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Religion in a Communist Consumer Society:
The Case of Kádár's Hungary
by Leslie Laszlo

Professor Laszlo is a member of the Department of Political Science at Concordia University in Montreal. He is the author of several studies on church-state relations in Hungary. The following essay is a somewhat abbreviated version of a paper read in New York City at the August 1980 meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since János Kádár enunciated his famous slogan "Whoever is not against us is with us" and embarked on a national reconciliation,¹ the relationship with the churches and their adherents became an important issue for the Hungarian communists. Vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church, to which the overwhelming majority -- some seventy per cent -- of Hungarian religious believers belong,² the rapprochement was nothing less than spectacular. After nearly twenty years of severe repression of religion and church activity, accompanied by incessant "cold war" type propaganda against the Vatican, the Hungarian government was the very first in the Communist Bloc to sign an agreement with the Holy See in 1964, preceding even Yugoslavia. And again in 1977 János Kádár was the first head of a ruling Communist Party to pay an official state visit to Pope Paul VI. In fact, today spokesmen of the Hungarian government maintain that church-state relations in Hungary are mutually satisfactory and could even serve as a model for the other socialist states.³

While this claim is certainly exaggerated since it ignores the continuing grievances of the Church (such as the severe restrictions placed on religious instruction, the interference of the State Office for Church Affairs with church government, discrimination against believers in university admissions and in certain occupations, etc.) the puzzle remains, why would a professedly atheistic regime which is obliged by its Marxist-Leninist ideology to fight religion, that "opiate" of the people, go out of its way to reassure its own people and the world at large of its sincere desire to live in harmony with the churches and work together with the religious believers in the building of socialism. Even a tentative answer to this question would have to take into account the multifaceted exigencies of both domestic and international politics, which forced even such giants of the Communist world as the Soviet Union and China to permit some manifestations of religion and church life on their territory. To be sure, it is not difficult to find certain features in Kádár's church policies which are meant for the "show" abroad, to enhance his image and to gain favourable publicity for his

country. However, a careful reading of the pertinent documents, declaration and speeches by party and government representatives leaves the impression that in this case foreign propaganda is only incidental: the real target is the people at home, more precisely the millions of believers in the population who were for a long time antagonized and alienated by the crude anti-religious propaganda and harassment of their churches.

The recurring theme in these pronouncements reaching out toward the believers is that, regardless of ideological differences, religious people should not feel like outsiders in the new socialist society; in fact, they are warmly welcome insofar as they are willing to cooperate in the building of socialism. It should be noted that in the past this invitation "to help in the common task of building socialism" was issued together with a caveat, namely that peaceful coexistence with religious believers did not mean approval of their "superstitions", or even indifference towards them. Religion was to be tolerated but it was still regarded as a retrograde, anti-humanistic world view, breeding false consciousness, diverting attention from the class struggle, propagating perverted moral values which had to be combatted by the Communists. In this vein, simultaneously with the rapprochement toward the churches, the regime intensified the ideological training of party cadres and introduced new obligatory courses in Marxism-Leninism at all levels of public education while religious instruction was practically eliminated from the schools. Apparently, they wanted the masses of believers to thrive and work hard for the state, but they did not want religion to flourish, as Mgr. József Cserhádi, the Bishop of Pécs, complained. One can surmise what the underlying rationale was in all this: namely, since there are still millions of believers, let's utilize their brains and brawn, but concentrate all effort on winning over and holding on to the youth, so that the new generation will grow up in the belief system of scientific Marxism-Leninism, uncontaminated by religious superstitions.

More recently, however, a subtle shift has occurred in this reasoning. There has been a relatively sudden and rather surprising discovery to the effect that religion is not only an annoying habit cum superstition of the elderly and ignorant who, incidentally, can be quite decent people and good workers, but that religion might provide man with a code of ethics based on moral values which are sorely needed in present day Hungary. Thus, for example, last year on the occasion of a press conference in Vienna, held by Secretary of State Imre Miklós, chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs, the representatives of the foreign press were given copies of a study by Miklós in which he admitted that "the Church can also carry out a positive role within socialistic society, such as in the defence of peace, in the promotion and encouragement of national unity with socialist content - for which the development of an atmosphere of trust is especially important - in defending societal and personal property, in spreading the ideas of humanism, in love for the people, in the fight against crime, in the promotion of the

progressive traditions of the national inheritance and of cultural values (e.g. in matters concerning the protection of art treasures, the care of sacred scholarly collections, historical studies)." Moreover, according to Miklós, it would be wrong to underestimate the influence of religious faith "in the private life of individuals, in interpersonal relationships, in the defence of certain moral norms and critical views of other norms."⁴

