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A REFLECTION ON RELIGION AND CHURCHES IN SLOVAKIA 30 YEARS AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

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Abstract

Thirty years after the fall of the communist regime in Slovakia presents an opportune time to reflect on various issues related to the broad subjects of religion and society, state-church relations, and the public ministry of the church. The aim of our paper is to offer such reflections with an emphasis on understanding the historical context and religious developments that affect Slovakia's current reality and must be taken into account when considering present and future challenges and opportunities. The paper consists of two main parts.[1] In the first, we present a brief history of Christianity in Slovakia, elucidate developments with regard to state and church relations, and discuss important topics such as the religious registration law, government funding of churches, and religious education. The second part focuses on the present moral crisis from a theological and ethical perspective and offers some solutions on how faith communities can contribute to the positive transformation of society.

Keywords

Slovakia, Christian heritage, national identity, communist oppression, Velvet Revolution, democratic transition, religious freedom, state-church relations, Václav Havel, moral crisis, justice deficit, ethics of responsibility, public theology, Acta Sanctorum, Inc., realistic hope.

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The Historical Context and Religious Development

Slovakia, with an area of about 49,000 square kilometers and a population of over 5.4 million people, is one of the smaller countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This political-cultural space is situated on an ancient crossroads of power and cultural-spiritual influences of the West and the East. This fact is aptly symbolized by the easternmost European Gothic Cathedral of St. Elizabeth in the city of Košice in relative proximity to unique wooden Eastern Catholic churches, which are part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage. The influence of the dominant Western and Eastern Christianity has overlapped from the ancient past up to the present. Similar to neighboring Hungary and Poland, Slovakia unambiguously belongs to Western civilization, culturally and politically. However, the sympathies of part of the Slovak population to related Slavic countries, particularly Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine, continue because of the specifics of historical development.

The region of Eastern Slovakia is the most diverse in terms of religion and nationality. From the large majority of the 18 registered (state-recognized) churches and religious societies operating in this region, the Greek Catholic Church (Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite) and Orthodox Church represent the Christianity of the Eastern Rite and continue to use Old Church Slavic in their liturgy. In addition to the majority-Slovak population, the Hungarian, Ruthenian, Romani, and Ukrainian national minorities are also represented.

The territory of present-day Slovakia has been populated since the Early Stone Age. Various Bronze and Iron Age groups settled here, including Celts, Germans, Roman legions, Avar Khaganate, and Slavs. Slovakia can be also called the land of castles. Up to 180 castles are situated in its territory, although most are now ruins. Spiš Castle is one of the largest castle ruins in Europe, and scenes from the movie *Dragonheart* were filmed here. Stone castles were built as early as the 11th century but particularly in the second half of the 13th century following the devastating Mongol-Tatar invasion. The main role of these castles was to guard strategically important locations along the state's borders and trade routes.

The material and spiritual history of Slovaks have been formed and crucially influenced by Christianity.[2] Roman soldiers who served in advanced military camps and fought bellicose

[2] There is a scholarly void in the English language on the history of what is now Slovakia. One of the earliest attempts to fill that gap is an informative work by Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for*

German tribes were the first Christians in our territory. The first Irish-Scottish missionaries arrived from the territory of Italy, followed by French missionaries from Germany. However, their mission did not succeed due to the language barrier. Unique archeological findings of liturgical objects were preserved from this period, particularly a bronze bell and fragments of two more bells. The first Christian church was built around 829 and was consecrated by Adalram, the Bishop of Salzburg.

The Christianization of the Slavic tribes in the Great Moravian Empire was led by Cyril (originally named Constantine) and Methodius, two well-educated brothers from Thessalonica who were sent here by Michael III, Byzantine Emperor, on the request of Rastislav, Prince of Great Moravia. Cyril, who was also called the Philosopher, was the creator of the Slavic alphabet—the Glagolitic script. Subsequent translations of biblical and liturgical texts as well as original works and written laws were done in this script. The translation of liturgical books and the Slavic liturgy into the old Slavic language was also approved by Pope Hadrian II in 867, elevating it to the same level as existing cultural liturgical languages.

The first documented bishopric in Central and Eastern Europe was founded in the town of Nitra in 880 under the leadership of Viching, a bishop of French origin, at a time when there was a strong inclination toward the Western Latin Rite.[3] After the death of Archbishop-Metropolitan Methodius in 885, his students were driven out of the country. They subsequently disseminated Christianity of the Byzantine Rite in the Balkans, primarily in Bulgaria. Memories of this brief period were awakened during the national revival in the 18th and 19th centuries and became one of the fundamental ideas for the establishment of a modern Slovak nation. This tradition is referred to in the Preamble of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic[4] and claimed by the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Lutheran denominations.

The invasion of the Carpathian basin by Hungarian tribes brought about the fall of the Great Moravian Empire in the early 10th century. This territory was forcefully incorporated into the multinational Hungarian Kingdom, where it lived and culturally and spiritually developed for a thousand years under specific conditions on the eastern edge of Western civilization. The

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Survival (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994). See also the excellent volume by Mikuláš Teich, Dušan Kováč, and Martin D. Brown, eds., *Slovakia in History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[3] To learn more about the important role of Nitra in Slovak history, see Ján Steinhübel, "The Duchy of Nitra," in *Slovakia in History*, 15–29.

[4] The introductory words of the Preamble are: "We, the Slovak nation, bearing in mind the political and cultural heritage of our ancestors and the centuries of experience from the struggles for national existence and our own statehood, mindful of the spiritual heritage of Cyril and Methodius and the historical legacy of Great Moravia… ."

Roman Catholic Church played a significant role in the social, economic, and political system of medieval Hungary, and its institutions, Latin liturgy, and centuries-old traditions clearly contributed to the internal unity of this multinational state. Numerous churches, monasteries, and precious artwork were created in this period, and the church also played a significant role in disseminating education.

From the second half of the 13th century, areas decimated and devastated by the Tatar invasion were inhabited mainly by German colonists. They brought new technological procedures, which they used in the development of traditional industries in mining, viticulture, agriculture, and wood processing. A substantial proportion of European gold, silver, and copper production came from the territory of today's Slovakia in the pre-Columbian era.

The Lutheran Reformation quickly spread throughout the territory of present-day Slovakia in the 16th century, first among the German population in mining and free royal towns and later among the general Slovak populace in towns and rural areas. The Calvinist Reformation was particularly accepted by the Hungarian populace. Protestants comprised the vast majority of the population in the early 17th century; however, due to the intensive counter-Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church regained its dominant position. The Reformation replaced Latin in the liturgy and the Bible with a language that was intelligible to the common people, and Reformation humanism had a crucial impact on the development of culture in our territory. It also resulted in the reform of the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent. The Jesuits and other orders in our territory established quality schools, including universities, and carried out extensive educational activities.

Here, we should mention that despite its minority position, the Lutheran Church significantly contributed to the creation of the modern Slovak nation and its statehood. Many key figures of our culture, science, and politics who had an impact on the development of our society until the middle of the 20th century were Lutherans. What followed after the communist takeover in 1948 interrupted the continuity of Lutheran development and its progressive reformation tradition and deformed and significantly weakened its identity.[5]

Existential struggles with the Ottoman Empire from 1526 until its final defeat near Vienna in 1683 was a critical phase in Slovak history. During those tragic times, Slovakia was a

[5] See more, Pavel Uhorskai a kolektív, *Evanjelici v dejinách slovenskej kultúry 1–2* (Liptovský Mikuláš, SK: Tranoscius, 2005).

neighbor of the warlike Ottoman Turks, and the border was approximately the same as our present-day southern boundary with Hungary. Awareness of this existential threat was also reflected in Slovak folklore, art, and literature and remains deeply rooted in the country's historical memory. For example, it has been manifested in deliberations regarding Turkey's attempt to join the European Union, where Slovaks expressed the strongest disagreement compared to that of its neighboring countries; Slovakia's response to the immigration wave in 2015 was similar. Recently, these tendencies have intensified after Turkey's military and political intervention in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Unlike, for example, Poland, no autochthonous Muslim community has existed in Slovakia. Islam is not a registered religion in the country, and there are no official mosques.

The position of Protestants deteriorated after the suppression of anti-Habsburg rebellions in the late 17th century and early 18th century, when these believers lost the final vestiges of religious freedom. This situation changed only after Emperor Joseph II issued the Patent of Toleration in 1781. The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran) became a worthy though not fully equal partner to the Roman Catholic Church in the process of the national and cultural revival of the Slovak nation.[6] Numerous minor Protestant denominations appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the wave of mass economic emigration from the country, particularly to the USA and Canada, where the majority of the more than two million Slovaks and their descendants living abroad are located.

The life of the Jewish community, with its specific cultural, economic, and religious contributions, was tragically interrupted by the Holocaust and became part of Slovak history.[7] Approximately 75% of the Slovak Jewish population was murdered by the Nazis in concentration camps and during repressive actions following the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising[8] at the end of World War II. Many of those who survived emigrated to the West, the USA, and Israel in particular, after 1945 and 1968.

[6] See more, Ján Juran, "Dosah reformácie na dejiny slovenskej kultúry," *Národná osveta – štvrťročník pre rozvoj miestnej kultúry a záujmovej činnosti* (Bratislava, SK: Národné osvetové centrum, Volume 27, Number 3, 2017), 35–40.

[7] See Ivan Kamenec, "Changes in the Attitudes of the Slovak Population Regarding the So-Called Solution to the 'Jewish Question' (1938–1945)," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40, no. 7 (2020): 44– 52, accessed October 19, 2020, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss7/4/.

[8] See more, Vilém Prečan, "The Slovak National Uprising: The Most Dramatic Moment in the Nation's History," in *Slovakia in History*, 206–228.

