they touch on questions which concern our actual witness to Jesus Christ in our world. It is my aim now to shed some light upon the remarkable connection between Prof. Hromadka and our contemporary theological thinking and to draw conclusions from his theological heritage.

First, I would like to reaffirm that Prof. Hromadka cannot be separated from the theological movement of our century which is commonly called "dialectical theology." I think I need not go into the details because the parallel development of Hromadka's thought with that of K. Barth, and the similarities and dissimilarities between them are known. The intimate friendship of these two giants of theology is also well-known and often depicted in the handbooks of the history of theology in the 20th century. I would prefer instead to deal with only two facets of this interrelatedness between the theological thinking in Eastern Europe and the development in the West. Karl Barth's rediscovery of the Gospel made a great impression on Hromadka's thinking. He was interested in and committed to the actual witness of Christians to their Lord within their respective societies, that is to the vertical and horizontal challenges of the Gospel at the same time. In other words, Hromadka's theological conduct was led by faith in Jesus Christ and was characterized by a special sensitiveness to history. In his thinking, the God of history and the God of revelation, the God of Jesus Christ, are the same God. Thus, he felt committed to the communio sanctorum in society. By virtue of this double commitment - which he never felt to be contradictory - he was, no doubt, a child of his time. He became a representative of Church and society in all periods of his career, regardless of his successes and setbacks, achievements and failures. I think that this commitment to Church and society, the dialectical relation between working for the Church and for the society, can provide us with a clue which explains the relevance of Hromadka's theology today. The role the Churches have to play in the course of turbulent political and social events in Eastern Europe raises questions which calls for answers. Here the special pioneer work of J. L. Hromadka, as a theologian of a Church within socialist society, is also an issue of constant debate. To be sure, since his death enormous changes have come about. His proposals and suggestions cannot be accepted or refused without discussion and reasoning prior to the decision-making. We have to address the same issues which were important in his eyes. We have to struggle to find the relevant message of the Word of God in the same manner as he did. This is why Prof. Hromadka has remained a modern thinker and a modern theologian even twenty years after his death, and this is why he is even today an often debated figure in the history of theology. I will try now to re-interpret some of his thoughts in the light of the most recent changes in our societies.

## II

For many years, Prof. Hromadka was a controversial personality because of his attitude towards the socialist "communist" countries and socialist society in general. I think today this cannot give rise to any astonishment: Between the two World Wars in Europe the thinking of many leading personalities was characterized by a certain disappointment. Disillusioned by capitalism, many people turned to the new vision of society offered by Marxism. They pleaded for changes and they condemned the actual status quo. The old became odious for them, and the new appeared promising. J. L. Hromadka belonged to the circle of people (among them were F. Joliot-Curie and J. P. Sartre) who looked upon the socialist experiment with expectancy, as the bearer of a new order. For Hromadka this was based on his Christian faith, that human society can be improved and shaped according to the will of God. It is unfortunate that his criticism of socialism (which was, of course, a positive criticism, aiming at refining it) was not acknowledge publicly.

In theological terms he expressed this criticism as follows: "We know about the sinfulness and corruption of man. We know that no social and political order can bring about salvation and perfect freedom for humanity. We know very well that the most adequate social organization and legal and political structures provide nothing more than a framework for the real, genuine human life in love, compassion, truth and hope." His vision of a new, better society corresponded to the Biblical view. In this sense Hromadka was indeed a prophet, within the meaning of the Old Testament. In his words: "Christian faith never stops at what exists and what happens in history: it shapes history according to what should happen and what is right."<sup>1</sup> He was also a prophet in regard to the contents of his message; he pointed out to us actual tasks concerning the political and social relevance of our faith; he taught us a new Christian attitude towards political events; he helped us in evaluating great upheavals in our times. He was not alone in doing this. The German Churches also had their prophet in the person of Martin Niemöller, and we Hungarians were following our prophet, Bishop Albert Bereczky (also a very controversial personality due to his attitude to socialism). They were all united in friendship. But Hromadka played an eminent role among these personalities; not only did he realize that the emergence of socialist countries was a challenge to Christian faith, but he was also convinced that the real choice was not between socialism and capitalism; in fact, this question in our electronic and nuclear age is rather obsolete. Rather, he prophesied a new age beyond ideologies, in which the importance of the question posed by the nuclear age transcends that of socialism/capitalism. Of course, this message was not always and everywhere welcomed; as a prophet he also addressed some harsh words to

