The Secular Spirituality of Former Eastern Bloc Dissidents - Part II

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THE SECULAR SPIRITUALITY 
OF FORMER EASTERN BLOC DISSIDENTS

PART II

by Leslie A. Muray

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I have always had a fascination for what I consider to be one of the most admirable features of the lives of former Eastern Bloc dissidents, namely their unremitting commitment and courage regardless of any potential danger to their persons. Most of the dissidents were former Marxists whose commitment to the utopian ideals of communism and the discipline of the party, and later to the cause of human rights and oppositional activity had a religious, spiritual, ascetic quality. A disproportionate number of them were Jews for whom, if they were old enough, their actual experiences during the Holocaust, and if they were of the post-war generation, the retrieval of the historic memory of that monstrous evil coupled with experiencing the Gulag in the broadest sense of the term shaped their unequivocal commitments. My illustrations in Part I focused largely on the former Democratic Opposition in Hungary, including its efforts to retrieve and reinterpret the Revolution of 1956 by means of which it questioned the legitimacy of the communist regime. In addition to analyzing the religious and spiritual quality of the former dissidents' commitment and dedication, I shall highlight the challenges such a secular spirituality poses for the development of a post-Holocaust, post-Gulag theology.

III.

In this section, I shall briefly consider two former dissidents from two other former Eastern bloc countries, Adam Michnik of Poland and Vaclav Havel of what was then Czechoslovakia. Michnik's life and thought closely parallels those of the younger generation of Hungary's former Democratic Opposition while Havel, a gentile profoundly shaped by the historic memory of the Holocaust, provides the quintessential exemplification of the secular spirituality of former Eastern bloc dissidents.

Born in 1946, Michnik came from a family of Jewish origin. Both of his parents were devoted Communists. Although Michnik could look forward to a life of privilege, his father's avowed respect for the varied and critical traditions of the pre-war Polish Left and disdain for the post-war institutionalization of Communist power was a profound influence on him. Other formative influences, at least intellectually were Leszek Kolakowski, who was of "the generation of October '56" that was instrumental in bringing the

“national,” reform Communist Władysław Gomułka to power (the Hungarian Revolution of '56 started on October 23 with demonstrations that were intended as gestures of solidarity with the Polish people) and who at that stage of development was a reform minded critical Marxist bent on expanding the reforms toward political pluralism, human rights, and social justice; and Jacek Kuron, who with Karol Modezelewski in their “An Open Letter to the Party” in 1964 (by which time Kolakowski was openly siding with these dissident Marxist students) critiqued the oppression and exploitation of workers under the Eastern bloc’s “managerial socialism” and advocated workers’ ownership (genuine social ownership) of the means of production much in the manner of István Angyal and the Workers’ Councils of the Hungarian Revolution of '56.3

But for Michnik, who had first been arrested in 1965, the most decisive events were the student demonstrations of 1968, which, needless to say, were severely repressed. Intellectuals like Kolakowski were not only expelled from the party but exiled. The government engaged in a vicious anti-Semitic campaign that led to the flight of most of what was left of Poland’s post-Holocaust Jewish population; less than 5,000 Jews live in postcommunist Poland.

Michnik stayed, was arrested, and received a three year prison term. In 1976, in the wake of arrests of workers following the Radom riots, he and Kuron among others, founded the Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR). He was always a mediating figure, and advocated the collaboration of the left with the Roman Catholic Church in defending human rights and the creation of some modicum of space for civil society.4

In the days of Solidarity (1980-81), Michnik, along with Kuron, became one of the advisors Lech Walesa. Following the imposition of martial law, he spent three years in prison.5 By the late '70s he had traversed the road from Marxism to a libertarian type of democratic socialism or, perhaps more aptly, “liberal communitarianism.”6 During the Roundtable Negotiations that led to Poland's first postcommunist elections in 1989, Michnik was one of the key negotiators. As the new postcommunist age was about to dawn, with all due respect and appreciation for the person and achievements of Walesa, the political alliance between the two men came to an end. Michnik since then has been the editor of a “liberal” newspaper (in the Central/Eastern European sense). He is one of the few defenders (and, in fact, now a friend) of General Jaruzelski, Michnik’s one time jailer now on trial for treason.