The period from 1867 to late 1918 is notorious for the efforts of the Hungarian regime to assimilate Slovaks and other non-Hungarian nations into the monarchy. The political developments after the end of World War I brought about the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and formation of successor states, including Czechoslovakia. Apart from the Czech politicians in exile—Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Edvard Beneš, and Slovak general Milan Rastislav Štefánik—the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, also deserves some credit for the creation of Czechoslovakia.

In the interwar period, churches operated and developed, unlike in neighboring states, freely within democratic state structures in Slovakia. Because of its different historical and cultural development, Slovak society was to a great extent conservative and strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. Conversely, a strong anti-Catholic mood was prevalent in Czechia after 1918, which resulted in a mass exodus from the Catholic Church. While some former Catholics established the Czechoslovak Church, others joined Protestant and Orthodox denominations or remained atheists.

The young Czechoslovak Republic was a functioning parliamentary democracy, but its political stability was disrupted by unresolved national and social problems. Czech politics insensitively promoted the theory of a united Czechoslovak nation,[9] which was strongly opposed by the influential Slovak People's Party, headed by the popular Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka, and the smaller Slovak National Party, led by the Lutheran pastor, politician, and writer Martin Rázus. Both parties promoted the autonomy of Slovakia within a common state, as was agreed for Slovakia and Subcarpathian Russia before the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

However, the stability of the Czechoslovak state was more threatened by the dissatisfaction of the large German minority, especially in the border areas of the Czech part of the republic. Its political demands escalated disproportionately after the accession of Adolf Hitler to the German chancellorship in 1933. In Slovakia, the irredentist activities of the Hungarian minority, which had never fully reconciled with the disintegration of the monarchy and consequences of the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, played a similar role. Social problems were a breeding ground for the creation and operation of a large communist party, which promoted the influence of the Stalinist Soviet Union in the Slovak political sphere.

[9] To learn more about the theory as well as ideology called "Czechoslovakism," see Elisabeth Bakke, "Czechoslovakism in Slovak History," in *Slovakia in History*, 247–268.

The multinational Czechoslovak Republic could not withstand growing pressure from Hitler. After Germany, Hungary, and Poland occupied extensive bordering territories, the Nazis occupied the rest of Czechia and Moravia on March 15, 1939, while the Slovak Republic, politically dependent on the Third Reich, was formed on March 14, 1939. Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, which established an authoritarian regime, became the ruling and only party. Contrary to the will of the Vatican, the Roman Catholic priest Jozef Tiso[10] became the president of the state. The regime outlawed small Protestant churches and introduced strict anti-Jewish laws, which eventually resulted in the deportation of tens of thousands of Jewish citizens to German concentration camps. The regime also discriminated against the Lutheran and Greek Catholic churches. After the war, former President Tiso was sentenced to death and executed. The evaluation of the period of the so called "The First Slovak State" (1939–1945)[11] still divides the population of Slovakia.

Forty Years of Communist Rule and Its Impact on Religious Life

The wartime Czechoslovak government-in-exile had its seat in London, and Czechoslovak citizens served in the French, British, and Soviet armies in the Battle of Britain, defense of Tobruk, and liberation of Ukraine, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. As a result, the restored Czechoslovakia was one of the victorious states. However, it was within the sphere of influence of Stalin's Soviet Union. Although the Democratic Party, which was founded and led by Lutherans, decisively won the free elections in 1946 in Slovakia, the Communist Party prevailed in Czechia. Representatives of the Communist Party held the positions of prime minister and crucial ministries in Czechoslovakia, and the party's plans for taking over were formulated and came to fruition in the February 1948 coup.

At first, the Communist rulers tried to come to an agreement with the Catholic Church. When this failed, they introduced tough repressive measures. In the fall of 1949, laws were passed that made all religious denominations fully dependent on the state, politically, and financially. State "supervision" over churches was introduced. Clergy members became employees of the state, to which they had to pledge fidelity and from whom they had to request consent to carry out their activities. Foreigners could not work in the country as clerics. The state

[10] For an outstanding resource on Jozef Tiso in English, see James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2013).
[11] See Ivan Kamenec, "The Slovak State, 1939–1945," in *Slovakia in History*, 175–192.

created a network of secretaries who thoroughly supervised the activities of all churches and their clergy in every district and region through local and regional authorities. Furthermore, the secret police conducted surveillance through its network of agents who had infiltrated the churches.

The state gradually confiscated most church property except for churches and parish buildings. As a result, religious groups became dependent solely on the contributions of their members and the state. Pursuant to the law, the state should have funded all church activities, but eventually it only paid clergy members small salaries and contributed to the operations of crippled bishoprics and church headquarters. The activities of religious societies were banned, and their social and charity activities, with the exception of care for older priests and nuns, were discontinued. From 1945 to 1989, there were no religious schools. The number of students pursuing degrees in theology was reduced, and the state became involved in the staffing of theological schools. Religious instruction was reduced and religious youth activities could not be carried out officially, while schools and socialist youth organizations promoted anti-religious propaganda.

Religious newspapers and publications were reduced to a minimum in the communist era. Religious literature was smuggled from abroad or secretly copied on typewriters under threat of criminal prosecution. Religious radio broadcasts were banned but were substituted to a limited extent by foreign radio broadcasts by Vatican radio or Radio Monte Carlo. During the Cold War, the state considered foreign contacts with churches to be very dangerous, in particular with the Vatican, World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, and other international Christian organizations. They tried to infiltrate groups attempting to gain these contacts in order to control them and reduce their influence.

The state also strived to limit the activities of churches to liturgical activities within church buildings and thus prevent their influence on political, social, and cultural life. Churches took a defensive approach; conservative attitudes deepened, and religiosity ceased to be a socialization factor in the country. The opportunistic attitudes of some clergy members also manifested, outwardly presented as involvement in the peace movement. The continuity of development was interrupted for 40 years and churches operated under conditions that were completely different from those in democratic states of the West. The range of anti-church

measures was tougher in Slovakia than in neighboring Poland and Hungary, but not as drastic as in the Soviet Union and Albania.

Due to the number of its members, organizational structure, societal influence, and links to world headquarters, the state considered the Catholic Church its main ideological and political opponent and thus made it the focus of its first attack. In 1950, the police and army occupied monasteries and convents; the priests and nuns were interned and activities of all orders were de facto canceled.[12] Several Catholic bishops and priests were arrested, convicted in show trials, and given long prison sentences. Many died as a result of or during imprisonment. Several Lutheran ministers were also imprisoned, including the first ordained female priest, as well as members of smaller Protestant denominations. In the same year, the state liquidated the Greek Catholic Church and forcibly incorporated it in the Orthodox Church.[13] Its activities were restored 18 years later during the political thaw known as liberalization in 1968.

The state also briefly banned the activities of two Protestant denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses and other smaller communities of faith were considered to be harmful sects and their activities were prohibited. The possibilities for the entry of incoming new religious movements and the dissemination of their ideas were minimal under these police state conditions. The "Prague Spring"[14] of 1968, symbolized by Alexander Dubček, brought great hope for the democratization of political and social life, including freedom of religion. However, this period was short-lived, as the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies on August 21, 1968, dashed all dreams for a change in the state's approach to churches. Nevertheless, this period was a significant milestone for church activities despite the subsequent political "normalization" and social apathy.

[12] To learn how the communist persecution affected the Slovak Jesuits, see Ladislav Csontos, S.J., *Faith and Fidelity Amidst Trials* (Warsaw, PL: Rhetos, 2014).

[13] To learn more about the Slovak Greek Catholic Church, which was harshly persecuted during the communist regime, see Jaroslav Coranič, "The History of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia," Peter Šturák, "The Attack on the Greek Catholic Church and Its Bishops During the Period of Communist Oppression," and Marek Petro, "Stability and Flexibility in the Church after the Fall of Communism," in *Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia: Current Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka (Salem, VA: Center for Religion and Society, Roanoke College, 2012), 259–358.

[14] For a detailed description of this period and its impact on Czechoslovakia and the world, see Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler, eds., *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

While in Czechia, civic resistance grew stronger and was represented by Charter 77,[15] in Slovakia, the Catholic Church was the strongest opposition, particularly its secret or underground church, which had its own parallel structures, secret priests and bishops, monks and nuns, clubs, and seminars. Although the Slovak Catholic Church was under constant surveillance, its activities and influence were not silenced. The Church issued declarations and organized petitions; its so-called Candle Manifestation on March 25, 1988, attracted attention at home and abroad. When several thousand believers with candles demonstrated for religious and civil rights in the center of Bratislava, they were attacked by police with batons and water cannons.

The year 1968 marked the beginning of the pietistic (evangelical) movement in the Lutheran Church, which focused on the spiritual renewal of individuals and the church but lacked any direct political goals. Similar tendencies were also manifested in smaller evangelical and Pentecostal denominations and communities. Thus, as a result of state pressure, members of various denominations in Slovakia and the Czech lands paradoxically began to cooperate at both the individual and small group level.

On the Road to Democracy and Religious Freedom

The decisive breakthrough occurred after November 17, 1989.[16] Massive demonstrations resulted in the collapse of the regime whose position, up to that point, had seemed unshakable. The political changes also brought religious groups their much-desired freedom. State supervision was discontinued, and the repressive anti-church provisions of the Criminal Code were revoked. The Constitution and laws have guaranteed denominations free religious status, and church weddings achieved equal status with civil ceremonies.

The emancipatory efforts of the Slovak nation were a significant feature of the dynamic development of the transition to a parliamentary democracy. Although in 1968, Czechoslovakia changed from a unitary to a federal state, the centralism of the capital Prague continued. Negotiations between the top representatives of the Czech and Slovak parts of the federation

[15] See Hans-Peter Riese, ed., *Since the Prague Spring: Charter '77 and the Struggle for Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (New York: Random House, 1979).

