Churches in the Gentle Revolution in Czechoslovakia

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An assessment of the role of the churches in the process of dismantling the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia is far from simple. The complexity of the task is deducible from the fact that the Czechoslovak reality of the last four decades in general, and the relations between the church and the Party-dominated state and society, in particular, have not yet been sufficiently explored. Due to the strict censorship of the government press, to ideologization of the societal and cultural phenomena, and to a lack of horizontally developing contracts between individuals and institutions of all kinds, all of life in the past seemed to have maintained an appearance of a dehistoricized flow of "events," the result of which was the exhibition of a form "approved" in advance from above. Viewed from the outside the impression that nothing had occurred in this country seemed unavoidable. Under the surface, however, history was slowly being prepared, molded, and eventually pushed to a surprisingly explosive point, as we witnessed in the November days, 1989. Who were the actors?

To answer this question, and a number of others, we have to take into consideration reform attempts of the 1960s. Again, there was a preparatory phase dating from 1961. For more than seven years, the spirit of profound and increasingly intensified criticism permeated all spheres of societal life and resulted in the so-called Czechoslovak Spring 1968. All the events, followed by the world public from January to August 1968, were gradually prepared through countless intellectual efforts, published and unpublished, alliances of unknown people exercising their criticism within cultural structures, research institutions, and last but not least, the Party itself.

Similarly, the development in the late 1980s culminating in November 1989 and the following months cannot be understood properly unless the dialectic between the spectacular events and the hidden network of spiritual and political striving underneath is recognized.
Every genuine evolution that affects the future has to be founded on the struggle for ideas, values, and objectives transcending the actual situation. Revolutionary upheavals as such usually divert from or even distort the intellectual revolt that was evolving earlier.

A question can be raised: to what extent have the churches participated in that process? We cannot escape an ambiguous assessment in answering this question. On the one hand, the churches in Czechoslovakia were involved. It does not mean, however, that their positive role can be described as direct support of the reform both in the 1960s and 1980s, and what is probably more important, it means that they failed in several respects.

Among the Protestants it was above all J.L. Hromádka, a well-known theologian, whose accentuation of solidarity and inescapable responsibility for and commitment to public affairs was shared by a group of younger clergy and laity called "New Orientation." While their teacher devoted his efforts since the end of the 1950s predominantly to the ecumenical and peace work abroad, New Orientation members were attempting to combine the Gospel and political commitment in the domestic context. Their point of departure was the concept of the Kingdom of God as a transcendent horizon that at the same time affects the current situation in all of its dimensions. Thus "New Orientation" was open to a dialogue that went beyond the narrow borders of the ecclesiastical domain. The idea of participating creatively in political life, exchanging views with the secularized strata of society including Marxists, was the dominating factor in their efforts at that time. In the struggle about legislation pertaining to the family, the peril existed that children might be separated from their parents and placed into state institutions if parents did not provide adequate Marxist education for them. In response not only individuals from New Orientation but about thirty congregations of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren sent their protests to the Ministry of Justice (1961–62). This struggle was one of the victorious attempts to humanize socialism.

At that time the Catholics had not recovered from the heavy losses which they had suffered during the period of persecution to which they had been exposed shortly after the Communists' seizure of power (1948). Consequently, they were too much absorbed by their own troubles. Moreover, their clergy, divided into adherents of an official institution strongly supported by the state and those maintaining loyalty to the Vatican, was at the brink of a split. The organization called Pacem in Terris worked up to November 1989 as a state agency without the Vatican's approval. Yet despite hard restrictions, the Catholics had succeeded in the 1960s and particularly in the last twenty years in developing genuine spirituality. And it has been lay people who now represent the most vigorous contribution to the spiritual renewal within the Catholic Church.

The Protestant churches, unlike the Catholic Church, were from the beginning of the Communist regime not considered as a powerful hostile community in terms of politics. To some extent they were even favored through the official interpretation of Czech history in...
which Jan Hus maintained the stature of a national celebrity in view of his social commitment. Thus, the temptation to accept the Communist regime with the prospect of survival as a tolerated minority (about 10% of the population) was enormous. The church leadership, in particular, did not manifest sufficient immunity against it. Without having examined the failures they made in the 1950s and 1960s they were not prepared to face the challenges after the invasion in August 1968.

The goal of the post-invasion regime during the period of normalization was to repress and marginalize the religious and church life. Laws on ecclesiastical matters adopted by the pro-regime parliament in October 1949 were made stricter and a number of severe provisions were designed to diminish the societal and cultural potential of the churches. For instance, to organize a meeting in order to show slides on historical church buildings could be considered a violation of the laws since this kind of activity was usually interpreted as non-religious and, as such, forbidden. Youth work, in particular, was greatly restricted, as was any attempt to affect public life through the Biblical witness. The churches had to confine themselves solely to the realm of cultic activities, and they were condemned to die out gradually. The disobedient clergy in all churches, when not imprisoned, lost their state licenses for ministry. The disobedient lay people had to face troubles in their jobs. There was practically no possibility for a young believer to become a teacher.

The Catholics reacted by attempting to reorganize a network of unofficial units within the parishes, sometimes headed by a clandestinely ordained priest, particularly in the period of latent or patent collaboration of the officially installed lower hierarchy with the state. With some exceptions, the bishoprics remained vacant until recently.

