

12-1998

Nationalistic Tendencies in the Slovak Roman Catholic Church

Frans Hoppenbrouwers

Dutch Roman Catholic relief organisation Communicantes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoppenbrouwers, Frans (1998) "Nationalistic Tendencies in the Slovak Roman Catholic Church," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 6 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol18/iss6/2>

This Article, Exploration, or Report 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 editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

NATIONALISTIC TENDENCIES IN THE SLOVAK ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH¹

by Frans Hoppenbrouwers

*Frans Hoppenbrouwers (*1962) is a Roman Catholic Church historian. He is secretary of studies of the Dutch Roman Catholic relief organisation Communicantes.*

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the eclipse of the communist regimes that followed it, *nationalistic tendencies*² apparently revived throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Appearances can deceive and so they did. It is clear now that nationalistic thinking was fostered throughout the communist era. Even the state itself contributed to that. Nationalism finally became manifest in the 1980's, during the Perestroika period. It preceded the 1989 turnover as well as the resurgence of a number of states that had lost their existence after World War II or even before that, e.g. the

¹ The author had talks with different representatives of the Roman-Catholic Church and politicians in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia and the director of the Slovak 'Council for Church-State Relations' in July and October 1997. By means of e-mail, internet and fax new material was added.

² Though the expression *nationalism* is frequently used in this article it would be better to use the expression *nationalistic tendencies*, because nationalism is a generalising term. It comprises a varying configuration of characteristics that may differ in intensity: 1) A simplistic interpretation of history as the mischief and fortune of a national community struggling for the preservation of its specific identity (against suppression by envious or expansionist enemies). 2) At the same time this national community is claiming for itself the stature of the ultimate salvation of the individual community member. 3) Exaggerating national culture, virtues and moral values as a specific quality of the nation and at the same time (implicitly) emphasising the inferiority of others. 4) Forcing minority or non-dominant groups to adhere to the aforementioned values by ignoring or attacking alternative cultural expressions or by imposing restrictive legislation. 5) Evaluating the individual or collective choices in the political, cultural, moral or religious domain as directed against or favourable to the dominant national group.

Balkan states from 1990 until 1992, the Baltic states and Ukraine in 1991 and Belarus in 1992. Last but not least, Slovakia gained independence on January 1, 1993.

Being the *natural* object of persecution, the Churches often proved to be strongholds of opposition. At the same time they held on to the national identity even if the national state had ceased to exist. In Slovakia the Roman Catholic Church played this particular role. Well organised the underground Church and the official Church – which were never separated – resisted the communist-atheist rule. Thus keeping faith alive the Slovak Roman Catholic Church became in the 1980's an important opposition *party* organising mass pilgrimages to holy shrines on Slovak territory. The communist era worked as a kind of *ideological freezer*. As soon as the communists unexpectedly gave way and new possibilities for societal expansion became available, the pre-communist period served as a model of times to come. Other models just weren't at hand. In the case of Slovakia rather unfortunately the Slovak State (1939-1945) became the point of reference, since Czechoslovakia itself was widely considered as a Czech-allied concoction of the Saint-Germain and Trianon peace conferences (1919/1920). This Slovak *nostalgia* centres on the Slovak State and more specifically its president, the Roman Catholic prelate Dr. Jozef Tiso (*1887-†1947). The wartime state is regarded by some Roman Catholics as an ideal society, where the Roman Catholic social doctrine prevailed, or as a time when Roman Catholic Church life flourished.³ Furthermore president Tiso had been executed by the Czech(oslovak) authorities as a fascist collaborator and had become in consequence an icon of anti-Czech sentiments and separatism.

Given this specific context one can imagine that the relation of the Roman Catholic Church with past and present can be somewhat awkward at times. Different themes will be investigated below:

1. Church-state relations today.
2. Slovak politics.

³ E.g. A. Hlinka, *20 + 10 Jahre danach. Zur Lage der katholischen Kirche in der Slowakei*,

3. Recent Slovak history.

4. Christianity and European history. Papal stimulus of Slovak nationalism?

1. Church-State Relations Today

After 1989 the old communist structures of control and repression were abolished, also in the Federal Slovak Republic. At the ministry of culture only the department of church affairs with an economical and a juridical section remained. The establishment of a *Council for Church-State Relations*⁴ within the ministry on January 1, 1997 was therefore quite a remarkable event. Its main goals are: 1) To investigate and analyse the relations between Church and state. 2) To provide materials to governmental policy makers and individual researchers.⁵ Strangely enough the director that was appointed had – in old times – intermediate connections with the Czechoslovak secret service STB. A scientific advisory board supports the council. Its members represent the denominational diversity of Slovakia, but they are not official representatives of their respective Churches. They are selected by means of co-optation. Two of them are Roman Catholics, who returned from exile after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are the professor of theology, vice-dean of the Bratislava seminary, Durica, and the sociologist-priest Anton Hlinka. The latter wrote brochures and books on the oppression of the (Czecho-)Slovak Roman Catholic Church and used to be in Slovakia a very popular collaborator of *Radio Free Europe*. Hlinka is connected with other state institutions like the Slovak State Television (STV) and the second state university in Trnava.⁶ In the eyes of many Roman Catholics the council is a successor of the communist control structures.

⁴ *Ustav pre vzťahy statu a cirkvi*.

⁵ P. Mulik, 'Staat und Kirche in der Slowakei. Wertschätzung der Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Kirchen in der Slowakei', [Bratislava (Institute for Church-State Relationships [of the Ministry of Culture]) 1997], 1-5.

⁶ Presumably they feel themselves obliged or grateful to the new political leadership because of the newly gained independence. In other Eastern European countries emigrants from exile more often display radical viewpoints regarding nationalism and state loyalty.