One might suspect, although tangible proof is lacking, that this change in perception and attitudes toward religion might be due, at least in part, to some cold statistics which were brought to the attention of the authorities by the sociologists working on the long neglected discipline of the sociology of religion in Hungary. Here it should be mentioned that the field, at least in Hungary, remains the reserve of Marxist scholars. When the Catholic Church wanted to establish a Pastoral Institute to engage in sociological research within the framework of the Catholic Theological Academy of Budapest, government permission was denied.⁵

Among the sparse information emanating from the professionals, but also from the churches, one can find some rather interesting data. From these I have selected a few samples to illustrate the gravity of the dilemma in which the Communists find themselves when dealing with religion and the churches in Hungary. Due to the dearth of data for the other religious denominations, the focus of this paper will be the Catholic Church. In any case, Catholicism is predominant in Hungary to such an extent that in common parlance, and even in government pronouncements, simple reference to "the Church" always means the Catholic Church.

Religion - an important societal factor

The first thing which had been confirmed by statistical findings is that religion has retained a strong hold on Hungarian society, despite over thirty years of Communist domination. In fact, there are still more Christian believers in Hungary than Marxist-Leninists.

Actually, the census figures after 1949 do not show the religious preference of the population. The various denominations give often widely differing figures of their estimated adherents. There is a general agreement only as far as to admit that the world wide trend of secularization also affected Hungary and as a result the number of believers had greatly declined. In the case of the Catholic Church the optimistic view is that while its losses might reach between one and two millions, there are still about five to six millions of Catholics in the overall population of ten million. In a thorough and detailed study, published in the Catholic monthly Vigilia, a comparison of the vital statistics of the civil register for the year 1971 with the corresponding parish records throughout the country in every single locality yielded the following results: on the occasion of the three foremost events of life -- birth, marriage, and death -- a surprisingly high percentage of the total population continues to call upon the Church to administer the sacraments of baptism (60.5%), holy matrimony (37.3%) - here it must be noted that divorcees cannot be remarried in the

Catholic Church), and last rites (60.8%).⁶ If one would add to these figures the likely number of Protestants who take their infants to the baptismal font, marry in church, and give their dead a Christian burial, one could say that in today's Hungary between 70 and 80 per cent of the population retain at least some ritual ties with their respective churches.

In the case of the above three ceremonies one should take into account, of course, family pressure, local customs, and the sheer weight of tradition. In other words, one should not take the high figures as indices of true religiosity. When in a poll a carefully selected cross section of the public was asked, "are you a religious person?" of the 9,000 people over 20 years of age only 46.0% replied in the affirmative, 46.6% said no, 5.8% could not decide, and 1.6% did not reply.⁷

Statistics about practicing Christians are even less impressive. In Budapest out of more than a million Catholics only about 100,000 go to church on Sunday, and only between ten and twelve per cent of the children are prepared for first communion. Overall, it is said that the number of committed, practicing Catholics is no more than about a million and a half for the entire country, i.e. about fifteen per cent of the population.⁸ Of course, this is still a respectable figure which would compare favourably with many Western societies, and it still exceeds the membership of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party which numbers some 800,000.⁹

Realization of this continuing hold of religion on a large segment of the population must have contributed to the ideological formula arrived at by the second colloquium organized by the East European practitioners of the sociology of religion at Prague in 1968. The participants concluded that religiosity is a social phenomenon which survives even in a socialist society, therefore one must include the believing masses and their churches in the program of building socialism, not exclude them. Simultaneously, the need for a Marxist-Christian dialogue and for further sociological studies of religion was recognized.¹⁰