The Protestant churches' leadership tried to evade any direct clash with the state authorities. Yet the price for maneuvering between the alternatives offered by the state was often too high to pay. Consequently, the commitment to public affairs in the late 60s as seen in a Message to the Nation (February, 1968) issued by the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (the largest Protestant denomination in Bohemia and Moravia with about 200,000 members) was gradually pushed aside and separation of the gospel from practical life increased. To be sure, at the synods, a number of resolutions concerning extra-ecclesiastical matters were still voiced and sometimes even adopted, but the pressure of the state and the crippled will of the church leadership coincided and had a demobilizing impact on the clergy and laity. Even worse was the accommodation of theological thought and practice to a kind of opportunism. It led to a strategy of survival that damaged both the credibility of the Christian message and the inter-human relations in the church. Instead of dialogue as a method of coping with issues, the introduction of disciplinary measures began to prevail.
The Charter 77 document was signed by seventeen Evangelical ministers and several lay people. Compared with the Catholic clergy signatories (three) the number of the former is impressive. That was about 6% of the Protestant clergy. Most of them were recruited from the "New Orientation," some with and some without preaching licenses. The church leaders were compelled to issue a statement distancing themselves from the signatories which, after reluctance, they eventually published. Similar things were happening in the whole society. Representatives of the cultural life were also exposed to a heavy pressure of the official mass media and state authorities and many signed the Anti–Charter. In this sense, the churches in my country share with the society the same way of a sinful surrender to the dishonorable regime and did not exhibit and exceptional spiritual courage as the followers of Jesus Christ would have been expected to do.

Yet it would be misleading to conclude that the church representatives had totally failed during the period of the so-called normalization. The issue is more dialectic and no one-sided assessment complies with reality. The whole society had been governed from above by ruthless totalitarian methods, and no dialogue occurred within it. The same cannot be said about the Protestant churches at large and, hopefully, neither about the Catholics. The spirit of presbyterian democracy, mutual tolerance, and understanding still survived, and it was not entirely destroyed, though essentially infected from without by the spirit of normalization.

The moral damage done in the course of time is far from overcome. We are faced with more than simple fear and weakness. This kind of sin is, so to say, "suprahistorical," a manifestation of our failure in any epoch of our existence as human beings. What is, however, more important, is to unmask the "gripping and drifting" people are adopting and using as tools of coping with problems, an adaption to official line and image, a process to which human sinfulness provides a substantial contribution.

One instance will illustrate the moral damage. It was customary for the Party of that time to exclude the public from participation in the decision-making process in the economy and in the political system. It was given just a set of unanimously accepted minutes from, say, a plenary session of the Central Committee. There was no information given telling about different views and tensions among various groups in the Party. There were only results that people learned, not the struggle of ideas and visions preceding them.

Several years ago the Synodical Council of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, the supreme administrative body, held negotiations with the state officials on the re-installment of the ministers who had lost their preaching licenses, some of them because they signed Charter 77. The result: Their potential applications could not be seriously considered by the state unless they were willing to withdraw their signatures. Only this information was then published in the church press. Neither the standpoints of the church negotiators nor the arguments that they had used in the debate, nor the reports of any possible
contracts with the respective ministers could be printed. Thus the church was kept uninformed as to whether a minister who was given a license in the meantime had withdrawn his signature or if another, still remaining outside the church service, preferred dissidence to the ministry.

To be sure, the state censorship would hardly have permitted church leaders to publish any more complete report, but the church leaders would have attempted to do so and, when unsuccessful, they should have found ways to inform the church members thoroughly -- at least those whom it concerned most.

The guilt of the church consists predominantly in the combination of personal weakness and the "gripping and drifting" commonly shared with the society at the time. This kind of guilt was infecting all kinds of institutions. Eventually, in this respect, there was no essential difference between the political and ecclesiastical bodies. And this was the most troublesome point of our church history with which we have not yet coped. The months and years to come will reveal whether our spiritual strength and analytical insights will contribute sufficiently to a remedial process.

One thing still remains to be mentioned. How does one explain the fact that, despite the weakness of the official Christianity in Czechoslovakia, non-violence and tolerance, witness to truth and sensitivity for love and forgiveness became supreme values both in the 1960s during the Czechoslovak Spring and in the late 1980s in the November days--a phenomenon hardly understandable unless the positive impact of Christian faith and church communities in the country were taken into consideration?

Undoubtedly, without claiming any exclusivity, the direct and indirect contribution of Christians to the process of revolutionary changes seems to be undeniable. Tracing back the positive impulses stemming from Christianity, we cannot but think about the glories traditions of the Czech Reformation in which devotion to the ultimate Truth and commitment to the social dimension of our life played such a significant role. By means of a number of transformations that took place since the Enlightenment and through the vigorous influences of nineteenth century leaders--Havlicek, Palacky, and Masaryk--these ideas have been internalized in the minds of the people. Suppressed by the oppressive power they seem to have been fully forgotten. Yet they were preserved and maintained in the most private spheres of personal talks--in families, among friends, in dissident groups, in seminars, in apartments, and last but not least in the genuine sermons, faithful Biblical work and new forms of spirituality in the churches. This legacy has been revitalized. Eventually its strength was revealed in the decisive moments on the historical crossroad our nation had to reach in the last months. Thus the hidden seed produced its fruit at a time which, measured by the usual standards of political thinking, would never give power priority. However, the opposite has been true.
Let us formulate it better in a theological proposition: It was "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). It was this fortunate combination of grace coming from the spiritual realm beyond our disposition and at the same time our devotion to it that exceeded all perplexities and sins that had troubled us for decades.