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3 Ibid. pp. 87-89.


During the Communist period (1968 and after), Michnik was the subject of direct government sponsored anti-Semitic attacks, personal attacks that would be continued by his detractors during the postcommunist period. It was in this context and in the very country where Auschwitz is located that the retrieval of the historical memory of the Holocaust came alive for him—probably even more vividly than for his Hungarian counterparts. Like the Hungarian dissidents of Jewish origin, Michnik is totally assimilated and does not think of himself as anything other than a Pole. And as is the case with these Hungarians, the Polish dissident’s persistent defense of human rights has always been in terms of universal human rights and not the particularity of these rights.

The following quotes from Michnik illustrate his ultimate commitment to freedom in a manner reminiscent of the Hungarian dissidents we have considered previously:

"... the value of your participation cannot be gauged in terms of your chance of victory but rather the value of your idea. In other words you score a victory not when you win power but when you remain faithful to yourself."7

"... By refusing to talk to the informer, and by choosing to be a political prisoner you are defending hope. Not just hope within yourself and for yourself but also in others and for others. You’re casting your declaration of hope out of your prison cell into the world, like a sealed bottle into the ocean. If even one single person finds it, you will have scored a victory."8

"... it is not courage that makes me choose prison instead of banishment. If anything, I am making this choice out of fear. Out of the fear that by saving my neck I may lose my honor."9

Referring to the importance of the retrieval of historic memory to “living in truth,” he writes:

"The history of your nation is fixed in your memory. You know that in its history a loyalty declaration signed in jail has always been a disgrace, loyalty to oneself and to the national tradition of virtue. You can remember those who were tortured and jailed for long years but who signed no declarations. And you know that you, too, will not sign them, because you are unable and unwilling to renounce the memory of the others."10

And summarizing the central focus on freedom, “libertarian socialism,” and “living in truth,” he maintains:

"In searching for truth, or, to quote Leszek Kolakowski, ‘by living in dignity,’ opposition intellectuals are striving not so much for a better tomorrow as for a better today. Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of socialism, which should not be merely or primarily a legal institutional..."

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7 Michnik, Letters from Prison and Other Essays, p. 7.
8 Ibid. p. 10.
9 Ibid. p. 24.
10 Ibid. p. 8.
structure but a real, day-to-day community of free people.”

Since he is the quintessential Central/Eastern European dissident and since his life story is so familiar, I shall not rehearse the details of the biography of Václav Havel. I shall, however, use what is probably his most famous essay, “The Power of the Powerless,” to highlight and summarize the most salient features that characterized Central/Eastern European dissident movements.

In this essay, Havel makes his point with the well known allegory of “the green grocer.” In Havel’s account, he imagines the green grocer placing in his window the slogan, “Workers of the World, Unite!” This he does not out of conviction but because he is afraid; by hanging the sign, he is communicating to his superiors and would be informers that he is obedient and as such should be left in peace. But since he is a human being with a sense of his own dignity, he would be ashamed and embarrassed to admit it. Hence, “... the sign helps the green grocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same concealing the low foundations of power,” hiding them behind the facade of something high, which is how the former dissident describes “ideology.” Havel describes this phenomenon in the following manner:

“The primary excusatory function of ideology, therefore, is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe.”

However, in the view of the Czech President, there is a yawning abyss between the aims of life and aims of post-totalitarian systems. Life, in its essence, aims toward independent self-constitution and self-organization, toward diversity and plurality, that is to say the fulfillment of its freedom. Post-totalitarian systems on the other hand, demand uniformity and conformity, serving “... people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it.” Moreover, the radius of its influence is ever widening. Any overstepping

11 Ibid. p. 148.
13 Ibid. p. 28.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. pp. 28-29.
16 Ibid. p. 29.
18 Ibid.
of predetermined roles is considered as an attack by the system on itself for every transgression is a denial of
the system.\(^{20}\)

Havel maintains that "ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual,
spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life," pretending that the requirements are
derivative from the requirements of life, a world of appearances attempting to pass for reality.\(^{21}\)

While the post-totalitarian system permeates every facet of life, since it does so with ideological
gloves, life in the system is saturated with hypocrisy and lies.\(^{22}\) And "because the regime is captive to its own
lies, it must falsify everything."\(^{23}\) Havel writes:

"Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or
they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this
reason, however, they must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to
have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill
the system, make the system, are the system."\(^{24}\)

The example of the green grocer hanging the slogan illustrates the workings of the principle of social
auto-totality.\(^{25}\) The former dissident asserts that "part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it
draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so they realize themselves as human beings, but so they may
surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the
system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so that they may participate in the
common responsibility for it, so they may be may be into and enslaved by it, like Faust with Mephistopheles."\(^{26}\)

But even more than this, through people's involvement a general norm is created which pressures their fellow
citizens.\(^{27}\) And the system draws everyone into its sphere of power in order that they may learn to be
comfortable with their involvement, to identify with it to the point where it becomes as though it were natural
and inevitable, with any non-involvement treated as an abnormality, as an attack on themselves. Havel

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid. pp. 29-31.

\(^{21}\) Ibid. p. 30.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid. p. 31.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid. pp. 36-37.

\(^{26}\) Ibid. p. 37.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
observes that "by pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone instruments of a mutual totality, the auto-totality of society." In a way that is reminiscent of Reinhold Niebuhr's distinction between the equality of guilt and the inequality of responsibility, the Czech President claims that in such systems "position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility, but it gives no one unlimited responsibility and guilt, nor does it completely absolve anyone."29

Havel's piercing analysis demonstrates that although humans can be compelled to live within a lie, this can be done only because of human beings are capable of living in this manner. He states:

"The essential aims of life are present in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existences."30

He continues:

"Yet, at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his or her inherent humanity, and utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life. This is much more than a simple conflict between two identities. It is something far worse; it is a challenge to the very notion of identity itself."31

Havel no less eloquently returns to his assertion that the capacity to surrender one's freedom, the willingness to live within the lie resides in the very grounds of human dignity. Maintaining that "individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is something to alienate,"32 he asserts that "the terrain of this violation is their authentic existence."33 He states that "living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie," for "it is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response."34 Havel writes that:

"Only against this background does living a lie make any sense: it exists because of that background. In its excusatory, chimerical rootedness in the human order, it is a response to nothing other than the human predisposition to truth. Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, therefore, there slumbers the hidden sphere of life in its real aims. of is openness to truth."35

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid. p. 38.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid. p. 41.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
This exposition sets the stage for the former dissident turning back to the example of the green grocer, supposing that the grocer refuses to put up the slogan, to vote in farcical election, to live within the lie.\(^{36}\) To be sure, the green grocer will pay a very high price for such “refusenik” behavior. But, despite the seeming failure of his actions, he will have accomplished something extremely important: he will have exposed the system for what it is, living within a lie; he will have exposed the fact that the emperor is naked. And in the process, he discovers his long suppressed identity and dignity.\(^{37}\)

The confrontation between the power of the post-totalitarian system and opposition forces, comprised of people like the green grocer turned dissident, occurs initially not at the level of quantifiable power but at the existential level.\(^{38}\) However, each act of living in truth, however small, loosens the grip of the system and enlarges the sphere of freedom, however little, because “if the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power.”\(^{39}\)

Havel’s contention at this point sounds unrealistic, idealistic to the point being removed from the reality of power relations of post-totalitarian systems of the former Eastern bloc. Yet, as Havel so ably demonstrated during the Velvet Revolution and as President first of Czechoslovakia, then the Czech Republic, he has a keen sense of “realpolitik” and is quite adept at using the levers of power, as well as practicing the art of compromise. Although varying in degrees of success in wielding of power, the same could be said of most members of the Democratic Opposition in Hungary and Solidarity activists like Adam Michnik in Poland who were keenly aware of the self-limiting nature of their activities as long as Soviet troops were present in the two countries, and who though unequivocal oppositionists, maintained informal and mostly secret contact with reform Communist technocrats and intellectuals (who by the end of the Communist period, it would be fair to say, were Communists in name only, and at certain points were willing to compromise to avoid bloodshed -- one of the lessons of ’56!). And yet it must be added that, coupled with numerous other factors (economic, geopolitical, military, and most especially Gorbachev’s announcement that the Soviet Union would not intervene in the internal affairs of its Warsaw Pact allies, that is to say the Brezhnev Doctrine was revoked and replaced by the “Sinatra doctrine”), the activities of the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, Solidarity

\(^{36}\) Ibid. pp. 39-41.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. pp. 39-43.