The relations between the Roman Catholic Church – the most important dialogue partner in the religious domain⁷ – and the Slovak government is not unproblematic. The problems are mainly the result of the wheeling and dealing of the quasi-democrat Meciar-government, but the diverging attitudes of the Roman Catholic bishops towards the state also play their role. Furthermore the concordat policy of Rome is a complicating factor. Most bishops – many of them were priests of the underground Church and among them bishop Rudolf Balaz of Banska Bystrica, chairman of the Slovak bishops' conference – do not want to co-operate with this government anymore, partly out of principle, partly out of mistrust. Archbishop Sokol of Trnava-Bratislava and primate of Slovakia, cardinal-bishop Korec of Nitra and the Greco-Catholic bishops of Kosice and Presov are more inclined to make compromises with the ruling Meciar government.

Church-State Relations: the Slovak Independence (1993)

Slovakia became independent on January 1, 1993 and especially in Czech ecclesiastical circles this was a traumatic event. Czech Church leaders had been strongly opposed to it. The mainstream Slovak Protestant Churches for instance had also been against independence. Being relatively small they were to suffer much from the division of Czechoslovakia. In the Czechoslovak Roman Catholic Church the opinions were divided. The then secretary of the Czech bishops' conference, Thomas Halik, called "Roman Catholic nationalism or nationalistic Roman Catholicism" a "dangerous and perverse heresy". He seemingly recognised nationalistic tendencies in the attitude of the Slovak bishops. Archbishop Vlk of Prague however thought it could free the Slovak Roman Catholics from feeling threatened or manipulated! He apparently supposed anti-Czech sentiments or bias among the Slovak Roman Catholics. From the Czech side the

⁷ About 65% of all Slovaks are baptised Roman Catholics (3.200.000).

Slovak bishops' view of the independence was – as a Czech politician said – evaluated as naive, favourable or coward.⁸

⁸ J. Broun, 'Church-state relations in Slovakia – October 1994'. In *Religion in Eastern Europe* (= *RiEE*) 15(1995)1, 14 and 'Gegen katholischen Nationalismus'. In *Glauben in der 2. Welt* (= *G2W*) 20(1992)9, 11.

Whatever their precise motives were, it is clear that the Slovak bishops lacked clarity. While Czech bishops called for a referendum (which in fact would have prevented the splitting up of Czechoslovakia),⁹ the Slovak bishops merely referred in the abstract to the right to self-determination as it is defined in the UN-charter. Bishop Tondra of Spis – then chairman of the Czechoslovak bishops’ conference – was personally in favour of the existing state structure, yet he also accentuated the right to self-determination.¹⁰ While the Roman Catholic bishops implicitly favoured independence the new premier of the Federal Slovak Republic Vladimir Meciar was trying to get them on his side (1992). To this purpose he made both threats and promises. Having beaten his Christian-democratic opponent, former prime minister Carnogursky, in the 1992 elections, he invited among others – like the Orthodox bishop Nikolaj of Presov and the Lutheran bishop-general Uhorskai – archbishop Sokol and cardinal-bishop Korec. Meciar promised total religious freedom and called the Churches necessary agents of the state project for the moral revival of Slovakia.

In a separate talk with the Roman Catholic Church leaders in June 1992 the prime minister expressed on the one hand his desire for good relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand however Meciar admonished the bishops for supporting Carnogursky’s Christian-democrats. He underlined the need for a Christian-democrat party, but at the same time he told his audience that Carnogursky’s party was not such a party. In the middle of November – the Slovak independence was announced on July 17, 1992 – premier Meciar visited the papal nuncio, bishop Coppa, in Prague to talk about politics, again. Meciar told him that the Roman Catholic Church should refrain from support to political parties in the future.¹¹ Generally speaking the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Slovak government remained good until the second term of the Meciar cabinet (October 1994-September 1998), but then started to deteriorate (see below). In June 1993 President Kovac – still good friends with premier

⁹ Opinion polls in Czechia and Slovakia showed that there was no majority in favour of the split.

¹⁰ ‘Gegen katholischen Nationalismus’ and ‘Volksabstimmung gefordert’. In *G2W* 20(1992)9, 11 and 20(1992)7/8, 13.

¹¹ ‘Neues Verhältnis zu den Kirchen’ and ‘Volksabstimmung gefordert’. In *G2W* 20(1992)12, 12

Meciar – even visited pope John Paul II in the Vatican. He thanked the pope for kissing the ground after arriving in Bratislava for his first visit to Slovakia (April 1990). Kovac saw it as an anticipated recognition of Slovak independence. The holy father called on him to let all Slovaks take up their responsibilities, minorities included.¹²

A New Concordat?

and 20(1992)7/8, 13.

¹² 'President Kovac beim Papst'. In *G2W* 21(1993)7/8, 10.

The concordat policy of the Holy See is a complicating factor in the Slovak situation that got a new impulse with the visit of archbishop Tauran – Rome’s *foreign minister* – in July 1997. The Slovak bishops received from him an instruction regarding the dialogue with the government. One of the issues at stake was to determine whether the *University of the Holy Cyril and Methodius* in Trnava could become a Roman Catholic university (see below). The exact timing of these negotiations was probably connected with the presidential and parliamentary elections (February and September 1998).¹³ Given these elections one could have expected a more willing attitude on the side of the government. Three successive rounds of negotiations between Rome and Bratislava were foreseen and each round should have been concluded with the signing of a partial treaty. This method had already been tested in Croatia and Slovenia. The Roman Catholic Church was going to try to obtain as much freedom and support as possible in order to carry out its religious and social mission.¹⁴

On the part of the Slovak government the following problems needed to be solved:

1. The financing of the Roman Catholic Church. The government wants to introduce a kind of Church tax similar to the system in some West-European countries (a fixed percentage of the income taxes). This mode of financing should become a part of the Slovak constitution. The Roman Catholic Church however wants to maintain the status quo: an annual donation according to present needs.
2. The appointment of the bishops. According to the *modus vivendi* of 1927 the government has the right of approval after the nomination of a bishop by the Holy See. Since 1990 however the Vatican has appointed new bishops without consulting the

¹³ The presidential elections ended in a stalemate, since no two third parliamentary majority could be found in favour of one of the candidates.