The social ills of a consumer society

What lent special urgency to the call for a united effort to build socialism was the realization that there were, indeed, great obstacles on the road toward a better society. During the 1960's, when Kádár's Hungary after many years of penury entered a degree of prosperity, and when many of the shackles restricting the acquisition of private property were removed by the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) and the doors seemed to have opened for the average man to strike it rich and join the affluent nouveau riche of socialist Hungary, parallel with the rapid decline of religion a vulgar materialism increasingly took hold of large segments of the populace whose chief goal in life became material possessions and la dolce vita. Few of them, however, have striven to realize their dreams by hard work. Popular

belief, based on observation of easy-to-find notorious examples, says that there are better and quicker ways to success and riches. Corruption, the greasing of palms, cheating on the job, embezzling, and stealing of public property became so widespread that it is almost accepted as normal behaviour for smart folk. At the same time those who cannot make it, sink in the stupor of alcohol, absent themselves from work, often end up on skid row, or commit suicide. The picture which the newly emancipated sociologists discovered and presented to the public in journals and even in the daily newspapers, was truly shocking and certainly beyond anything the Party and the government had cared to admit even to themselves. After all, no country, and even less one which calls itself socialist, would want to brag about such sorry records as having the lowest birthrate, but the highest rate of suicides in the world,¹¹ and probably the worst problem of alcoholism: it is said that between half a million to a million men and women are severely affected by alcohol, while about 150,000 can be regarded as alcoholics proper, among whom the male-female ratio is 5:3.¹² Work discipline is almost non-existent and productivity is abysmally low. These are the symptoms of a seriously ill society, even if to the outside world Hungary presents the picture of the show window of the Communist world, with its happy go-lucky people, considerable degree of individual and artistic freedoms, and fully stacked magazine shelves, which even its critics describe as "the merriest barracks in the Soviet camp".

Bishop Cserháti's challenge

This then was the somber background to the remarkable dialogue which took place in 1976/77 between the Party's chief ideologue and cultural czar, Deputy Premier György Aczél and the bishop of Pécs, Msgr. József Cserháti. There is no place here to go into details of their widely publicized exchanges; suffice to say that to Aczél's invitation to the believers to join in the task of defending world peace and of building socialism, Bishop Cserháti replied that if the regime wanted sincere cooperation, it should stop offending the feelings of the believers by its constant attacks, and even ridicule, of their most sacred convictions. Why not, asked the bishop, end the deeply humiliating treatment of the believers as "second class" citizens subject to various kinds of harassment and discrimination. Instead the government should aim at restoring their pride and self-esteem which is so necessary for the good performance of any job, by openly acknowledging the positive values of ethics and morality which Christian believers contribute to society. This would, of course, necessitate also the granting of greater freedom to the Church in its mission to strengthen those values among the adults and inculcate them in the children in teaching them the catechism of Christian faith and morality.¹³

Cserháti's contention that religious believers do, in fact, follow moral precepts to a higher degree than non-believers, is supported by the study carried out by a team from

the Catholic Theological Academy of Budapest, cited above in connection with the data on religious practice. By taking the number of suicides, divorces, and abortions, and the incidence of the use of oral contraceptives, and correlating these figures with the intensity of Catholic practice in each city and county, the researchers were able to establish a significant negative correlation throughout the country, without exception, between these two sets of data. In a nutshell, their findings show that where Catholicism is stronger, the rate of suicides, divorce and abortion is definitely and significantly lower. In the case of oral contraceptives the correlation was found less significant - the pill is accepted by Catholics with greater ease than abortion - but even there the indication is clear that the use of contraceptives is less widespread among Catholics.¹⁴ The message is clear: in a country beset by serious problems of suicide, family disintegration, and extremely low birth-rate, and which is faced, as a consequence, with alarming labour shortage, Catholics are apparently better equipped by their faith to cope with life's stresses and to accept family responsibilities. Thus they are fulfilling their duty and obligation to increase and strengthen the human potential of the socialist state better than others do.

One can assume that a similar discovery, namely, data showing positive correlation between religiosity and moral behaviour that is desirable from the point of view not only of the Church but also of the government, might have been made also by Marxist sociologists; however, as has often happened to their announced projects, publication did not follow. Anyhow, it would be somewhat embarrassing for them to come out with such findings because, assuming that the first statement, i.e. "religion enhances morality" was proven, then the reverse must also hold, i.e. "the absence of religion has negative effect on morality". What a Pandora's box for a true Marxist-Leninist to open!