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<sup>1</sup>Der Geschichte ins Gesicht sehen, p. 171.

his people, just like the prophets of the Old Testament.

The call for repentance was not easy to perceive; like Niemöller in Germany, Hromadka had his difficulties not only in Czechoslovakia but also on the ecumenical scene in proclaiming his convictions. But prophets are always called to fulfil this double task. They continuously work for the well-being and salvation of the people to whom they have been sent, and at the same time they have to use harsh words to call the people to repentance. Even Prof. Hromadka was not exempt from misunderstandings and even misinterpretations; even after his death misunderstandings and misinterpretations about his theology were not entirely dissipated.

### III

Recent social changes in some socialist countries, like perestroika in the Soviet Union or the most recent reform processes in Hungary have called into questions the forty-year existence of socialism in the so-called East Bloc. Some speak of the necessity of social pluralism; others plead for more democracy, and certain people are abandoning a militant socialism and calling for more tolerance. All this is expressed by the rejection of classical Marxist teachings such as the class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Atheism is also on the wane.

These changes in some of the socialist countries touch upon church-state relations as well; we of Eastern Europe also are challenged to re-define our attitude towards socialist governments and societies. In this respect, we had a prophet in the person of Prof. Hromadka forty years ago, who regarded socialism as a moral promise. If we ask people today whether this promise proved true, a great percentage would answer with a resolute "no"! Consequently, the question could be raised: Was Prof. Hromadka a true or a false prophet? Was the message he preached among us the Word of God or a dream, such as was condemned in the book of Jeremiah: "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully." (23,28). Was the preaching of Prof. Hromadka among us chaff instead of wheat? In the course of history, will the Lord say that he is against this "false dream" (32v), or will He affirm that his word will break the rock to pieces? What should we say now: did the message of Prof. Hromadka prove true or false?

It is not by chance that I have chosen the prophecy of Jeremiah as the hermeneutical key for the understanding of the prophetic role of Prof. Hromadka. In fact, Jeremiah, the great prophet of Old Testament times, had to struggle with the false prophets who prophesied that the besieged Jerusalem would not be taken by the Babylonians. To their mind it was impossible for Jerusalem to be captured because for them the name of Yahweh was

inseparable from the temple. On the other hand, Jeremiah took great pains to make clear that the Babylonian invasion was the Lord's punishment for the iniquities of Israel and that the only way out of this impasse was for the people to repent, to convert anew to the Lord. An in-depth analysis of the language and theological thought of Hromadka will show how much he was indebted to the preaching of Jeremiah. We are justified in comparing him to this great prophet.

However, in the same manner it must be said that the exile in Babylon, which had been foretold by Jeremiah, lasted more than 70 years. How could the prophecy of Jeremiah be interpreted after 70 years had passed? Was the prophecy concerning this punishment of the Lord a false prophecy in the Light of the grace of God, by which he brought about a new exodus? This would mean that we oppose the prophetic word of judgement to the proclamation of the grace of God. To be sure, the great prophet of the exile, Deutero-Isaiah, was not called to preach the anger of Yahweh, the punishment of the Lord, but His grace and liberation. The words of Jeremiah could not be repeated. But were they invalid? Have they lost relevance? I think it would be short-circuiting the question to denounce Jeremiah as a false prophet; Jeremiah believed that the punishment of Yahweh would not last forever. He was also convinced that the return from the exile would take place; he was a man of the future. His call for repentance, and his proclamation of the Lord's punishment (which was a painful task for him) served to maintain God's eternal covenant with his people. And the preaching of Deutero-Isaiah consisted of the proclamation of this covenant also. We may conclude that the contents of the prophet's message can be different from time to time; they can also be opposed to each other. But differences of content may not call the legitimacy of a former prophet into question.