\(^{38}\) Ibid. p. 41.

\(^{39}\) Ibid. p. 43.
activists like Michnik in Poland, and Havel and his fellow signers of Charter 77 in the former Czechoslovakia, embodying the meaning of living in truth, played an indispensable part in the demise of post-totalitarian systems and the Great Transformation of 1989-90.

IV.

The thread of continuity between István Angyal and the later dissidents of the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, of Solidarity activists like Michnik in Poland, and Charter 77 signers like Havel in the former Czechoslovakia is their unremitant commitment to the cause of freedom, to “living in truth,” to the cause of human rights, and to oppositional activity. This commitment had (and has) a religious, spiritual, ascetic quality. It is this that I call “the secular spirituality of former Eastern bloc dissidents.”

By “spirituality” I do not mean anything ephemeral, ethereal, otherworldly. Neither do I identify it exclusively with the particularity of its institutional expressions in various religious traditions, although admittedly the variety of traditions of spirituality are embodied in and transmitted through their institutional manifestations. Rather, in the broadest and most general sense, what I mean by “spirituality” is a life orientation, a way of being-in-the-world. It entails an “ultimate commitment” that integrates and transforms all of our other commitments (Wieman), an “ultimate concern” that ties together and gives meaning to all of “preliminary concerns.” In this broad, general, inclusive sense, “spirituality” is a dimension of all religious traditions, theistic and non-theistic. Considered in this fashion, we can affirm that historically spirituality has found both supernaturalistic and naturalistic expressions in Western religious traditions. In addition, when defined in this manner, spirituality can be considered to have not only ostensibly religious but secular expressions as well.

By “secular,” I am thinking in part of the Latin word, “saeculum” meaning “this world,” “this age.” In addition, the manner in which I use the word “secular” also chiefly has the modern connotation of a way of being-in-the-world without identifying with particular religious institutions and traditions, and without any reference to the sacred -- except in a sociological, functional sense. I shall not engage in the typical Western distinction of the ‘60s between “secularist,” positivist, positions that preclude any plausibility of the existence of the sacred and “secularity,” fully modern, oriented to this world, accepting modern science yet open to the possibility of the existence of the sacred; both positions, as well as genuine agnosticism, existed side by side in “the secular spirituality” of former Eastern bloc dissidents.

I have already alluded to the “ultimate commitment,” “the ultimate concern” of these dissidents that integrated and unified their other commitments and “preliminary” concerns, exhibiting what could appropriately be called a radical faith, a radical trust. To be sure, “the object” of this trust cannot be understood in any conventional theistic sense. What can be considered the object of this radical trust or its functional equivalent is what I have called “the cause of freedom,” “to live in truth.” While this sounds nebulous and imprecise, in my view it is that very imprecision that captures the ethos of the dissidents.
Precision, to be sure, is indispensable to rigorous, critical thinking. However, attempts at too neat and facile systemization all too easily lead to totalization -- something the former dissidents experienced all their lives! Moreover, although I am not aware of any former members of Hungary's Democratic Opposition using the term, the cause of freedom to which they were (and are) committed in an ultimate sense is unmanageable and uncontrollable, reminiscent of the notion of "World Freedom" ("Világ Szabadság"), which, almost in a Hegelian sense, is the moving force of history. And what amounts to the equivalent of this "World Freedom" finds concrete expression for the dissidents as both freedom from and freedom for, freedom from manifested in the advocacy of the institutions of political democracy and the safeguarding of human rights and civil liberties, freedom for manifested in the demand for participation, the means for self-realization in community with others, in part through political, in part through economic democracy, workers' ownership and management.

We have seen that in their unremitting devotion the former Eastern bloc dissidents paid no heed to any adverse consequences to their own persons. Clearly, such a commitment entailed considerable self-discipline and self-denial. In passing, it would not be exaggerating to mention a loose parallel between the devotion of the dissidents and the tradition of the martyrs in Christianity and Islam -- "martyrs" without any connotation of the more bizarre aspects of martyrdom but in the best sense of the term, a "witness" to the point of being willing to die for the integrity of one's faith.