¹⁴ The Croatian, Slovenian and Polish concordats can serve as examples. The Croatian-Vatican concordat in: ‘Conventio inter Sanctam Sedem et Croatiae Rem Republicam de iuridicialibus quaestionibus’. In *Acta Apostolici Sedis* 89(1997)277-302.

(Czecho-)Slovak government. “Thus – concluded the director of the *Council for Church-State Relations* – anti-Slovak bishops have been appointed. This poses a threat to state security, because the new and small Slovak Republic needs an offensive patriotism, especially in the south where Slovaks are subject to hungarisation.” (It has been said that the Vatican would be prepared to make some concessions.)

3. The restructuring of the borders of the Roman Catholic dioceses. The government apparently prefers new diocesan borders similar to those of the administrative regions, which split up the more or less homogenous Hungarian regions in the south of Slovakia.

4. The interference of certain bishops with party politics.

Talks started on July 19, 1997 in Trenčianske Teplice in view of the first treaty on Roman Catholic education and pastoral care for the military and the police. Prime minister Meciar himself participated in the discussions, the Roman Catholic Church was represented by cardinal Korec among others and the Holy See by the papal nuncio to Slovakia, bishop Dosena. Bishop Balaz, chairman of the Slovak bishops’ conference, was absent. The negotiations between Church and state started under a bad sign. Just a few days before some pro-state newspapers had published a forged declaration of the bishops’ conference in which the Slovak bishops denied the present need for NATO.¹⁵ The talks were short and inconclusive and premier Meciar said that both parties were to blame for the difficult discussions. The Roman Catholic representatives did not give any

¹⁵ Most bishops on the contrary favour the entry of Slovakia into western supranational organisations. I. Chalupecky, ‘Die katholische Kirche in der Slowakei’. In *Informationen und Berichte* (1995)8/9, 4 gives another example of such forgery. In 1994 the HZDS orientated newspaper *Slovenska Republika* printed a faked declaration of priests of the Nitra diocese protesting against colleague priests in the Spis and Rožnava dioceses, who had criticised the government.

comment.¹⁶ New discussions are not to be expected before the parliamentary elections in September 1998.

2. Slovak Politics

¹⁶ T.A. Byrnes, 'Church and Nation in the Slovak Republic'. In *Religion, State and Society* (= *RSTS*) 25(1997)284 and A. Stiavnicky, 'Kerk en regering in Slowakije'. In *Bulletin kerkelijke contacten Tsjechië en Slowakije* (= *BKCTS*) (1997)18, 9-10.

The political climate in Slovakia is unhealthy.¹⁷ This is especially due to the politics of the HZDS party (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) of the Machiavellian prime minister Vladimir Meciar. The leading members of the HZDS were recruited from the (former) state enterprises and among high government officials (*apparat_iki*). After the Iron Curtain was lifted they went into politics in order to secure themselves against a possible loss of power. Thus the privatisation of state enterprises was rather limited and mostly just beneficial to political friends. Another indicator of the bad political situation is the participation in the government of the SNS (Slovak National Party) and the left wing ZRS (Workers Union of Slovakia). The SNS party is more or less responsible for the nationalistic and sometimes xenophobic orientation of the educational and cultural policies. The history of the Slovak State (1939-1945) for example is now being (re)written. The minister of education Eva Slavkowska (SNS) has largely favoured the nationalistic cultural society *Matica Slovenska* that publicised heavily disputed books on the Slovak State of president Tiso. A positive evaluation of wartime Slovakia often results from a manifest anti-Hungarian and anti-Czech bias.

¹⁷ A good overview in K.D. Martinsen, 'Niedergang der slowakischen Demokratie'. In *Osteuropa* 47(1997)791-809. See also <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/7502/human.html> *The Slovak Republic Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997*, [Washington] (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor – U.S. Department of State) 1998.

Other health problems of the young Slovak democracy are the attempted state control over the mass media, restrictions on the non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and the physical and mental intimidation of political opponents and critics of the Meciar government. In July 1995 for instance the residence of bishop Rudolf Balaz of Banska Bystrica was illegally searched by the Slovak secret service SIS in order to investigate (fictitious) accusations of art smuggling!¹⁸ A remarkable way of silencing the opposition is the foundation of new schools of higher education and faculties of university that have to compete with existing institutions. They receive more financial support and have teachers who display a remarkable degree of political correctness. In September 1997 in Trnava a second state university opened its doors. It was named the *University of the Holy Cyril and Methodius*. Thus the first, Christian-democrat orientated *University of Trnava* – under attack since 1994 – got a powerful competitor. Roman Catholic schools of higher education that had wanted incorporation into the *University of Trnava* received no state approval, but later were offered incorporation into the *University of the Holy Cyril and Methodius*.¹⁹ Finally, in March 1998, the Slovak Roman Catholic Church leaders decided not to accept the government offer to turn the latter into a Roman Catholic university.²⁰

The Roman Catholic Church in Opposition

The relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Slovak government were in the beginning rather good. In the Roman Catholic hierarchy were several bishops who favoured independence and cardinal-bishop Korec used to be an enthusiastic supporter of prime minister Meciar. Furthermore the Roman Catholic bishops had nothing much to complain about because the state left the Church well alone and was in fact supportive, providing state salaries for priests, generous restitution of confiscated church property (though problems were to arise) and subsidies for social, educational

¹⁸ 'Polizei durchsucht Bischofsamt'. In *G2W* 23(1995)10, 8.