[16] One of the most useful resources in English analyzing the Czechoslovak (so-called "Velvet" or "Gentle") revolution of 1989 and its aftermath is the work of James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

after the 1992 elections led to the decision to separate.[17] Thus, after 70 years of the coexistence of two constituent nations, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist and an independent Slovak Republic began its new journey through history on January 1, 1993. All of this occurred without violence, and the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic have enjoyed excellent relations for a long period. Both states are also partners within the European Union, NATO, and Višegrad Four, along with neighboring Poland and Hungary.

The status of religious denominations in the Slovak Republic is comparable with that of other democratic countries where freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Freedom of faith is guaranteed by the Constitution. The equality of all religions and non-interference of the state in the liturgical and internal affairs of religious communities as well as their non-interference in state affairs is also guaranteed. The autonomy of religious denominations in their external and internal activities was ensured legislatively.

Furthermore, most church property that was nationalized after 1945 and 1948 was returned.[18] The first phase of restitution of church property took place in 1990 and 1991 before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. It particularly concerned the partial return of buildings to restored Catholic orders. The Slovak Republic was the first post-communist country to thoroughly address the correction of property injustices caused to religious groups through legislation that became valid in 1994. Based on this law, the majority of property was returned to the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Churches. The state also returned property to the Greek Catholic Church as the original owner (primarily churches and parsonages) and provided financial compensation for them to the Orthodox Church, thus peacefully resolving their property disputes.

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[17] For various scholarly perspectives on the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and whether it was "inevitable," see Mary Heiman, *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Abby Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); and Jiří Musil, ed., *The End of Czechoslovakia* (Budapest, HU: Central European University Press, 1995). To learn about the two countries' trajectories in the first two decades after their breakup, see M. Mark Stolarik, ed., *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Twenty Years of Independence, 1993–2013* (Budapest, HU: Central European University Press, 2016). For a reflection a quarter of a century after the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, see Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, "The Irony of Czechoslovakia's History: Twenty-Five Years after the Velvet Divorce," *Providence: Journal of Christianity and American Foreign Policy* (January 27, 2018), accessed September 12, 2020, https://providencemag.com/2018/01/ irony-czechoslovakia-history-twenty-five-years-velvet-divorce/.

[18] See more, Ján Juran, "The Restitution of the Church Property in the Slovak Republic," in *Restitutions of Church Property*, ed. Michaela Moravčíková (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2010), 55–59. The volume also includes chapters related to the restitution of church property in some other post-communist countries including Czechia, Ukraine, and Romania, which may be interesting for comparison.

The state respects the social status of registered religions; it legally guarantees their equal standing before the law and permits them to conclude agreements with the state. It cooperates with them on the principle of partnership cooperation. Relations with churches and religious societies and the registration of new religions are ensured by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic.

From 1948 to 1989, the state excluded religious groups from activities in public and social life. After the change in the political system, their status and activities in relation to civil society started to be gradually restored. Churches also had to simultaneously address numerous other issues that had accumulated. As opposed to Poland, very few churches were built in the post-war period in Czechoslovakia and this lack was obvious, especially in new housing developments. However, hundreds of new churches and pastoral and missionary centers were built in Slovakia after November 1989. The reconstruction and renovation of restituted buildings and sacral structures with national cultural monument status were expensive since the communist state had invested only minimally in them. New bishops were appointed to bishoprics that had been vacant up to that point, and new leadership in the Lutheran church was elected.

Moreover, religious societies, publishing houses, magazines, radio, and TV broadcasting were founded or restored. Organizational issues, renovation and building of infrastructure, and concurrent addressing of several issues were handled quickly and smoothly; however, according to some, the religions lagged behind in their pastoral and public activities. Zdeněk Nešpor underscores this point when he writes: "External observers, in turn, were bothered that large denominations in particular devoted, in their view, excessive attention to their own internal, organizational, and material affairs without being sufficiently engaged in pastoral and mission activities."[19] This was partially due to the fact that the change in the political and social situation was unexpected and religious institutions were caught unprepared and lacked sufficient staffing or an adequate strategy.

The early 1990s were characterized by the general public's sudden interest in spiritual and religious questions. Religious events, pilgrimages, ordinations, and evangelizations were organized with massive participation in stadiums and sports arenas. Pope John Paul II visited Slovakia in 1990, 1995, and 2003. Although certain Protestant denominations had great

[19] Zdeněk R. Nešpor, *Česká a slovenská religiozita po rozpadu společného státu: Náboženství Dioskúrů* (Prague, CZ: Karolinum, 2020), 89.

expectations regarding the growth of their membership and churches, this never came to pass. Initial enthusiasm gradually faded, only to be replaced by consumerism and problems connected with the rapid transformation of society.

The current system of parochial schools was established and included in the state system of education. In 2020, 335 parochial schools are in operation, including 98 kindergartens, 123 elementary schools, 87 secondary schools, 27 vocational and special schools, and one Catholic university. Faculties of theology are part of the state universities. The state covers the costs of salaries and maintenance of the schools, but not for building renovations and maintenance. Many parochial schools are among the top institutions in their field. They were established by the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Greek Catholic, and Reformed Churches. Small denominations are also entitled to establish and operate their own schools, but in reality, this is not possible due to insufficient enrollment. The prestigious C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School, founded and managed by the Church of Brethren in Bratislava, is an exception.

In the post-November 1989 period, parochial schools became a worthy equal of public and private schools. Their quality confirms the justification of inclusion in the state education system. Their government support is also a practical manifestation of the fulfillment of the right of believers as taxpayers to exercise the right to the religious upbringing and education of their children. The Lutheran Church also operates an elite bilingual high school with American teachers. Religion is taught at state schools according to the religious membership of the students or by choice with ethics as an alternative. Religion is taught by priests or catechists, who are paid by the state.

The restored social and charitable activities carried out by Catholic charities and Lutheran *diakonia*, as well as similar organizations of smaller Protestant Churches, achieve respectable results. Church facilities successfully complement the network of facilities founded by state and local governments, especially where their services are lacking. The Catholic Church operates hospices and facilities for the homeless, the Lutheran Church operates a special school for children with combined sight and hearing disabilities, and the Orthodox Church operates a home for teenage mothers and children. The Work of Churches with the Romani ethnic minority, with a population of 350,000 to 400,000, is a special part of this work along with missionary and pastoral activities.

State and Church Relations in a Free Society

In the last census in the Slovak Republic of 2011,[20] 75.5% of the populace claimed their adherence to a registered church or religious society. Of the overall population of 5,397,036, a total of 3,347,277 (62.02%) declared their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church; 206,871 (3.83%) with the Greek Catholic Church; 316,250 (5.86%) with the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran), 98,797 (1.83%) with the Reformed Christian Church (Calvinist); and 49,133 (0.91%) with the Orthodox Church. Relatively few residents identified themselves with one of the less numerous registered religious communities, including 1,999 (0.03%) with the Jewish Religious Communities. Meanwhile, 23,340 (0.43%) declared their affiliation with other non-registered religions such as 1,934 (0.036%) Islam and 2,530 (0.047%) Buddhism, and 725,362 (13.44%) professed to be atheists. The question on religious faith was not completed by 511,437 (10.58%) individuals for various reasons. In 2019, 14,463 of 29,664 weddings in Slovakia were church weddings and 42,821 of 53,234 funerals were religious funerals. There were 48,152 baptisms that year, and 8,755 persons joined churches while 1,224 left.

As mentioned earlier, 18 registered churches and religious societies operate in the Slovak Republic. All religious groups which operated based on the consent of the state up to 1991 are considered registered regardless of the number of members. This pertains particularly to the Jewish religious communities and majority of Protestant denominations, which have several hundred to several thousand members. The religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses was registered in 1993, the New Apostolic Church in 2001,[21] the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2006, and the Bahá'í Faith in 2007.[22] The Ministry of Culture denied registration to three groups: the Atheistic Church of Unbelievers, Church of the Christian Fellowships of Slovakia,[23] and Community of Faith.[24]

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[20] For a helpful analysis of the Census 2011 in English, see Ivana Juhaščíková, et al., *The 2011 Population and Housing Census: Facts About Changes in the Life of the Slovak Population* (Bratislava, SK: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2015).

[21] See Ján Juran, "K dvom žiadostiam o zaregistrovanie cirkvi," in *Ročenka pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví 2002,* ed. Michaela Moravčíková and Eleonóra Valová (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2003), 277–279.

[22] See Margita Čeplíková, "Registrácia Bahájskeho spoločenstva v Slovenskej republike," in *Ročenka pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví 2007,* ed. Michaela Moravčíková and Eleonóra Valová (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2008), 166–172.

[23] See more, Ján Juran, "Registrácia Cirkvi kresťanské spoločenstvá Slovenska," in *Pentekostalizmus v súčasnom náboženskom a spoločenskom kontexte*, ed. Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek and Ivan Moďoroši (Ružomberok, SK: Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku, 2013), 113–119; Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek and Noema Brádňanská Ondrášek, "Registrácia Cirkvi kresťanské spoločenstvá Slovenska," in *Medzinárodné a vnútroštátne právne aspekty*

The law on the registration of churches and religious societies has been a subject of criticism for a long time,[25] and it must be admitted that although it is in accordance with the Constitution and international conventions, it is not an ideal law. The fundamental rights of members of registered and non-registered religions are equally ensured. However, registered religions also have the right to teach religion in state schools, access to correctional facilities, hospitals, social care facilities, public media, and the right to receive subsidies from the state budget. Unregistered religious entities, including the Muslim community,[26] often choose to acquire legal status by registering as civic associations and foundations with the Ministry of the Interior.