The most fascinating aspect of "the secular spirituality" of former Eastern bloc dissidents is in my view their remarkable courage. I find it reminiscent of Tillich's "courage to be," the affirmation of one's being "in spite of" the threat of non-being, whether in the form of fate and death or emptiness and meaninglessness (which are the most pertinent for this discussion) or guilt and condemnation, by taking the anxiety of the threat of non-being into oneself. However, as I make this observation, I am keenly aware of my predilection to view the ethos of the former dissidents from the perspective of my understanding of the Christian faith. That is to say, I am inclined to see in the dissidents the "anonymous Christians" of Karl Rahner, "the latent church" of Paul Tillich, and respondents to the fundamental intuition that what we do matters because it matters eternally because it matters to the One who is everlasting, the process perspective of Schubert Ogden.

However, the self-understanding of the former dissidents, as well as such precursors as István Angyal, the integrity of their "secular spirituality" in its own terms needs to be affirmed. That means accepting and affirming that, according to the dissidents' own self-understanding, what they did was for its sake, for the sake of their own dignity and authentic existence. And that is its own self-justification.

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Of course, in the writings and activities of the former dissidents, there is an element of what Schubert Ogden has called “contributionism.” That is to say, (instead of Ogden’s Hartshornean process perspective) how historical memory would treat them is not an unimportant motivating factor in the courage they manifested. And this anticipation of historic memory is profoundly linked to a sense of continuity with courageous heroes of the nation’s past -- a phenomenon we have seen particularly in the writings of Adam Michnik but no less present among the members of Hungary’s Democratic Opposition and Czechoslovakia’s Charter 77 activists. Nevertheless, this seems far less important than the fact that since “living within the lie” had become unbearable, “living in truth” was for its own sake and was its own self-justification regardless of whether or not or how they would be remembered.

An integral part of “the secular spirituality” of former Eastern bloc dissidents, as well as precursors like Angyal, both during the communist and the postcommunist periods, was their dual emphasis on responsibility and reconciliation. As we have seen, for example, members of the Democratic Opposition took responsibility for retrieving and telling the truth about ’56; doing so was indispensable to “living in truth.” This was done not to point the finger or seek reprisals but out of the deep seated conviction that only by taking responsibility and holding people accountable for their actions could there be authentic reconciliation. Members of the former Democratic Opposition, as for instance János Kis and Árpád Göncz, President of the Republic of Hungary since 1990, certainly did not advocate putting on trial men, now in their 80s, who in ’56 gave orders to shoot or participated in the shooting of unarmed demonstrators. But they did advocate a full, unequivocal uncovering of the truth to the point of naming the decision makers and perpetrators of atrocities. Only by honestly facing the truth about the past can people be reconciled to themselves, only then can disparate groups within the population be reconciled to each other.

In Poland, Solidarity activists like Adam Michnik put no less a dual emphasis on responsibility and reconciliation. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this is his friendship with his one time jailer, General Jaruzelski, as the latter was put on trial for treason for his imposition of martial law (he was recently acquitted). Similarly, although Havel eventually signed the Czech Republic’s lustrace laws knowing that the Parliament would override his opposition, he did lend his moral authority to opposition to the legislation.

One of the most significant aspects of what I have just described, which was no less true during the communist period, is the lack of a “dualistic” attitude toward their opponents or those who did not share their views and support their activities on the part of the former dissidents. That is to say, in a way reminiscent of the lack of rancor they exhibited in the retrieval of the historic memory of the Holocaust, there is no hint of a “we-they” mentality dividing people into “the righteous” dissidents and the “unrighteous” communists, “the

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pure" oppositionistic and "impure" silent majority that shared complicity in supporting the system. Rather, perhaps expressed most eloquently by Havel, it is typical of the ethos of the former dissidents to contend that there were no "righteous," that all, including themselves, shared, with varying degrees of responsibility, in the complicity of supporting the post-totalitarian system. Recognition and acceptance of this is a precondition for national reconciliation in their estimation.

The theme of reconciliation provides a point of transition for highlighting some of the challenges such a secular spirituality poses for the development of a post-Holocaust, post-Gulag theology. Not the least of these challenges concerns the very practical theological task of post-communist reconciliation in the context of recently established democracies.