¹⁹ In consequence alumni only receive the lowest academic degree (*magister*) and will earn lower wages in state funded institutions.

²⁰ 'Universitätsstreit'. In *G2W* 26(1998)6, 10.

and charitable activities. Meciar's attitude was already authoritarian during his first time in office as premier (1992-1994), but it became even grimmer when he came in office the second time (October 1994).²¹

²¹ I. Chalupecky, 'Die katholische Kirche in der Slowakei', 1-7 gives a good overview of the early years of independence.

Already in December 1993 and again in May 1995, the bishop's conference had complained about the situation of public life, especially the bad political culture characterised by politically motivated dismissals and the power struggle between president Kovac and premier Meciar. (This by the way incited a professor of the Bratislava archdiocesan seminary to criticise the Slovak bishops in the HZDS orientated newspaper *Slovenska Republika*.²²) The language law of November 15, 1995 led to a more or less definitive split between government and bishops. This law aimed at the reduction of the presence of minority languages like Hungarian, thus favouring the use of Slovak language in public life. Protesting along with the Hungarian episcopate, the Slovak Roman Catholic bishops obtained the right to give pastoral care to the Hungarians in their own language. Later that same year the bishops came to the support of president Kovac against whom a fervent press campaign was raging.

New protests followed when a new 'law on the preservation of the republic' was passed on March 26, 1996. It was more or less a copy of a communist law dating back to 1948 and intended to silence the (Slovak-Hungarian) critics of the ruling government. In a public statement 10 of the 15 Roman Catholic bishops publicly condemned this law, cardinal Korec (who protested separately) and archbishop Sokol among others excepted. Bishop Balaz, chairman of the Roman Catholic bishops' conference, saw it as a proof of the government's lack of commitment to democracy and an open society. Soon after two priests – bishop Balaz supported one of them when criticised by archbishop Sokol – were charged under the new law. In December 1996 cardinal Korec protested against the unconstitutional exclusion of a former HZDS MP from parliament. In June 1997 representatives of all major confessions, the Roman Catholic and Greco-Catholic Church included, visited president Kovac. The political culture was criticised and the political

²² I. Chalupceky, 'Die katholische Kirche in der Slowakei', 5 does not mention which professor.

parties were called upon to deepen Slovak democracy and to strive for integration in European structures.²³

²³ T.A. Byrnes, 'Church and Nation in the Slovak Republic', 285-286 and P. Morée, 'Slowaakse bisschoppen protesteren tegen Meciar'. In *BKCTS* (07-1996)13, 3-4 and 'Bischöfe für Kovac', 'Bischöfe gegen Republiksschutzgesetz', 'Kardinal Korec gegen Einschüchterung', 'Kirchenmänner beim Präsidenten' and 'Wider die politische Unkultur! Stellungnahme des Bischofskonferenz zur gesellschaftlich-politischen Lage in der Slowakei'. In *G2W* 23(1995)6, 12, 24(1996)5, 9, 25(1997)1, 9-10, 25(1997)9, 10 and 22(1994)1, 24-25.

Again in May 1998 only 9 bishops protested against the polarisation in the Slovak society creating an atmosphere of ethnic hatred, international isolation and the moral degradation of Slovakia. They called on the government to respect the resolutions of the Constitutional Court, to assure democratic elections, to let the Slovak people chose their president, to favour ethnic and religious tolerance and to guarantee objective information to the public by the media. The government parties condemned this protest as an illegitimate interference in state affairs. Premier Meciar told the 9 bishops to take an example in the pope , who allegedly had asked the Slovak bishops to leave politics alone. Furthermore he praised archbishop Sokol, cardinal Korec and the remaining 3 bishops as responsible citizens.²⁴

During the two visits to president Kovac in December 1993 and June 1997 the deterioration of moral and social life in Slovakia was also criticised. Poverty, drugs, economic decline, extreme differences of income were severely censured. The general lack of interest of the Slovak citizens in the political and societal life was denounced as the main reason of moral degeneration. Attending a funeral of a young gypsy, who was murdered by skinheads, bishop Balaz in July 1995 bravely condemned this act. He disapproved any kind of racism.²⁵ Most residing Roman Catholic bishops were priests of the underground Church. They generally display a less favourable way of looking at the Slovak government than archbishop Sokol (apostolic-administrator under communist rule), cardinal-bishop Korec (an underground bishop) and the Greco-Catholic bishops. As a collective, individually and together with leaders of other Churches they have protested against political abuses and societal problems as well.

3. Recent Slovak History

²⁴ 'Geharnischte Kritik'. In *G2W* 26(1998)6, 9-10 and P. Morée, 'Slowaakse bisschoppen klagen de regering-Meciar aan'. In *BKCTS* (06-1998)20, 3-4.

²⁵ See footnote 22. 'Haltungsänderung gegenüber Zigeuner?'. In *G2W* 23(1995)11, 11. Gypsies generally have a bad reputation and are subject to ill treatment by citizens and state officials as well.

The reevaluation of the political life of president Tiso (†1947), who was the first and only president of the Slovak State (1939-1945), is a recurring issue within and outside the Roman Catholic Church.²⁶ This reevaluation is closely connected to the Slovak State, which in fact was – as some argue – a de facto protectorate of the German Third Reich. Because Tiso was the president of the first independent Slovak political entity ever (where Roman Catholicism allegedly flourished), he has a big symbolic value to the present Slovak Republic. His role in the deportation of the Jews to the German death camps is the main issue at stake. Another issue alongside it is the repression of the Protestant Churches during the Tiso reign. How far Tiso's responsibility did extend has in recent years become an open question once again. He is back on trial.