Here, it is important to mention the Finding of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic from February 3, 2010 (PL. ÚS 10/08-70), in which the court concluded that "religious freedom guaranteed by Article 24 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is understood as an individual freedom, and there is therefore no reason to object to the conflict between the designated provisions of the Act and Article 24 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and Article 9 of the ECHR, where Act no. 308/1991 Coll. regulates the law of churches or religious societies as collective entities." In the opinion of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic, "the fact that a certain church or

subjektivity osobitných subjektov medzinárodného práva a cirkví a náboženských spoločností, ed. Marek Šmid and Michaela Moravčíková (Trnava, SK: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Právnická fakulta, 2013), 190–208; Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek, "Náboženský radikalizmus, náboženská sloboda a registrácia náboženských subjektov v Slovenskej republike," in *Konvergencie a divergencie v slovenských a českých štátno-cirkevných vzťahoch - dvadsať rokov od vzniku samostatnej SR a ČR*, ed. Marek Šmid and Michaela Moravčíková (Trnava, SK: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Právnická fakulta, 2014), 129–153.

[24] See more, Radovan Čikeš, "Systém a podmienky registrácie cirkví na Slovensku a modelový príklad ich opodstatnenosti," in *Pentekostalizmus v súčasnom náboženskom a spoločenskom kontexte*, 121–130.

[25] See, for example, Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, "Slovakia's New Religious Registration Law is a Step in the Wrong Direction," *Providence: A Journal of Christianity & American Foreign Policy* (March 1, 2017), accessed September 4, 2020, https://providencemag.com/2017/03/slovakias-new-religious-registration-law-step-wrong-direction/; Martin Vernarský, "Constitutional Regulation of Relationship between the State and Churches in the Slovak Republic," in *Migration: Religions Without Borders – European and American Perspectives*, ed. Martin Dojčár (Trnava, SK: Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Education, 2017, 66–91; Robert Gyuri, "Registrácia cirkví a náboženských spoločností v SR (podmienky a subjektivita)," in *Medzinárodné a vnútroštátne právne aspekty subjektivity osobitných subjektov medzinárodného práva a cirkví a náboženských spoločností*, ed. Marek Šmid and Michaela Moravčíková (Trnava, SK: Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Právnická fakulta, 2013), 146–172; Michaela Moravčíková, "New Religious Movements in the Context of New Legislation Regulating Relations between State and Churches in the Slovak Republic," in *Nová Religiozita/New Religiosity*, ed. Michaela Moravčíková and Katarína Nádaská (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2011), 129–145; Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, "On Religious Freedom in the Slovak Republic," *Religion in Eastern Europe* (Vol. 29, No. 3, August 2009): 1–9, accessed September 4, 2020, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol29/iss3/1/.

[26] Abdulwahab Al-Sbenaty, "Komunita moslimov v Slovenskej republike – úsilie o nadobudnutie právnej subjektivity," in *Medzinárodné a vnútroštátne právne aspekty subjektivity osobitných subjektov medzinárodného práva a cirkví a náboženských spoločností*, 184–189.

religious society is not registered does not mean or imply that members of such groups are restricted in the very essence of the right to freedom of religion in its expression." The fact that a certain church or religious society is not registered "did not interfere in any way with the exercise of fundamental rights or freedoms of persons claiming allegiance to this church or religious society, which can be realized through another legal entity."

The state partially funds religious organizations directly from the state budget, similar to models in Belgium, Luxembourg, and Greece.[27] This practice arose in the times of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and all state formations and regimes in our territory have continued to follow it. Until 2020, the state provided religious groups financial means for the wages of clergy and partially for the operation of their bishopric authorities and headquarters. The total amount of the state contribution was slightly increased, and in addition to wages, it may be used for educational, social, and cultural activities. In 2020, the state allocated 52 million euros for the direct support of religious groups, which represents 0.2% of state budget expenditures. Religious groups own thousands of buildings with national cultural monument status and the state provides special financial funds for their renovation from the Ministry of Culture's grant system.

Part of the public has long been dissatisfied with the current model of financing churches and religious societies and would prefer their complete financial separation from the state. At the same time, it calls for the opening of a scholarly and public discussion on this topic. Regardless of what one may think of the current model, the fact remains that over the last three decades, debate has taken place at various levels,[28] and the current law, which was approved on October 16, 2019, was born as a compromise between the relevant actors. The National Council of the Slovak Republic unequivocally approved it by a vote of 115 in favor, 25 abstentions, and one against. Both members of the coalition and the opposition voted in favor of the law. Proponents

[27] See more, Ján Juran, "The Church as Legal Entity," in *Migration: Religions Without Borders – European and American Perspectives*, 58–64; Radovan Čikeš, "The Financing of Churches and Religious Societies by the State Future Form of the Financing," in *Clara Pacta – Boni Amicii: Contractual Relations between State and Churches*, ed. Marek Šmid and Michaela Moravčíková (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2009), 71–78.

[28] In 1997, 2007, and 2009 the Ministry of Culture initiated and financed three large international conferences on the topic of models of financing churches, state and church relations, and restitution of church property. See, for example, Michaela Moravčíková and Eleonóra Valová, eds., *Financing of Churches and Religious Societies in the 21st Century* (Bratislava, SK: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkví, 2010). From 2011 to 2016 the Expert Commission, composed of representatives of the state and churches, met to discuss the topic of financing churches and religious societies. Also, several television and radio discussions took place and national newspapers published numerous articles on the topic.

of financial support for churches also argue that the state subsidizes non-profit organizations, political parties, sports, and culture to an even greater extent.

Churches and religious societies are equal before the law and may conclude agreements on mutual cooperation with the state. This possibility was first realized upon the adoption of the Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on November 24, 2000, at the Vatican; it is related to the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches.[29] Subsequently, the Agreement between the Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Societies that regulates the status of 11 registered religious groups, was approved on April 11, 2002.[30] This agreement also concerns minority religions including Jewish religious communities, which thus are guaranteed the same possibilities for mutual cooperation as majority religions. This represents the Slovak Republic's fulfillment of its commitment to preserve the rights of all religious groups.

The Basic Treaty obligates Slovakia to conclude four partial treaties. Two already adopted treatises regulate religious upbringing and education at schools and religious service in the army, police, and penitentiaries. The Catholic Church established a military ordinariate headed by a military ordinary (bishop) with 69 active priests. Other Churches have 23 clergy in this service. The other two treatises remain to be concluded—the financing of the Catholic Church and the right to exercise objections of conscience based on religious convictions. The dispute over the conscientious objection treaty resulted in the breakup of the governing coalition and the early elections in 2006.

Contemporary Slovak society can be characterized as predominantly conservative and traditional with close links between religiosity and ethnicity. A substantial part of the population considers religion an important source of their identity. Censuses have revealed that the majority of the population declared membership in churches, traditional and historical in particular—the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Greek Catholic, Reformed (Calvinist), and Orthodox denominations. Jewish religious communities are also in this group. Practically all churches take identical or similar standpoints regarding cultural-ethical issues, which is also in line with the views and attitudes of the majority society. Recently, this was clearly manifested in the refusal to adopt the

[29] On this topic, see Marek Šmid, "International Legal Personality of the Holy See: Bilateral International Treatises," in *Clara Pacta – Boni Amicii*, 71–78.

[30] See more, Margita Čeplíková, "Contribution of the Agreement between the Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Societies to the Progress of Freedom of Belief," in *Clara Pacta – Boni Amicii*, 53–62.

Istanbul Convention. In general, the liberal views of progressive Christianity are manifested mostly in Bratislava and its surrounding areas; they are represented by small groups and isolated theologians and clergy members, who, however, have significant support from the liberal media.

New unconventional religious groups have become part of our society in the past 30 years. However, public opinion is not much in favor of their establishment and their activities have not found general acceptance in our cultural environment; they gain new members relatively slowly. On the other hand, established churches have become significant participants in the public life of society affected by secularization. Slovakia does not completely adhere to any of the development trends of modern European religious trends but follows its own path. Religiosity here is widespread, deeply rooted and respected throughout society, although the majority of believers do not actively practice their faith. In the parliamentary elections in February of 2020, conservative Catholics and Protestants achieved relatively strong results and are represented in both the Parliament and state executive.

The Moral Crisis and Ethics of Responsibility[31]

So far, we have focused mostly on descriptive analysis and providing factual data; we will now discuss some normative and practical questions related to our topic. A person's evaluation of the last 30 years and the current situation will naturally depend on the perspectives from which she or he looks at reality. The facts are often clear, but interpretations can differ and are influenced by various factors including the professional expertise of the assessor and his or her personal relationship with the evaluated phenomenon. Competent assessments will more often be complementary than contradictory. In the second part of our article, we will approach this subject from a theological and ethical perspective, especially highlighting the problem of corruption and the role of faith communities can play in addressing it.

Joe Holland and Peter Henriot in their book *Social Analysis: Linking Faith to Justice* provide a practical methodology for conducting social analysis and answering a fundamental question: "What is going on?" According to the authors, one should be attentive to a series of

[31] Some ideas in this section were previously explored and material was published in Lubomir Martin Ondrasek's short articles: "Twenty-Seven Years after the Velvet Revolution: The Enduring Problem of a Contaminated Moral Environment," *Providence: Journal of Christianity and American Foreign Policy* (November 22, 2016), accessed December 20, 2019, https://providencemag.com/2016/11/twenty-seven-years-after-the-velvet-revolution/ and "The Velvet Prophet: Václav Havel and His Message of Responsibility," *Sightings: Religion in Public Life* (November 19, 2009), accessed December 20, 2019, https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/velvet-prophet-vaclav-havel-and-his-message-responsibility.

questions about the history, structures, values, and direction of the situation we are analyzing if we want to more fully understand any given reality.[32] In this article, we are unable to employ this robust socioanalytic exploration, but in addition to the historical overview provided in the first part of this paper, will draw from another important source of cultural analysis—the "commentary of the wise."[33] Many would consider one of the wisest moral guides on our region to be the playwright, dissident, and later President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel.