Since elsewhere I have written at greater length about the problem, I shall mention the first of these challenges briefly. It concerns the complex relationship between the churches and the former dissidents. As religious communities, all of which were persecuted in various ways at different times during the communist period in the entire Eastern bloc, have been attempting to establish their postcommunist identities, although one can increasingly find evidence of countertrends and as unsafe as generalizations can be, one can claim that much of new leadership of the churches of the region have tended to identify with the broad spectrum of populist nationalism in which religious, cultural, and national symbols are linked. There is a tendency on the part of populist nationalists, in spite of the presence of "liberals" in their ranks, to see free thinking "liberals," inside the church and outside, with their concomitant advocacy of the limitations of undue concentrations of power, as a threat to the integrity of faith, the unity of the church, and the very survival of the nation. And at one extreme of populist nationalism, the use of "liberal," "liberal-Bolshevik" as a derogatory euphemism for "Jew" is not far away (Michnik recently bore the brunt of anti-Semitic attack by a Roman Catholic priest during a sermon).

Adherents of religious communities, especially the churches, in Central/Eastern as well as Russia and the successor states, need to acknowledge that they can disagree with others without considering them "opponents" and "enemies of religion and the nation," without impugning the integrity of their motivations, and slurring religio-ethnic origins, that is to say with the kind of civility that is a prerequisite for democracy. The range of complex issues free thinking liberalism opens up -- the nature of truth claims, whether the criteria for adjudicating truth claims should be confessional or subject to public criteria, whether the boundaries of these communities and their truth claims are fixed or fluid, if fluid to what extent, and finally the relationship between "Christ and culture" -- needs be discussed honestly and openly, affirming the right to disagree, voicing one's perspective vociferously yet with civility without demonizing those on the other side and seeing

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Sermon material and exchange between Father Henry K. Jankowski, sermon originally in St. Brígitta Roman Catholic Church, Gdansk, and Czeslaw Milosz in Magyar Naranca, politikai-kulturalis hetilap, VIII. évf. 34. szám 1996. augusztus 22., p. 2.
them as threats to one's existence.

One of the most urgent challenges for the development of a post-Holocaust, post-Gulag theology, in my view, is the delineation of such a theology in a democratic way and that is simultaneously in contact with yet critical and hopefully transformative of intellectual currents that foster the exploration of the meaning(s) of democracy and nurture their development. An example of this might be the development of a "democratic faith" in a "democratic God." Of course, the question of the appropriateness of engaging in such a task once again open up the range of issues mentioned above.

A prerequisite for the kind of openness I have been advocating (and have attempted to model in this paper) is the affirmation of the commitment and ensuing activities of the former dissidents, both during the communist and postcommunist periods, in their own right, their own integrity, and see them as self-justifying and self-authenticating.

Finally, there is the urgent challenge of anti-Semitism, especially given its resurgence during the postcommunist period. It goes without saying that for any kind of authentic historical and national reconciliation to take place the churches of Central/Eastern Europe and Russia and the successor states, especially because of their histories, need to confess and repent their complicity in the Holocaust and to liberate themselves for the anti-Judaic tradition in Christianity that has been a breeding ground for anti-Semitism.

The churches of the region have varied in their responses. For example, in Slovakia, a semi-official rehabilitation of Josef Tiso has been underway; Cardinal Corec participated in the dedication of a plaque in his memory: local clergy did the same in Tiso's birthplace. Little attempt has been made to come to terms with the past. I have already alluded to anti-Semitic verbal attacks on Adam Michnik during a sermon by a Roman Catholic priest in Poland. Archbishop Josef Glemp has both condemned anti-Semitism and been maladroit in handling it. On the other hand, various ecclesiastical commissions and institutions have been very much in the forefront in dealing with the issue. In Hungary, the Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral letter confessing and repenting the churches' complicity in the Holocaust -- one of the most far reaching documents to be issued by a representatives of a church body in the region. For all such important work, it is clear they are but the beginning of the process of historic and national reconciliation.

This raises the problem of the historical fusion of religious, national, and cultural symbols. To come to grips with the past, the ambiguous history of this fusion needs to be looked at carefully, accurately, and inclusively. The whole issue of the relationship between "Christ and culture" in a postcommunist democracy, in the distinctive particularity of each nation and the equally fundamental interrelatedness to its neighbors, needs to be examined.