The Roman Catholic Church and President Jozef Tiso

During a meeting in New York in March 1992, cardinal-bishop Korec of Nitra complained that in times of freedom it was still impossible to obtain the full truth about president Tiso. He expressed the wish for an unbiased historical investigation that would recognize attenuating circumstances since:

“Tiso had no opportunity to prevent the Nazi's from doing what they wanted to achieve in Slovakia.”²⁷

The cardinal however had been criticised before by Hungarian Slovaks after inaugurating a Tiso memorial plaque.²⁸ Other unfortunate events occurred. In the spring of 1993 in Ruzemberok bishop Tkac of Kosice spoke at a commemorative mass for the priest Andrej Hlinka (†1938), who had founded the Slovak National Party to which also Tiso belonged. He called upon his Czech brothers to apologise for executing president Tiso. Remarkable was the attendance of the vice-president of the Slovak National Council,

²⁶ E. Géze, 'Der Schicksalsweg eines Priesters'. In *Osteuropa* 45(1995)A283-A287

²⁷ 'Korec über Tiso'. *G2W* 20(1992)4, 9.

²⁸ R. Bohren, 'Die Slowakei im Spiegel ihre (Kirchen-)Geschichte'. In *G2W* 22(1994)1, 18.

Jozef Prokes, who was then honorary president of the right-wing nationalist party SNS. He too called for a new appreciation of Tiso's presidency.²⁹

²⁹ 'Rehabilitierung gefordert'. In *G2W* 20(1993)9, 9.

In July 1997 historical research was still underway and no conclusions had been reached. This however could not prevent archbishop Sokol of Trnava-Bratislava from celebrating a mass to the memory of president Josef Tiso. This action was not uncontested within the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The chairman of the Slovak bishops' conference bishop Rudolf Balaz of Banska Bystrica openly criticised archbishop Sokol.³⁰ This fortunately showed bishop Balaz's shift of opinion, since on other occasions he also had spoken in favour of president Tiso. At the opening of a Jozef Tiso Memorial Hall, autumn 1996, he had called him an "extraordinary and outstanding personality". Just a few months later he suggested that the judgement on wartime Slovakia and Tiso were biased exactly because the president was a Roman Catholic priest. (Thus covertly accusing critics of anti-clericalism.) For this reason he expressed the need for historical research.³¹

Ecumenical Complications

³⁰ 'Slowaaks leerboek weerspiegelt dubbele houding over WO II'. In *BKCTS* (06-1997)6.

³¹ T.A. Byrnes, 'Church and Nation in the Slovak Republic', 286 and J. Luxmoore, 'Eastern Europe 1994: a Review of Religious Life in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland'. In *RSTS* 23(1995)217. Luxmoore argues that Slovak bishops tried to temper nationalistic views on Tiso.

This attitude towards the history of the Slovak State is painful, especially for the Jewish community, but also for the Protestant Churches. Jews and Protestants alike now face a kind of Tiso revival characterised by the emergence of local ‘Society of Friends of President Tiso’ throughout the country, publications by the state supported nationalist cultural society *Matica Slovenska*,³² Tiso memorials (1997), and the Roman Catholic desire for his rehabilitation. Furthermore, the oppression of the Protestant Churches during the Tiso reign and the contribution of its members in saving persecuted Jews is generally neglected.³³ Nationalists negatively evaluate their participation (together with communists and Jews) in the Slovak National Uprising (August-October 1944), because it was directed against the Slovak State. The same goes for their working together in the National Council (1945-1946). Especially painful was the publication of the exile priest Milan S. Durica – a professor of sociology of the Padua University (Italy). His *History of Slovakia and the Slovaks* (1996), which was funded by the European Union and approved by the SNS led ministry of education, made a big – negative – impact. It was rightfully dismissed as anti-Czech, anti-Hungarian and anti-ecumenical, as insensitive towards the fate of the Slovak Jews and exonerating the Slovak wartime government.³⁴ Neglecting the essential contributions of Protestant intellectuals to the 19th century nationalist movement and the suffering of the Protestant Churches during the communist period, Durica in contrast highlighted the merits of the Roman Catholic Church. This however did not prevent a spokesman of archbishop Sokol to attach his approval to the already contested publication (July 1997).

A positive development therefore was the decision of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic bishops to establish a reconciliatory committee that will investigate the historic relationships between Protestants and Roman Catholics. This committee was to focus on

³² Other (extreme) right-wing organisations are the ‘Andrej Hlinka Society’ and the ‘Union of Slovak Soldiers’. These organisations support publications edited by the *Matica Slovenska*.

³³ ‘Christlich-jüdischer Dialog’ and ‘Warnung vor Faschismus’ In *G2W* 21(1993)4, 11 and 23(1995)5, 9.

³⁴ M.S. Durica, *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovakov*, [Bratislava 1996]. A comprehensive analysis in English was provided by the Czech-Slovak review *Kritika & Kontext* 2(1997)2-3, 24-65. ‘Umstrittenes Geschichtsbuch’. In *G2W* 25(1997)6, 10. The *Matica Slovenska* published some of Durica’s books on Tiso. He’s to be distinguished from his brother mentioned in the text above.

the period from the Reformation until the first Slovak independence (1517-1939), the Churches in the Slovak State (1939-1945) and the Churches under communism (1945-1989). In January 1998 six historians convened in order to start their activities. On April 5 the Slovak bishops issued a declaration on the holocaust in the Roman Catholic weekly *Katolicke Noviny*. Referring to previous statements (1987 and 1990) they encouraged all people of good will to ask forgiveness and to overcome prejudices. The role of wartime president Tiso however wasn't mentioned.³⁵

President Josef Tiso: An Innocent Bystander?