Following the 1989 Velvet Revolution, in his first inaugural address to the nation, President Havel described the poor condition of the nation's economy, educational system, and above all, the environment. He then underscored what he thought was an even more serious problem: "The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we got used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only for ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness lost their depth and dimension."[34] Thus, "our main enemy today," Havel reminded Czechoslovakia's citizens, is "our own worst nature: our indifference to the common good; vanity; personal ambition; selfishness; and rivalry."[35]

Only six weeks were needed for the totalitarian regime that was in place for over 40 years to completely disintegrate. As a result of the 1989 "Velvet Revolution," Czechoslovakia was suddenly free and could embark on its new journey to democracy. After the fall of Communism, there was a mix of "technical problems" and "adaptive challenges"[36] mirroring Moses' experience after he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. The technical problem was conducting the revolution and later building a series of new institutions that could support the rule of law, a free market, and democracy. The real adaptive challenge lay in changing people's mindsets to accept responsibility in general and for these institutions in particular. In order to have a robust democratic society, we need both a democratic system and people of a democratic temperament

[32] Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith to Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 7–30.
[33] See Lawrence E. Adams, *Going Public: Christian Responsibility in a Divided America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 15.
[34] Václav Havel, "New Year's Address to the Nation. Prague, January 1, 1990," in *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice: Speeches and Writings, 1990–1996* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 4.
[35] Václav Havel, "New Year's Address to the Nation," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 8.
[36] For an explanation of these concepts, see Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 19–23.

who understand the value and limits of freedom. With freedom should come responsibility; separating the two begets moral anarchy.

Today, it is clear that four decades of totalitarian oppression have impacted post-communist countries in a more negative way than originally thought. In 1990, the newly elected president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, spoke in the aforementioned address about Czechoslovakia's moral devastation. The present moral climate seems not much better and many would say worse than prior to 1989. As the 20th anniversary of the demise of totalitarianism approached, Havel remarked that he was "deeply mistaken" to think that people would quickly alter their mindsets and concluded that making significant progress in this area will take decades.[37] Even a very perceptive person like Havel seemed to underestimate the time it would take to solve the numerous challenges in a country that was transitioning politically, economically, and civically.

As we approach the 31st anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, Slovakia still suffers from an unraveled moral fabric and underdeveloped ethics of responsibility that is necessary for a free society. Corruption[38] and the justice deficit is one of the most visible manifestations of what Havel dubbed the "contaminated moral environment." One of the clearest indicators of Slovakia's justice deficit is the excessive presence of unreported, uninvestigated, and untried corrupt behavior throughout the public and private sector. To illustrate, until recently, no top Slovak politician has been imprisoned for corruption.[39] After the murder[40] of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018, tens of thousands of citizens

[37] Václav Havel, cited in Ludmila Rakušanová, "Václav Havel: Estébáci mají klid a obří platy" [Václav Havel: The Secret Police Has Peace and Huge Salaries], *Deník* (October 16, 2009), accessed September 9, 2020, https://www.denik.cz/samet-rozhovory/havel_rozhovor20091115.html.

[38] A quarter-century after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the World Economic Forum's annual corruption index revealed that six of the top eleven most corrupt countries with advanced economies were in post-communist Europe. See Thomas Colson, "These are the 11 most corrupt countries in the developed world," *Business Insider* (September 29, 2016), accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/wef-corruption-index-the-most-corrupt-countries-in-the-oecd-2016-9?IR=T&r=SG.

[39] See more, Radoslav Tomek, "Slovak Ex-Ministers Sentenced in Landmark Anti-Corruption Case," *Bloomberg* (October 18, 2017), accessed September 9, 2020, https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/slovak-ex-ministers-sentenced-in-landmark-anti-corruption-case.

[40] See Editorial Board, "A Muckraking Journalist is Murdered in Slovakia," *The Washington Post* (March 7, 2018), accessed September 4, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-muckraking-journalist-is-murdered-in-slovakia/2018/03/07/96a42c32-2174-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html.

gathered across Slovakia, calling for justice. These were the largest protests since 1989 and led to a major political crisis and the resignation of Prime Minister Fico and some of his cabinet.[41]

President Andrej Kiska, who after leaving office formed his own political party, went as far as to state both at home and abroad that Slovakia is a "mafia state."[42] In 2016, Kiska delivered an address entitled "How to Restore Public Confidence in the Common European Project" at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin, Germany. In his speech, he cited a fact that many of his fellow citizens know through personal experience and is reflected in corruption perception indexes: "A few days ago, I came across an opinion poll asking what people consider their country's biggest problem. More than half of Polish and Hungarian citizens said the quality of health care. I think that in Slovakia we would see a similar response, but we would almost certainly add corruption."[43]

The good news is that there seems to be an ever-increasing number of citizens who see corruption as a problem, also evidenced by the outcome of Slovakia's Presidential Elections in 2019[44] and especially General Elections in 2020. The main agenda of the unexpected winner of the General Elections, *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti* [Ordinary People and Independent Personalities], which won 25% of votes, is anti-corruption.[45] It is also noteworthy that at the time this article was written, Daniel Lipšic, a former Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of Interior, declared that he is considering accepting the candidacy for Head of the General Prosecutor's Office or the Special Prosecutor's Office. In the context of our present discussion, we should pay attention to Lipšic's rationale: "I am considering this because I think that at this time there is a unique opportunity in Slovakia, perhaps for the first time in 30 years,

[41] See more, Marc Santora, "Young Slovaks Buck a Trend, Protesting to Save Their Democracy," *The New York Times* (March 17, 2018), accessed September 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/world/europe/slovakia-protests-robert-fico-jan-kuciak.html.

[42] For President Kiska's undiplomatic pronouncement abroad, see Tim Röhn, "Es sah so aus, als wäre die Slowakei ein Mafia-Staat," *Die Welt* (May 4, 2019), accessed September 4, 2020, https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article192911739/Staatspraesident-Kiska-ueber-Korruption-in-der-Slowakei.html.

[43] Andrej Kiska, "Kiska hovoril v Berlíne o obnovení dôvery v Európsku úniu," *Andrej Kiska, prezident Slovenskej republiky* (December 12, 2016), accessed September 4, 2020, https://www.prezident.sk/article/kiska-hovoril-v-berline-o-obnoveni-dovery-v-europsku-uniu/.

[44] See more, Tatiana Jancarikova, "Anti-corruption Lawyer Zuzana Caputova Wins Election to Become Slovakia's First Female President," *Independent* (March 31, 2019), accessed September 4, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/
news/ world/europe/slovakia-presidential-election-latest-zuzana-caputova-president-a8847726.html.

[45] The Economist Staff, "An Anti-Corruption Campaigner Triumphs in Slovakia," *The Economist* (March 5, 2020), accessed on May 9, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/slovakia-presidential-election-latest-zuzana-caputova-president-a8847726.html.

to advance justice and bring to justice many people who until now thought they were above the law."[46]

Corruption within the justice system is especially troublesome because it undermines the rule of law, one of the key pillars of a democracy. It is encouraging to see that Slovakia might be turning the corner in this area as well. On September 14, 2020, the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) launched a major operation against corruption within the court system in the city of Žilina, after which 13 individuals have been charged and five have been detained, including the chair of the Regional Court, Eva Kyselová. It has been reported that this operation is not just about a few isolated cases but that "the police have uncovered an enormous corruption scheme" that has lasted for several years.[47] The effort has followed another major operation in March 2020, when NAKA arrested 13 judges in Bratislava, including former deputy justice minister Monika Jankovská, on charges of corruption, interference with the independence of courts, and obstruction of justice.[48] Two months earlier, NAKA detained former general prosecutor Dobroslav Trnka on suspicion of abusing his power as public official;[49] he is presently being prosecuted.

Excessive corruption and the justice deficit are, of course, not only legal and political issues but also ethical and moral ones. The examples we used are just the tip of the iceberg, illustrating the presence of morally dubious behavior that includes academic dishonesty, bribery in healthcare, cronyism, and nepotism. No country is immune from these vices, but they are more widespread and tolerated in Slovakia than in established democracies. If we have learned anything from the past three decades, it is that it takes a long time to bring about adaptive change in post-totalitarian countries. Martin Bútora, a sociologist and important actor in the Velvet Revolution who served as an advisor to President Havel and Slovak ambassador to the United States, aptly stated: "It takes six months to bring political change and free elections; it takes

[46] Daniel Lipšic, cited in "Lipšic zvažuje prijatie kandidatúry na šéfa Generálnej prokuratúry" [Lipšic Is Considering Becoming a Candidate for the Head of the General Prosecutor's Office], *Postoj* (September 4, 2020), accessed on September 4, 2020, https://www.postoj.sk/60750/lipsic-zvazuje-prijatie-kandidatury-na-sefa-generalnej-prokuratury.
[47] Veronika Prušová, "Búrka pokračuje: v Žiline zatkli predsedníčku krajského súdu Kyselovú aj sudcu Polku" [The Storm Continues: In Žilina, the Chair of the Regional Court, Kyselová, and Judge Polka Were Arrested], *Denník N* (September 4, 2020), accessed September 4, 2020, https://dennikn.sk/2038382/zatykanie-v-ziline-policia-zadrzala-sudcov-polku-a-beresa-robila-na-tom-roky/.
[48] The Slovak Spectator Staff, "Kočner's Judges Charged and Detained," *The Slovak Spectator* (March 11, 2020), accessed September 4, 2020, https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22355425/kocners-judges-charged-and-detained.html.
[49] See more, Radoslav Tomek, "Slovakia Charges Ex-Top Prosecutor as Graft Clouds Vote Campaign," *Bloomberg* (January 16, 2020), accessed September 18, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-16/slovakia-charges-ex-top-prosecutor-as-graft-clouds-vote-campaign.

about six years to start the economy; it takes sixty years to change the mentality [of people] and civil society. We are just approaching the halfway point."[50] And it is not only a matter of time but also hard work.