#### IV

The above lines may illustrate why the heritage of Prof. Hromadka is precious to us in the East European church and why we find it necessary to reassess his theology even in the light of recent events. There the matter must rest; Prof. Hromadka was a prophet, proclaiming the Gospel, and rehearsing Micah's words: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (6,8). Surely, this message is always to be reinterpreted, in order to say precisely how Christians have to face great turmoils of their times. And the message of Prof. Hromadka of forty years ago was that Christians and Churches should not be hindered by their attachment to old social formation in perceiving the new challenge which was launched by the new socialist societies. But at the same time, Prof. Hromadka knew that the promises of socialism, of a perfect human society, can never be realized."The

causes of the moral misery of humankind and spiritual despair cannot be removed even by effective changes and economic reforms."<sup>2</sup> I am convinced that this way of understanding socialism was an enrichment for the Church Universal showing us that the Gospel is not tied to any particular form of human society but bears relevance with regard to each of them. That is why the rumors accusing Prof. Hromadka of betraying Christianity and of being a fellow traveller of Communism must be repudiated resolutely. Would it not be absurd to assume that Jeremiah stood at the Babylonians' side?

Why have we to dwell so long on depicting the Old Testament prophecy? Why must we point out the similarity of Prof. Hromadka to the prophets of ancient Israel? First, it is because I think it is essential to his theology, and second, because the Old Testament prophecy also had an impact on Marxist philosophy. In fact, many Marxist philosophers (among them first of all young Marx himself) played the same role in contemporary social life as the ancient prophets. The harsh words directed at the powerful, the menace of punishment, the prophecy of doom (which was the revolution) are all dramatic forms of the prophecy. The parallels to Jewish Christian thought are striking. We cannot wonder that these ideas seemed attractive for many Christian thinkers. It seems clear that this common point between Marxist revolutionary theory and the Christian-Protestant tradition in which Prof. Hromadka was reared, was what opened Prof. Hromadka's eyes to the new society. He was convinced that Marxism and socialism need Christ's message, especially its prophetic aspects. That is why he stressed the importance of dialogue with Marxists. For many people this was not clear and indeed, today they still cannot understand why a dialogue with Marxist philosophers is imperative. Many of them assert that it is, in fact, a contradiction, not possible without the betrayal of Christianity. In so doing, they overlook one of the most remarkable convictions of Prof. Hromadka concerning Marxist thought: he assumed that atheism and materialism were not central to Communism: "The human being is more than the environment and social conditions, the human being is more than the homo oeconomicus, one who is bound only with economy." He always stressed that Marxism alone is insufficient for understanding the human being. Concerning atheism Hromadka was convinced that if the Church were to distance itself from old political systems and if the political situation were to be consolidated, then socialism would move away from atheism.<sup>3</sup> It was his conviction that the usual anti-clericalism of the workers' movement and of the Communist Parties was only due to the former attitudes of the Churches. This certainly does not excuse these parties for their administrative and political restrictions against the Church. But Marx's criticism of religion should seriously be taken into consideration because for a long time Christianity,

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>See "Kommunismus und Christentum," 1946.

too, had relied on human power and not on its Lord, Jesus Christ. "The tremendous challenge which comes from the revolutionary socialistic ideology has the identity effect. We have to go to the place where the prophets heard the Word, where the Church of the Apostles had to walk - between Jerusalem with the devastated temple and Rome" - says Hromadka. As far as the socialist revolution is concerned, however, he was always convinced that its task could not be fulfilled without the contribution of Christianity, and without the noble moral values of Christianity, no society can be established and maintained. The urgent task for Hromadka was to find the right place of the Church within the new society in order to proclaim there the Christian message of mercy, love, and reconciliation and so to contribute to the building of a more humane society. His aim was to safeguard the place of the Church within the new society and not to let the Church become a ghetto, but on the contrary, to let it become a missionary Church.