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An integral part of my final point is the need to affirm and appreciate the distinctiveness of an assimilated Jewish culture within the particularity of each nation, a point that I suspect the former dissidents of Jewish origin would not accept. István Deák mentions that although in Hungary assimilated Jews, as we have seen, thought of themselves as nothing else than Magyars, they have made unique contributions to Hungarian culture precisely because of their distinctiveness as assimilated Jews.47

As a non-Jewish Magyar, I have always felt embarrassed and ashamed that there were Jewish Hungarians who felt the need to hide their Jewish background. I could certainly understand why they would want to do so. But what is wrong with affirming one's Hungarianness and simultaneously affirming one's Jewish roots, no matter how much one is assimilated? And what is wrong with gentile Hungarians affirming the genuine Hungarianness of Jewish Hungarians and affirming equally their Jewish roots? This suggests a degree of openness that affirms and accepts both distinctiveness and identity without seeing either distinctiveness of identity as absolute. And such a degree of openness may provide an appropriate model for an authentic postcommunist reconciliation.

I have spoken with considerable trepidation about the challenges to theology in a Central/Eastern European context; after all, I have lived in the U.S. for 37 years. Nevertheless, having a foot inside and outside both worlds, I have taken the risk of highlighting and making some judgments about theological issues facing the region as I see them.

However, these issues are no less real for religious communities in the United States, especially the development of a post-Holocaust, post-Gulag theology delineated in a democratic way. What this involves, among other things, is a challenge to explore honestly and consider pragmatically whether our theological formulations enhance or obstruct democratic development. And, of course, given the imprecision and confusion surrounding the use of the word “democracy,” we are challenged, both in the U.S. and Central/Eastern Europe, to explore the possible meaning(s) of democracy.

But the biggest challenge “the secular spirituality” of former Eastern bloc dissidents presents to religious communities in the U.S. is to Western triumphalism, something that few of them share. Does the end of the Cold War mean that life in one system has been meaningful for forty-five years, meaningless in the other? Such a contention would be dismissive of and trivialize the lives of the peoples of the former Eastern bloc over the circumstances of which they had little choice.

To be sure, there is much to celebrate. But there are many tragedies, past and present, to be faced. Dissident turned President Árpád Göncz has expressed a fairly typical perspective among former dissidents, especially in Hungary, in claiming that in the Cold War there were only losers. And the present, the moment

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of "the melancholy of rebirth," is too important to be consumed by the pseudo-euphoria of triumphalism.

Perhaps the most important challenge the "secular spirituality of former Eastern bloc dissidents" presents for all of us, regardless of what "bloc" which we resided in geographically, to live in freedom and in truth as authentic human beings.

V.

I set the context for this paper by means of some personal recollections and historical reflections. I proceeded by using the figure of the executed freedom fighter István Angyal as paradigmatic of the attempts of the Democratic Opposition in Hungary to retrieve and reinterpret the Revolution of 1956, a fundamental part of their attempt "to live in truth," by means of which it questioned the legitimacy of the communist regime. In addition, as a survivor of Auschwitz, Angyal was equally paradigmatic and served as a role model for those members of Hungary's Democratic Opposition who either remembered or tried to retrieve the historic memory of the Holocaust which, coupled with the experience of the Gulag in the broadest sense of the word, shaped their unequivocal commitments. I then explored further some of the ideas and activities of the former Democratic Opposition in Hungary. More briefly, I drew parallels to the key figures of Adam Michnik in Poland and Vaclav Havel in the former Czechoslovakia. The religious and spiritual quality of the former dissidents' commitment and dedication I analyzed and highlighted the challenges such a secular spirituality for the development of a post-Holocaust, post-Gulag theology.

The following words by Erazim Kohák provide an eloquent summary of "the secular spirituality of former Eastern bloc dissidents:"

"... the immensely brave men and women of the civil initiative, killed, jailed, exiled, are unlikely to bring down the impersonal edifice of Soviet rule. Their great achievement is that, before all eternity, they have spoken the word of truth in time... Their success, whatever the 'results,' is in having been at all. in having spoken the word of eternal truth amid the complexity of time."

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