³⁵ 'Bischöfe zur Shoah'. In *G2W* 26(1998)5, 7-8 and 'Versöhnungsinitiative'. In *G2W* 26(1998)3, 8.

Proper research into the history of the Slovak State and especially into the life of president Tiso based on Slovak sources has not yet been undertaken. Nevertheless, by using German sources, one can still draw a raw picture of the attitude of the Slovak State towards the Jews and the way their deportation to the German death camps took place.³⁶ The image is not favourable.

In October and November 1938 pogroms took place in Bratislava in which the Slovak fascist Hlinka-guards³⁷ and German Slovaks took part. When independence (March 14, 1939) was declared *Arianisation* of Slovakia was well on the way. The Jewish Political Party (among others) had already been forbidden, Jewish property was confiscated and 6000 Jews in Bratislava were sent to labour camps. In the autumn of 1941 a 'Jewish codex' was made law, stating who was a Jew and who was not. In November the Slovak government notified German authorities to be ready to send their Jewish population to the east, but at the same time lay a claim on their properties. In 1942 registration and *concentration* proceeded and the Slovak government voluntarily offered the Germans 500 Reichmarks per Jew for the costs of deportation. Together with German deportation specialists – assistants of the infamous Adolf Eichmann – the Hlinka-guards and German militia rounded up 56,000 Jews that were sent to the death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz. A number of Jews under ministerial and presidential protection remained, but after the Slovak National Uprising in 1944 until the end of March 1945, the remainder was sent to Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen and Theresienstadt. Again deportation experts and Slovak aids worked closely together.

³⁶ I've consulted Hans Safrian's *Eichmann and His Accomplices*: H. Safrian, *Eichmann und seine Gehilfe*, Frankfurt am Main (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag) 1995 [1993¹], 209-213 and 308-311.

³⁷ The Hlinka-guard was a paramilitary organisation established by the Slovak government in 1938 to be 'the moral auxiliary organs of all government offices'. See F. Vnuk, 'Slovakia's Six Eventful Months (October 1938-March 1939)'. In *Slovak Studies 4: Historica 2*, Cleveland-Rome (Slovak Institute) 1964, 82. The nationalist Roman Catholic priest Frantisek Vnuk used to live in exile and is now professor of the Bratislava diocesan seminary.

One can ask now, if a new picture of Tiso will cast away the shadows that lay on his presidency. It has been argued that the higher necessity of survival as a state and the protection of the Slovak people led to the unwanted sacrifice of Jewish citizens.³⁸ The level of co-operation and the profits gained from it however turn this questionable argument rather sour. Maybe the Slovak leadership was acting beyond freedom, but the creation of a context of permissiveness by outright anti-Semitism and active collaboration cannot be justified. Tiso's role will remain ambiguous even if favourable evidence will be presented. A quotation from a conference held in Holi_ on August 8, 1942 shows this clearly. When asking himself whether "the solution of the Jewish question" – as the Nazi's used to call it – was compatible with Christian principles Tiso answered:

"I think that no one has to be convinced of the fact that the Jewish element posed a threat to the life of the Slovak State. (...) We acted according to the law of God: Slovakia dispose of your enemies! In this sense we establish order and will continue to do so."³⁹

4. Christianity and European History. Papal Stimulus of Slovak Nationalism?

Whenever travelling to Eastern Europe pope John Paul II always insists on the fundamental role Christianity played, plays and should play in the mental, spiritual and moral growth of the European states. The secular sphere and the religious sphere have interacted continuously resulting in the advancing impregnation of the secular sphere with Christian faith. Faith becomes firmly rooted in culture (inculturation). According to the pope the coming of age of Europe in the last 2000 years of history has a double meaning for the present:

1. In view of the European integration each member state should recall and guard its own historic-Christian traditions in order to oppose the development of a vague European cultural relativism.

³⁸ E.g. M.s. Durica, 'The Republic of Slovakia'. In *Slovak Studies 1: Historica 1*, Rome (Slovak Institute) 1961, 105-121.

³⁹ H. Safrian, *Eichmann und seine Gehilfe*, 213.

2. At the same time there exists the need for (re-)evangelisation, *Tertio millennio adveniente*.⁴⁰ The gospel should continue to contribute to the public welfare (*bonum commune*).

Pope John Paul's second visit to Slovakia (June 1995)

⁴⁰ *With the Coming of the 3rd millennium* – the title of an apostolic letter of pope John Paul II (1994).

During his second visit to the Slovak Republic the holy father emphasised the Cyrilo-Methodian tradition as the linking pin of Christianity in Slovakia from the Greater Moravian Empire (9th and 10th c.) to the present.⁴¹ Here pope John Paul II touched a classic nationalist topic dear to the opponents of the Hungarian cultural oppression in the 19th and 20th c. In this context the Slovak State (1939-1945) was considered as the revival of the Greater Moravian Empire. According to president Tiso the specific contribution of the two brothers Cyril and Methodius lay in their joining together of Christian faith and Slovak nation.⁴² The holy father however cleverly, but somewhat artificially avoided the linkage of the Greater Moravian Empire with the Slovak Republic (1993) *through* the Slovak State. He described the Second World War period as an interruption of the existence of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939 and 1945-1992). Yet a clear, continuous line was drawn.⁴³ (Papal interest in the Cyrilo-Methodian tradition dates back as far as pope Pius IX (†1878) and his successor Leo XIII (†1903). In 1981 John Paul II made the two holy brothers from Salonika in Greece, Cyril and Methodius, the patrons of Europe. They symbolise for him the re-evangelisation and the desired unification of Europe, geographically as well as mentally.⁴⁴)

Insisting on the analogy between the brothers-missionaries Cyril and Methodius and the Slovak bishops of today pope John Paul said:

⁴¹ In fact the pope underlined that on the one hand the brothers Cyril (†869) and Methodius (†885) were the missionaries who brought orthodoxy to the Slavs and on the other hand professed their allegiance to the Holy See of Rome. See 'The Holy Fathers Visit to the Slovak Republic'. In *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition (= ORWE)* (19-07-1995)10.