We may disagree with Havel on many issues, but he was certainly right to emphasize the ethics of responsibility as the solution to our societal problems and the problems of the world. The theme of responsibility appears in Havel's speeches and writings with remarkable frequency and consistency. While addressing the US Congress, the newly elected president said that "...the salvation of the world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human responsibility."[51] In 1993, having received The Onassis Prize for Man and Mankind in Athens, he uttered: "Today's world, as we know it, is faced with multiple threats. From whichever angle I look at this menace, I always come to the conclusion that salvation can come only through a profound awakening of man to his own responsibility, which is at the same time a global responsibility."[52] In Tokyo, he said, "politics should be principally the domain of people with a heightened sense of responsibility."[53] When speaking at Hiroshima, he summarized: "If humanity has any hope of a decent future, it lies in the awakening of human responsibility, the kind of responsibility unrepresented in the world of transient earthly interests."[54] At Harvard, he acknowledged that "it will certainly not be easy to awaken in people a new sense of responsibility for the world."[55]

We could find many more examples of Havel's clarion call for both individual and collective responsibility. Therefore, Jean Bethke Elshtain is right on target when she writes: "The only 'solution' to the crises Havel sketches is to *deepen human responsibility* in and through hope for the moral reconstitution of society"[56] [emphasis added]. Our purpose is not to examine

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[50] Martin Bútora, "100 Opinions: Independence, Vision, Responsibility," accessed January 18, 2019, http://www.100nazorov.sk/53-mimovladne-org/846-butora-martin. Bútora paraphrases German social and political theorist Ralf Dahrendorf, who shortly after the fall of communism in Europe perceptively remarked: "It takes six months to create new political institutions, to write a constitution and electoral laws. It may take six years to create a half-way viable economy. It will probably take sixty years to create a civil society." Quoted from Ralf Dahrendorf, "Has the East Joined the West?" *New Perspectives Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 42.

[51] Václav Havel, "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress. Washington, D.C., February 21, 1990," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 18.

[52] Havel, "The Onassis Prize for Man and Mankind. Athens, May 24, 1993," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 126.

[53] Havel, "Asahi Hall. Tokyo, April 23, 1992," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 101.

[54] Havel, "The Future of Hope Conference. Hiroshima, December 5, 1995," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 242.

[55] Havel, "Harvard University. Cambridge, June 8, 1995," in *The Art of the Impossible*, 223.

[56] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "A Performer of Political Thought: Václav Havel on Freedom and Responsibility," in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, ed. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz and Phyllis Carey (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), 120.

Havel's ethics of responsibility, which would require a separate study. We simply want to note that we share Havel's insistence that embracing responsibility is the key to solving most problems we face in our world, including the former Eastern Bloc countries. Human freedom exercised without responsibility resulted in the present crisis. Thus, on the most fundamental level, the solution to societal transformation is educating citizens in moral and civic responsibility.

Is Havel's message compatible with Christianity, the dominant religion in Slovakia? We believe so. The notion of responsibility plays a prominent role in the work of a number of Christian theologians and ethicists,[57] and we maintain that Christian ethics is first and foremost about vertical and horizontal responsibility. We believe that the public task of Christianity is to promote responsibility with a vision of transforming the present world into one that is freer, peaceful, and just and thus contribute to approximating the ideal of "good society."[58] This would include addressing the problem of corruption in light of biblical justice.

The Need for a Responsible Public Theology

As we have already noted, according to Slovakia's most recent 2011 census, almost three-quarters of the population self-identified with a Christian denomination—a high number especially considering the country's location in Europe. At the same time, widespread corruption is also evident in Slovakia. Is there a positive causal relationship between Christian self-identification and corruption? We do not think so. On the contrary, we maintain that the stronger a country's Christian presence, the lower level of corruption should be. However, that applies only in the case of 'prophetic' Christianity, which is the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Mt 5:13–16) and carries the potential to be an agent of positive transformation in society. Conversely, 'cultural' Christianity—even if it is not an oxymoron—easily adapts to

[57] See, for example, James M. Gustafson and James T. Laney, eds., *On Being Responsible: Issues in Personal Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) and *The Responsibility of the Church for Society and Other Essays* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

[58] For an extensive treatment of the concept of a "good society," see Robert Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991). We maintain that a good society stands on three pillars—freedom, justice, and peace— which are related to the theological concept of the Kingdom of God. See more, Lubomir Martin Ondrášek, *Verejná teológia na Slovensku* (Trnava, SK: Dobrá kniha, 2019), 25–28.

corrosive cultural trends, does not represent an alternative community, and is a lamp without oil and salt without taste.

Two common reactions to corruption are indifference and anger. Prophetic Christianity offers something different. One of the world's foremost interpreters of the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, has devoted a significant portion of his scholarly research to study prophecy and "the prophetic imagination."[59] The latter concept can contribute to a better understanding of the prophetic role of the church in confronting corruption. According to Brueggemann, the role of the prophet is twofold: to critique by expressing grief over the condition of things, thereby drawing attention to the need to engage in addressing them, and to energize people by communicating hope that change is possible. The ability to feel pain, demonstrate compassion, and engender hope distinguishes the voice of the prophet from the roar of a siren.

Prophetic Christianity laments over corruption, knowing that it is not a victimless crime—despite perhaps initially appearing that way. This fact was highlighted at the Third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town in 2010, where four thousand Christian leaders from 197 countries convened and led to the establishment of the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Network.[60] Prophetic Christianity also humbly acknowledges and feels the pain of its own failure, whether from doing, collaborating with, or not actively confronting evil. This awareness will protect Christians from haughty attitudes and vacuous moralizing.

Pope Francis, when he still served as the cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires, was not oblivious to the problem of corruption in his own country. From a biblical and theological standpoint he reflected on it, and wanted others to do the same. His words are also relevant for post-communist Slovakia: "It will do us good to reflect together on the problem of corruption and also on its relationship with sin. It will do us good to shake up our souls with the *prophetic* force of the gospel, which places us in the truth about things by stirring up the layers of the fallen dead leaves of human weakness and complicity that can create the conditions for corruption that surround us and threaten to lead us astray"[61] [emphasis added].

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[59] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).
[60] To learn more about this evangelical effort, see *The Lausanne and World Evangelical Alliance Integrity and Anti-Corruption Network* website: https://www.globalintegritynetwork.org/.
[61] Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *The Way of Humility: Corruption and Sin & On Self-Accusation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 11.

Thanks to modern technology, the author of this part of the article has been able to listen to hundreds of sermons from various congregations across Slovakia and gain a sense of what is being preached from their pulpits. It did not take long to notice that many of them were quite thoughtful, but the majority missed something essential: they inadequately reflected on contemporary problems and rarely, if ever, dealt with the issue of justice—a pillar of Christian ethics that encompasses the problem of corruption. Corruption is also a theological and ethical issue, and if the church wants to represent prophetic Christianity, it has no choice but to consider how to engage in the battle against various forms of corruption. The church—bishops at the national level, pastors at the local level, and believers wherever they are—should more tenaciously enter this fight.

In 2015, the book *Radosť evanjelia na Slovensku* [The Joy of the Gospel in Slovakia] was published, having been edited by František Mikloško, an important Catholic dissident during communism and later politician, and Karol Moravčík, a Catholic theologian and priest. Although the book is not a scientific monograph and has shortcomings, it deserves our attention as it assesses the situation in the Catholic Church from the perspective of its engaged insiders. The contributors see the cup as half empty: they view the state of the Slovak Catholic Church more critically than is customary in the Catholic environment. One of the main problems the Catholic Church faces, the editors argue, is that the Second Vatican Council "was only modestly reflected and applied in our region" and Pope Francis' message has not sufficiently resonated in the Slovak context.[62] Mikloško also points to the departure of priests and members of religious orders from the ministry, mismanagement of restituted property or insufficient ability of churches and the Catholic media to "*connect with today's people, especially secular ones*"[63] [emphasis added].

The chapter "Situation of Priests and Dioceses," written by the Catholic priests Karol Moravčík, Július Marián Prachár, and Pavol Zaťko, is the core of the book because of its scope and content. The authors are critical of "enduring clericalism," which they say results in "the Eucharist and other sacraments often being performed only mechanically, what leads to ritualism and spiritual emptying," as well as priests "keeping their distance from the laity" and "not

[62] František Mikloško and Karol Moravčík, "Úvod," in *Radosť evanjelia na Slovensku: Pokus o analýzu situácie katolíckej cirkvi* [The Joy of the Gospel in Slovakia: An attempt to analyze the situation of the Catholic Church], ed. František Mikloško and Karol Moravčík (Bratislava, SK: Hlbiny, 2015), 7–8.
[63] František Mikloško, "Základné štatistické údaje," in *Radosť evanjelia na Slovensku*, 14–16.

engaging in dialogue with the secular part of the public."[64] Separate problems for them include the lack of willingness and ability of theologians and clergy to *engage in the wider public space* apart from ceremonial functions as well as the fact that "bishops make decisions as absolutist rulers," not feeling "obligated to be morally accountable to the public" and "critically evaluating the actions of politicians only in the case of intimate moral issues"[65] [emphasis added].

After reading this chapter and the entire book, some readers may gain the impression that the last three decades have been a period of missed opportunities and failure to address the urgent challenges of living in a free society for the Slovak Catholic Church. Determining the degree to which the authors' claims are true would require a more robust discussion and listening to the voices of those who are objects of criticism. At the same time, we should not overlook a number of positive examples that testify to the vitality of the Catholic Church and its believers and their contribution to Slovak society. We could mention here *Spoločenstvo Ladislava Hanusa* [The Ladislav Hanus Fellowship],[66] which seeks to intellectually shape young people and encourage them to engage in social and political life; the remarkable ministry *Dobrý Pastier* [The Good Shepherd] that provides social services and spiritual care to the homeless under the leadership of Catholic priest Vladimír Maslák; or Godzone, a charismatic movement whose main mission is evangelization.