In order to dissipate all misunderstandings we have to quote the words of Prof. Hromadka by which he criticized the foundations of the socialist vision. It is, however, a striking fact that his criticism always aimed at correcting mistakes of that society and not at opposing it out of a blind anti-Communism. He said: "If we have some reservations in regard to dialectical materialism and scientific socialism, we have them not because of our anxiety, cowardice or stupid churchy prejudices, but simply because its philosophy is insufficient in explaining and changing the reality of our world."<sup>4</sup> It is, however, important to note that this insufficiency did not prevent Prof. Hromadka from seeking dialogue with Marxist philosophers and cooperation with politicians. One of his basic convictions was that the atheistic ideology of the Communist parties cannot be counter-balanced by a militant anti-Communist crusade but by spiritual renewal of the Church and Christians. That is why he opposed the anti-Communism of John Foster Dulles in Amsterdam in 1948 at the constituting General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. He raised his voice against the identification of Christianity with the Western liberal societies.

## V.

The openness of Prof. Hromadka for dialogue and cooperation had theological foundations and was central to his thinking. Of course, this does not mean that he was infallible and that his theology had no weak points. Otherwise, he would have succeeded in all his efforts of cooperation. I think we should plead not for a hagiographical but a critical appraisal of Prof. Hromadka.

We can also reckon with some developments in his thought. The difference between his

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<sup>4</sup>Der Geschichte ins Gesicht sehen, p. 173.

statements on the Russian invasion in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 reflect such a development worth mentioning here. In 1956, his comments were framed by the context of the cold war. He assumed that a criticism of Communism must be made, but he tried to understand that the Hungarian popular uprising was inspired by Western Europe and by American cold war spirit. At the same time he stressed the need of criticism; in his judgement, the socialist countries should abandon harsh methods of the revolution which could be justified at the beginning but not in the ongoing life of socialist society. "The dictatorship of the proletariat is but a provisional means for establishing a new society," he wrote. All in all, he believed in 1956 that socialism was attacked from outside. This line of thinking was profoundly changed in his well-known memorandum of 22 August 1968. He could not keep quiet any more, and he went so far as to raise the question about the future of Socialism. According to him, the reasons for the reform processes in Czechoslovakia (the Prague Spring) were to be found in internal political errors and in the failures of Marxist ideology. That is why what he said in relation to the events of 1968 is completely different from the opinion he expressed in relation to the Hungarian uprising. He wrote: "Our question is whether socialism is capable at all of creative development, of influencing the world community of peoples and especially the youth, whether it can provide convincing ideas, moral openness and political wisdom."<sup>5</sup> It is extremely difficult, even impossible to recreate the international atmosphere of those days. Without a good portion of empathy, nobody can attempt to make a tentative analysis of the events of the Hungarian uprising or the Prague Spring. The protest of Prof. Hromadka against the Russian invasion has to be even more appreciated in the light of the international power structure twenty years ago.

It is, however, clear that Prof. Hromadka never gave up hoping for a positive and fruitful East-West dialogue; his readiness for dialogue as a method of peace-making was rooted in his theological conviction, resulting from the close connection between Christology and anthropology. The fact is that Prof. Hromadka's prophetic vision contributed to establishing a new type of society, which has also come true. Though bad experiences accumulated until they reached their climax 1968, it was not the promise which deceived many people, not the idea of socialism which failed, but its implementation.

The prophetic heritage of Prof. Hromadka may be summed up in what we can accept as his political and theological testament: "If we can transcend all the barriers which artificially or historically divide the world and separate man from man, nation from nation, Church from Church, race from race, we may do something very important for world peace."

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 305.