⁴² J. Kirschbaum, 'Cyrilo-Methodian Tradition in Slovak National and Political Life'. In *Slovak Studies 3: Cyrillo-Methodiana*, Rome (Slovak Institute) 1963, 153-172.

⁴³ 'The Holy Father's Visit to the Slovak Republic'. In *ORWE* (12-07-1995)11.

⁴⁴ K.j. Verleije, *Brugfiguren voor een verdeeld Europa. Cyrillus en Methodius*, Brugge 1982, 93-152.

“In this delicate phase of the consolidation and growth of your country, a country which always found in Christian values a fundamental element of its identity, new and challenging tasks await the Church...’

Pope John Paul II meant the defence of the Roman Catholic faith and its believers against “...*today’s enemies*: radical subjectivism, practical materialism, religious indifference, consumerism, secularism and hedonism...” The Roman Catholic Church that once had resisted atheistic communism now has to fight new, western enemies.⁴⁵ According to the pope exactly here the Church should contribute to the public welfare by proclaiming the gospel. He does not reiterate or even support a political Roman Catholicism.

During his visit to Slovakia the holy father recalled to his audience the witness of the martyrs in the history of Christianity up to the communist era. In Kosice on July 2 John Paul II solemnly pronounced the canonisation of the so-called three ‘martyrs of Kosice’, who fell in 1619 under the hands of the Protestants. Already some months earlier though the intended canonisation was criticised by Protestant Church leaders. On the one hand, they opposed the partial representation of historical facts. Protestants themselves had also been victim of religious intolerance. In Presov in 1687 the so-called ‘24 martyrs of Presov’ were murdered by Roman Catholics. On the other hand, they were offended by the implicit comparison of the Protestants with the communist Church persecutors.⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II proved to be sensitive to this criticism. In Presov and

⁴⁵ ‘The Holy Father’s Visit to the Slovak Republic’. In *ORWE* (12-07-1995)8.

⁴⁶ ‘Heiligensprechung in der Slowakei’ and ‘Martyrer von vorgestern’. In *G2W* 23(1995)3, 15. The canonisation of the 17th c. Roman Catholic priest Jan Sarkander in May 1995 in Czechia led to even stronger protests. A similar problem arose in 1993 when the Slovak bishops dedicated Slovakia to the Virgin Mary. The Protestant Church leaders had preferred a dedication of the Roman Catholic faithful to Mary instead. See ‘Ist Maria Patronin aller Slowaken’. In *G2W* 21(1993)11,9.

Kosice he commemorated the victims of Roman Catholic violence and stressed the common suffering during the communist era.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 'The Holy Father's Visit to the Slovak Republic'. In *ORWE* (05-07-1995)1-2 and 3, (12-07-1995)11 and (19-07-1995)9 and 'Papstreise in die Slowakei'. In *G2W* 23(1995)7/8, 12.

Frankly speaking such canonisations should be avoided, because they stir up a tumultuous Church history, which until now has never been thoroughly investigated. It seems however that the need to promptly provide icons of persecution for the 1948-1989 period leads to precipitated choices.⁴⁸ Yet, one very positive feature could be distinguished. The new saints all had different, non-Slovak nationalities: Polish, Croatian and Hungarian. The pope made the following remark on that:

“The three saints belonged to three different nations, but they shared the same faith (...). May their example renew in their fellow citizens of today a commitment to mutual understanding and may it strengthen especially between Slovaks and the Hungarian minority the bonds of friendship and co-operation!”⁴⁹

Arriving in Bratislava on June 30 John Paul II had already expressed his satisfaction with the signing of the Slovak-Hungarian treaty regarding the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.⁵⁰

At Sastin, the Marian pilgrimage site, the holy father put forward the situation of the Czech, Rom and Hungarian minorities. Especially the Slovak-Hungarian Roman Catholics were brought to the attention of his audience.⁵¹ They had presented the pope a petition with some 52,000 signatures before his visit to Slovakia in protest against a lack of pastoral care. Points of concern were the absence of Hungarians in the higher Church hierarchy, the lack of Hungarian (speaking) priests and the restructuring of the Roman Catholic dioceses to the disadvantage of the Hungarian minority. Until then the bishop's conference had refused to meet their demands, claiming that the Hungarian wishes were politically motivated, that vocations among Hungarians were lacking and that Slovak priest candidates learn Hungarian sufficiently well. John Paul II underlined this last point. He told his listeners that the Roman Catholic Church – because of its catholicity –

⁴⁸ Pope John Paul II has canonised more saints during his pontificate than the popes before him together the last five centuries.

⁴⁹ ‘The Holy Father's Visit to the Slovak Republic’. In *ORWE* (05-07-1995)2.

⁵⁰ ‘The Holy Father's Visit to the Slovak Republic’. In *ORWE* (05-07-1995)3. This treaty remained more or less without consequences.

⁵¹ A similar protest was made before the pope's first visit to Slovakia in 1990. Then the Hungarians asked for an auxiliary bishop of their own.

is committed to meet the minorities' expectations. Moreover he said the Roman Catholic Church could not submit to any kind of nationalism.⁵²

5. Conclusion

After the unexpected changes in 1989 the Central and Eastern European countries had to develop new perspectives for the future. This was, and still is, a complicated process of trial and error, since the fear for an open and unknown future tends to favour a retreat into history (*back to the future* as they say). The openness towards the new, mostly western ways of life (e.g. democracy, pluralism, capitalism and liberalism) is often viewed with suspicion. In the case of the Slovak Roman Catholic Church – the Slovak Churches and society at large – there are some complicating factors. The period of the Czechoslovak Republic was perceived as being one of cultural and mental oppression (1920-1939). The communist era was the oppressive background to which the Roman Catholic Church (and other Churches) sometimes played an outstanding though minimised role (1948-1989). Therefore the first Slovak independence became a significant historic model (1939-1945). Then the Roman Catholic Church exercised a great influence upon moral, societal and political life. There Church figures like president Jozef Tiso played their prominent, yet contested role.