Like the Catholic Church, the second largest Lutheran Church and other smaller churches and religious societies have faced various challenges and opportunities over the past three decades as well as more or less justified criticism from within and without, which they have responded to in their own ways. Space constraints will not allow us to address these issues in more depth, but we would like to draw English readers' attention to an informative book entitled *Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia*, edited by Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka.[67] One challenge that is common to all Slovak churches with which they will have to more effectively cope if they want to be relevant actors in the 21st century who contribute to the positive transformation of Slovak society is developing their own robust public theology.

[64] Karol Moravčík, Július Marián Prachár, and Pavol Zaťko, "Situácia kňazov a diecéz" in *Radosť z evanjelia*, 22–23.
[65] Ibid., 25, 29, 36.
[66] For a description and information on the activities of Spoločenstvo Ladislava Hanusa (SLH), see the organization website: https://www.slh.sk/en/.
[67] See Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, Review of Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia: Current Challenges and Opportunities, ed. Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 35, no. 3 (2015): 60–66, accessed June 2, 2019, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss3/6.

We should also say a few words about the critique of the Christian church from the outside, which in Slovak society is aimed mainly at the dominant Catholic Church and its representatives.[68] Particularly one-sided and sometimes offensive criticisms in some media are especially noticeable; Archbishop Cyril Vasiľ, S.J., recently pointed out the problem in his incisive and thoughtful homily.[69] Furthermore, Anton Ziolkovský, who was then the executive secretary of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, observed: "Critiques of the Church in the so-called mainstream media are most often written by dissenting theologians and former priests, several of whom have unresolved personal conflicts with it. Their words are sufficient for the editorial board and suit their interests. Editors have no ambition to overcome this 'bias' by adding new authors whose commentaries would be freer of bitterness or even the desire for 'settling scores.'"[70] The discussed authors politically identify with the progressive left. The Slovak media need, in our opinion, more people like church analyst Imrich Gazda,[71] who critically yet competently and without prejudice comments on topics related to Christianity and traditional churches.

Similarly to other post-communist countries, the Slovak church is still seeking to answer how it should engage publicly in the context of a liberal democracy. When the church's voice is heard in a public space, it is usually an expression of disagreement with abortion, same-sex unions, and euthanasia, which understandably triggers adverse reactions from the media and secular public. One of the rare cases in the modern history of Slovakia when a high-ranking religious leader spoke clearly, directly, and publicly about an urgent socio political problem that is also a serious moral problem was the statement by Milan Lach, S.J., then the Auxiliary Bishop of Prešov, who served as the president of the Council for pastoral activities in healthcare of the

[68] See more, Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek, "Antikatolicizmus – posledný prijateľný predsudok?" [Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice?], *Denník N* (1/14, February 18, 2015), 11.

[69] The homily was published under the title "Kopnúť si do cirkvi je dnes v istých kruhoch v móde, je to takmer povinnosť" [Attacking the Church Is Fashionable, Almost Obligatory in Some Circles Today], *Postoj* (May 31, 2020), accessed September 4, 2020, https://svetkrestanstva.postoj.sk/55712/kopnut-si-do-cirkvi-je-dnes-v-istych-kruhoch-v-mode-je-to-takmer-povinnost.

[70] Anton Ziolkovský, cited in Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek, "Dôveryhodnosť médií ovplyvňuje aj to, ako informujú o cirkvi" [The Media's Credibility Also Depends on Their Reporting About the Church]. *Denník N* (4/238, December 11, 2018), 11.

[71] Gazda is also the author of an informative chapter that introduces English readers to the topic of Slovak Catholic media and their development after the fall of communism. See Imrich Gazda, "Catholic Media in Post-Communist Slovakia," in *Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia: Current Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Michal Valčo and Daniel Slivka (Salem, VA: Center for Religion and Society, Roanoke College, 2012), 485–505.

Bishops' conference of Slovakia.[72] In a country where the adage "the church should not get mixed up in politics" is often voiced without elaboration, Bishop Lach's statement was met with substantial public support. His public stance can be seen as part of a prophetic thread that runs throughout the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition when religious leaders "spoke truth to power."[73]

In 2012, Michal Valčo, a leading Lutheran scholar wrote a compelling chapter, "Setting the Stage for a Meaningful Engagement: The Need for a Competent Public Theology in the Post-Communist Context of Slovakia,"[74] in which he accentuates the public dimension of Christian theology and asserts that "Christian churches, if they want to remain faithful to their own Gospel identity, should not abdicate prophetic, social, and educational roles in their societies"[75] but instead should learn to fulfill these roles in accordance with God's ultimate purpose for the world. We maintain Slovakia suffers from moral malaise partly because of the lack of responsible public theology (or more precisely, theologies) and theologians who can help people of the Christian faith responsibly engage the world.[76] An authentically prophetic Christian ministry is one of the visible manifestations of responsible public theology.

Acta Sanctorum, Inc.: A Case Study

As a response to the described problem and in line with an expressed normative vision, Lubomir Martin Ondrasek and Noema Bradnanska Ondrasek founded Acta Sanctorum, Inc.,[77] a nonprofit, internationally oriented, nondenominational Christian organization in Chicago on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. The meaning of Acta Sanctorum's Latin name ("Acts of the Saints") reflects the founders' conviction that

[72] See more, "Slovakia: Bishop Milan Lach to State Authorities, 'Stop Moral and Material Decay of Healthcare Resort,'" *SIR - Servizio Informazione Religiosa* (January 26, 2016), accessed on September 15, 2020, https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2016/1/26/slovakia-bishop-milan-lach-to-state-authorities-stop-moral-and-material-decay-of-healthcare-resort/.

[73] See more, Ľubomír Martin Ondrášek, "Hovoriť pravdu moci" [To Speak Truth to Power], *Denník N* (2/29, February 12, 2016), 10.

[74] Michal Valčo, "Setting the Stage for a Meaningful Engagement: The Need for a Competent Public Theology in the Post-Communist Context of Slovakia," in *Christian Churches in Post-Communist Slovakia*, 185–244.

[75] Ibid., 209.

[76] An excellent example of such a person is Czech theologian, sociologist, and Catholic priest Tomáš Halík. See more, Lubomir Martin Ondrasek, "A Public Theologian from 'Atheist' Czechia: Tomáš Halík Turns Seventy," *Sightings: Religion in Public Life* (May 31, 2018), accessed October 4, 2019, https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/public-theologian-atheist-czechia-tomáš-hal%C3%ADk-turns-seventy.

[77] The vision, mission, and guiding principles of Acta Sanctorum that follow were formulated in 2009 and with some minor changes appear also on the organization's website: "About," Acta Sanctorum, accessed September 5, 2020, https://www.actsan.org/about.

Christians have been entrusted with the mandate to better the world through words and deeds of love and justice. Since its inception in 2009, the organization has been shaped by the idea that freedom and responsibility must never be separated. The organization's, or more precisely, the ministry's motto is: "promoting individual, social, and political responsibility."

At the time of organization's founding in 2009, Lubomir Martin Ondrasek pursued a course of doctoral study in religion and ethics (philosophical, theological, and political) at the University of Chicago Divinity School under the supervision of Jean Bethke Elshtain (1941–2013), Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics. Ondrasek discussed his vision for Acta Sanctorum with Professor Elshtain, and she endorsed it as follows:

> When Václav Havel gave his first speech as President of the newly free Czechoslovakia, as it was then, one of the things he said was: "We now enter the long tunnel at the end of the light." How right he was! There is the brilliant flash of new-found democratic freedom and, following that —the Velvet Revolution— there is the long, hard work of sustaining a decent, justly ordered democratic society. One feature of such a society is its ethics—how it understands itself. One asks: What is the quality of life in common? Acta Sanctorum labors to keep alive a rich civil society, one in which an ethic of responsibility pertains. From the beginning, Christians were called upon to reflect on "life in common together," as St. Augustine put it. Christians were to be salt and light to the world, enlivening all they touched and directing it toward peace and justice. Acta Sanctorum operates on this premise: what is the task of Christianity in a free society? How can Christians contribute to a good we can know in common that we cannot know alone? This ethics of responsibility is not aimed exclusively at Christians but, rather, is enacted in behalf of the polity as a whole. I commend the organization; honor its founders; and wish it Godspeed in the years ahead.[78]

More than a decade later, the founders of the organization continue to be not only encouraged by Professor Elshtain's kind words but also struck how incisively and thoughtfully she was able to express Acta Sanctorum's *raison d'être*. The questions she posed in her endorsement are the very ones the founders want the Christian leaders to ask in Slovakia and other post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Acta Sanctorum has a threefold mission: 1) inform about the particular challenges present in post-communist countries, inspire by personal example, and provide concerned individuals and organizations with opportunities to engage in transforming these places to become more free, peaceful, and just; 2) assist people of the Christian faith in developing analytical skills and moral reasoning about critical social and political issues of our day so that they can effectively address

[78] Email message dated March 8, 2010, from Jean Bethke Elshtain to Lubomir Martin Ondrasek.

these issues through public witness and ministry; and 3) engage the wider public by publishing, presenting, and providing consultations in the areas of Ethics and Society, Public Theology, Church and State, Transformational Leadership, and the Pentecostal Movement. To fulfill Acta Sanctorum's mission, the founders have engaged and served four "publics:" church, academia, state, and the general public.[79]

The following guiding principles serve as a basic theological, ethical, and political framework for pursuing Acta Sanctorum's mission: Coming from a perspective of Christian faith, we believe that human beings were created in the image of God but as a result of the Fall are tainted with sin that manifests itself in the incorrect use of freedom. We acknowledge the complexity of human nature and do not share reductionist perspectives of humanity, thus attempting to avoid both excessive optimism that would lead one to embrace various utopian social and political projects and the exaggerated pessimism that often leads to apathy, cynicism, and general resignation. We seek to appeal to "the better angels of our nature" in the hope that many will embrace the values that contribute to the common good.