Given the feeling of subordination that the Slovaks have felt and fostered towards the Czechs the Slovak independence was an almost 'natural' consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall. (Czech politicians, like federal premier Klaus, on their part wanted to rid themselves of economically more backward Slovakia.) Ruled for centuries, mainly by Hungarians, the Slovaks were twice unwillingly incorporated into a Czechoslovak Republic. Support for independence from the side of the Slovak Roman Catholic Church came not as a surprise, because the Church itself and the Prague dominated communist

⁵² 'Besorgte ungarische Katholiken'. In *G2W* 23(1995)2, 9, J. Broun, 'Church-state relations in Slovakia – October 1994', 15, T.A. Byrnes, 'Church and Nation in the Slovak Republic', 286-288 and 'The Holy Father's Visit to the Slovak Republic'. In *ORWE* (12-07-1995)9. Examples of nationalistic Church policies are: diocesan structures in accordance to ethnic boundaries and the refusal to provide pastoral care in the native tongue.

regime were antagonists. Moreover, the Slovak Roman Catholic Church bore the reminders of a time when it was an important institution. This memory not only brought with it an unfounded nostalgia – society was radically modernised in the 50 years under communism – but also a naive admiration of the past. Though it would be wrong to accuse the Slovak Roman Catholic Church of outright nationalism or even of anti-Semitism, there are some examples of an unwarranted recycling of history. This indicates plain naiveté and a nationalistic way of thinking as well.

The dependence of the Roman Catholic Church (and the Churches in general) on the state introduced an ambiguity in their mutual relations. On the one hand the state wanted to get Church support for their policies and was clearly willing to use persuasion as well as force. On the other hand the Church had to adapt to the new laws, mentalities and outlook of the Slovak government. A certain, minimal loyalty was required in order to be or to become a serious negotiation partner. (Here is another possible reason, why the Slovak bishops did not strongly oppose the independence of Slovakia.) The developments after the independence of January 1, 1993 however made it quite impossible for the Church not to protest. Thus the Church leaders got trapped in a discourse that qualifies stances as pro- or anti-Slovak. Pro-Hungarian support, just like criticising state policies, is interpreted as anti-Slovak. Protesting against certain laws, which aim at the Hungarian minority, does not imply however a non-nationalistic way of thinking. The desired rehabilitation of president Tiso, the definition of a new diocesan circumscription or the unwillingness to provide a Slovak-Hungarian auxiliary bishop show it clearly. Nevertheless it is difficult to tell exactly whether the Church policies result purely from pragmatic choices (*adaptation*), a kind of exaggerated pro-Slovak point of view (*nationalism*) or defiance of state interference with the internal Roman Catholic church affairs (*protest*). All three elements seem to be there.

Further European unification has induced regionalism and a renewed interest and concern for the national cultural heritage. In the young Slovak Republic this concern is much bigger, since the perception of the national history is mainly one of loss. Moreover small countries will most likely play a minor role in the western supranational

organisations. In this given context pope John Paul's *back to the roots* can have a negative influence on the integration into these organisations and – binding faith and nation firmly together – give an impulse to nationalistic ways of thinking. It could lead to the usurpation of history as wholly Roman Catholic, thus identifying Roman Catholicism and the Slovak nation and denying historic and present (religious) pluralism. This happened with the canonisation of the three Counterreformation saints. Most Slovak bishops however favour integration into western military, economical and political structures.

The great importance that is attached to the inculturation of the Christian tradition (in its Roman Catholic denominational variety) could result in involuntarily facilitating the linkage of theological or religious themes with nationalistic-historic ones. Of course, the Cyrilo-Methodian tradition is much broader than Slovak Roman Catholicism (Cyril and Methodius brought Orthodox Christianity to the Slavs), but in fact this specific tradition in reality can have other significations: a. Slovak Roman Catholicism, b. faith and Slovak nation, c. Orthodoxy, d. European unification along with (re-)evangelisation. The many different meanings make these themes vulnerable and vague at the same time. Though intending one interpretation, another, nationalistic one can be perceived. In the case of Slovakia the Cyrilo-Methodian tradition most likely refers to an imagined continuous historic development from the Greater Moravian Empire, where the Slovak people allegedly played a leading role, to the present days. This history of the Slovak people includes the Roman Catholic, fascist Slovak State of 1939-1945.

Because the communist utopia has been abandoned and the western, liberal utopia is being criticised without emphasising its blessings the nationalistic *paradise lost*-utopia can become a seductive and therefore dangerous alternative for the Roman Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe. This is partly due to the tradition orientated approach of the Roman Catholic teachings. Most Slovak Roman Catholic Church leaders however bravely condemned the nationalistic inspired government legislation, the political climate in general, nationalism and anti-Semitism. Initial naiveté and allegiance to the newly independent Slovakia gave way to serious criticism. In May

1998 the majority of the bishops explicitly condemned nationalistic (ethnic) intolerance. Some individual bishops and Roman Catholic intellectuals however have clearly demonstrated their nationalistic way of thinking. The history of the Slovak State (1939-1945) and its president Jozef Tiso remain controversial issues. The Roman Catholic bishops for one reason or another stay loyal to the wartime president, who seems to have a special attraction to them.