Our fundamental belief is that a more free, peaceful, and just world can only emerge by embracing a deeper sense of moral responsibility. We believe that the origin and grounding of this responsibility is ultimately in God and that the Christian tradition provides a plethora of resources for the awakening and cultivation of moral responsibility. We do not claim, however, that only people of Christian faith have the capacity to act responsibly; thus, we want to cooperate with people of all faiths (or none) who identify with our mission. Avoiding the perils of legalistic moralism and moral relativism, Acta Sanctorum contributes to the spiritual and moral renewal of society. We are committed to approaching vexing ethical and moral issues with conviction and courage and also humility, believing that self-righteous and triumphalist attitudes are antithetical to the spirit of true religion and prevent the creation of community.

We consider democracy, for all its flaws, the political system within which freedom and just peace have the best opportunity to prosper. The human ability to act justly makes democracy possible, but the human proclivity to act unjustly makes democracy necessary.[80] A vibrant civil

[79] Lubomir Martin Ondrasek was inspired here by David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 3–5. His understanding of various publics differs slightly from Tracy's and to his three publics I added a fourth: the state (political authority). See more, Ondrášek, "Teológia vo verejnom priestore" [Theology in Public Square], in *Verejná teológia na Slovensku*, 65–68.

[80] This is a paraphrase of Reinhold Niebuhr's famous aphorism found in his book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice

society is indispensable to a functioning and stable democracy, and religious communities play an important role in its construction and preservation. While we adhere to the concept of the separation of church and state, we also recognize that faith and religion are not simply private matters and hold that religious voices should not be *a priori* excluded from the public square. Acta Sanctorum has a nonideological approach to politics and seeks to maintain a critical and creative distance from "all the kingdoms of the world" in its social and political reflection.

Due to the fact that the founders of Acta Sanctorum have in the first decade of the organization lived in the United States, they have primarily engaged with Slovakia through writing.[81] The most important effort in relation to public theology was the bilingual co-edited book *Cirkev a spoločnosť: Smerom k zodpovednej angažovanosti* & *Church and Society: Towards Responsible Engagement* that included chapters by leading Christian thinkers including Harvey Cox, Jean Bethke Elshtain, David Fergusson, Robert P. George, Miroslav Volf, and John Witte, Jr.[82] and over 130 commentaries and essays that Lubomir Martin Ondrasek published in the national newspapers *Denník N*, *SME,* and *Konzervatívny denník Postoj* from 2013–2020. In a polarized society, it is noteworthy that Ondrasek was the only author during this time whose work was regularly published in major "liberal" and "conservative" outlets.

The articles were collected in three books: *Kresťanstvo, etika a verejný život* [Christianity, Ethics and Public Life, 2017], *Verejná teológia na Slovensku* [Public Theology in Slovakia, 2019], and *Úvahy verejného teológa o viere, spoločnosti a politike* [Reflections of a Public Theologian on Faith, Society, and Politics, upcoming in 2021]. Therein we find the articulation and illustration of a specific model of public theology[83] that Ondrasek appends with

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makes democracy necessary." Some readers will probably recognize that Acta Sanctorum guiding principles have been inspired by the Augustinian Christian realist tradition of which the most prominent representative in the 20th century is the aforementioned theologian, ethicist, and political thinker. On this topic, see Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

[81] For the complete list of projects and activities, see the ministry's website: https://www.actsan.org/.

[82] See David A. Escobar Arcay, "Review of Cirkev a spoločnosť: Smerom k zodpovednej angažovanosti & Church and Society: Towards Responsible Engagement." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 34, no. 1 (2017): 54–57, accessed September 3, 2020, http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss1/10.

[83] E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr. provides a helpful three-part definition of the term: "First, public theology is religiously informed discourse that intends to be intelligible and convincing to adherents within its own religious tradition while at the same time being comprehensible and possibly persuasive to those outside it. Second, public theology addresses issues that bear upon a religious community but also pertain to the larger society, including those who identify themselves with other faith traditions or with none. Third, to achieve such ends, public theology relies on sources of insight, language, methods of argument, and warrants that are in theory open to all. Public theology is thus theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque,

the adjective "responsible." Readers are introduced to the concept of public theology, its essential features, and prominent figures such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King Jr., Richard John Neuhaus, and Tomáš Halík. However, most of the articles present an example of *doing* public theology. To the best of our knowledge, the author is the first person to use the term "verejný teológ" (public theologian) in the Slovak language. He elucidates its meaning in light of relevant scholarly literature,[84] applies it to himself, and has been acknowledged as such by others. His goal is to introduce the discipline of public theology to a Slovak audience that would eventually lead to more faithful and effective Christian engagement in larger society.

Realistic Hope for the Future

Long before medieval theologians, existential philosophers, and modern psychologists inquired into the subject of hope, the Hebrew prophets from Isaiah to Malachi spoke it through their messages to a community that needed to be energized as it looked at their decadent present condition and seemingly bleak future. The prophets' words were at times hard to listen to, but they were not devoid of hope. In contemporary literature, one finds many perspectives on the nature of hope and its importance for the individual and community. Hope is one of the central characteristics of responsible public theology; Christians ought to be a people of hope.

French existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel, German systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann, American biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, and many others aid us in drawing a critical distinction between optimism and hope. Paradoxically, in the Central European

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temple, or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria. Public theologian is someone who—from the perspective of a particular religion—analyzes, discusses, or proposes solutions for issues, conditions, and questions that are of concern and import to those within his or her religious tradition, as well as to the general public, and does so in ways that can be understood and evaluated by, and possibly be persuasive to, society at large." Cited from: "To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 65–66.

[84] See, for example, Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Scott Paeth, E. Harold Breitenberg, and Hak Joon Lee, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Baker, 2013); Kristin E. Heyer, *Prophetic & Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006); Linell E. Cady, *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991); Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

context, one of the most thoughtful distinctions between the two concepts is provided by a non-theologian, then-political dissident Václav Havel. Havel elucidates:

> Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to do good works, and the only true source of breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.[85]

Havel's words were uttered in 1986 after his many years of struggle with communism that included time in prison. Yet Havel did not lose hope that one day he would see his country liberated from the iron grasp of totalitarianism. Astonishingly, three years later, his audacious hope was realized and enshrined in history. Havel will always remain a symbol of hopeful resistance and one of the great examples of practitioners of hope.

The waves of optimism that swept Czechoslovakia in 1989 have long receded. Many think that the current situation in Slovakia does not offer many reasons for optimism, while others maintain that the measure of pessimism in Slovak society is disproportionately high. Regardless of who is closer to the truth, Slovak society acutely needs men and women of hope who can energize their neighbors and lift societal morale. People with different political and religious views rarely interact in the spirit of respect and kindness. Frustration often turns into destructive anger on the anonymized Internet and the public space is being increasingly vulgarized. The country needs responsible public theologians who can warn that the existence and spread of such phenomena does not yield anything good, call for changed hearts and minds, and communicate hope that positive transformation is possible. Undoubtedly, good politicians are indispensable for helping create a good society, but society can never become "good" without a healthy civil society in which engaged churches and committed believers with a prophetic imagination play an important role.

[85] Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 181–182.

From the perspective of the church's public ministry, every generation of Christians has a fight that they did not choose but are obligated to join. Martin Luther King Jr. led the fight against racial discrimination, Desmond Tutu against apartheid, Dietrich Bonhoeffer against fascism, Óscar Romero against poverty, and John Paul II against communism. Each was in his own way a public theologian and prophet who increased the public's awareness of evil, confronted it, and offered hope that the world can become more free, peaceful, and just. It is no coincidence that the biography of Pope John Paul II is entitled *Witness of Hope*, Oscar Romero's is named *The Prophet of Hope*, a collection of sermons and speeches by Desmond Tutu is called *Suffering and Hope*, and a collection of the most important writings and sermons of Martin Luther King is titled *A Testament of Hope*. Like Havel, these practitioners of hope were able to dream of the seemingly impossible and maintain a hope that energized them and ultimately helped them become a force for good in history.

For Christians, hope has two distinct but inseparable dimensions: eschatological and earthly. Here we think primarily of the second dimension, viewing hope as an alternative to and protection from naive optimism and cynical pessimism in the context of Christian social engagement. For example, because human nature does not change, it would be naive to believe that in Slovakia we could eventually completely eliminate corruption, but it would be equally mistaken and morally irresponsible to think that progress in confronting corruption is futile and fail to confront it. The hope that committed human beings can become agents of positive change in society is not based on wishful thinking but historical experience. Although Slovakia faces many problems that must be confronted, the evil twins of fascism and communism were defeated in the 20th century. This progress was neither automatic nor inevitable but depended on people who were motivated by hope to improve the condition of their world.

Cynical pessimism, which is sometimes portrayed as "realism," has no power to inspire and therefore can never become an engine of positive social change; on the contrary, it will slow down or completely hinder societal improvement. On the other hand, naive optimism, which is sometimes associated with "idealism," is not as innocuous as it might seem at first glance. Slovak society needs idealistic realists or realistic idealists, including responsible public theologians—in both broader and narrower sense—who can correctly describe "what is going on," recognize the limits of human action, and simultaneously can dream and are full of hope, energizing those around them in the struggle for the common good. Although we believe that an

ethics of responsibility anchored in the love of God and neighbor rather than an ethics of hope should be the motivating factor for Christian social engagement, we also think realistic hope as the basic orientation of the human heart greatly broadens the path to the positive transformation of society.

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