Coming back to Bishop Cserháti's challenge, it is interesting to note that it was not ignored, or rejected outright, as it would have been in the past. In fact, the authorities seem to have come around, at least halfway, to accepting his suggestion. As I have already shown in the beginning of my essay, Secretary of State Imre Miklós now talks about the churches' role "in the defence of certain moral norms", their positive role within socialist society "in their love for the people", "in defending societal and personal property", "in the fight against crime", etc. In similar vein Professor József Lukács, the foremost philosopher of atheism in Hungary, the editor of Világosság, lecturing on "Churches and Religiousness in Socialist Hungary" at the Political Academy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, conceded that religion could perform a useful social function. It is by no means a negligible social force which "preserves certain moral principles", especially in the realm of human and family relations.¹⁵

To date this change of attitude, while significant, is still half-hearted and cannot be regarded as unequivocally sincere. A big stumbling block remains in the way of true reconciliation and fruitful cooperation between church and state, and this is the question of the youth.

The youth

The overwhelming majority of all studies done by the Hungarian sociologists of religion is focussed on the youth. Their data show that the most rapid secularization, the steepest decline in religiosity, has been registered among the young, especially the students. For example, according to the results of a poll taken among working and student youth between sixteen and twenty-five years of age, reported in the November 1968 issue of the widely read literary monthly Kortárs, only 32% said that they believed in God, one per cent was unsure, and 66 per cent described themselves as materialists. Other inquiries show even lesser figures, between 15 and 20 per cent of believers among high-school and university students.¹⁶

It seems that religiosity is in inverse ratio to the educational level and years of schooling. Thus by completion of junior high school, the percentage of children still believing drops from the original 60 per cent in first year to 35.5 per cent. By the time of graduation it is 21.4 per cent; after that at the university it remains fairly constant, between 18 and 20 per cent.¹⁷

The Party takes a certain satisfaction in these results. It even claims credit for weaning away the youth from religion which it identifies with false consciousness and unreal idealism, positively harmful to the development of the new socialist man. In reality, the Communists have little reason for too loud a jubilation and self-congratulation. The very same data show that the youth which abandoned its religious heritage, did not automatically turn to the officially propagated Marxist-Leninist belief system. Far from it: while the number of Marxist atheistic youth is estimated to be 10-15 per cent at the maximum, the vast majority of young people in Hungary today, well over 60 per cent in all polls that have been published, are found to be totally indifferent, without any belief whatsoever, and if they call themselves "materialists" that term has nothing to do with Marxist philosophy:¹⁸ it simply means that they are only interested in money and what money can buy, comfort, pleasure, and sex, in other words what Marxists disdainfully describe as "vulgar materialism".

If this were only an intellectual attitude or passing fad! The sober truth is that it is rather both the symptom and a self-perpetuating cause of the grave societal ills already mentioned: the low work discipline, alcoholism, disintegration of the family, widespread corruption, theft of public property, and so on. Of course, these are not new phenomena (they have been deplored and castigated by the Party for years) but now it turns out that these failings - once said to have been the remnants of bourgeois-capitalistic society -- are even to a greater degree characteristic of the young generation that has been educated and shaped by the socialistic system. That this is so has been demonstrated again by the data collected by sociologists and by the merciless figures on growing juvenile delinquency.¹⁹

There are no secrets any more: the Hungarian public is bombarded by a spate of articles appearing in periodicals and in the daily press, by round-table discussions on the radio and dramatic shows on TV depicting the nihilistic, cynical hedonistic young people wearing jeans, playing rock music and dancing in discos, young people whose only goal in life is to own a motorbike, or an automobile, and live the sweet life of pleasure.

No compromise on the youth

Although János Kádár addressing the 12th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party last spring himself complained about those young people who have "negative attitudes, such as indifference, in the case of some people even cynicism, and the tendency to seek an easy life",²⁰ there is no admission of failure, nor a call for help addressed to the churches. The Communists stubbornly and desperately cling to their faith that it is they alone who should mold the young minds. They still hope against all evidence that they will succeed in educating the youth in the Marxist-Leninist ideology and imbue them with the supposedly superior morality of Communism. In this case there seems to be no room left for compromise with the churches which also insist on their mission to win the souls of the young. If anything, the shackles on religious instruction are tightened even further while Communist indoctrination is intensified. Thus, in spite of the official assurances about the satisfactory church-state relations in Hungary, a muted tug-of-war for the youth continues.

Enter the Pope

An interesting footnote: Pope John Paul II has now entered the debate. In his second letter to the Hungarian episcopate, dated Easter 1980, he called on the Hungarian Catholics to insist on their right to have religious instruction in the public schools.²¹ The effect of this move is certain to stir up controversy, upsetting the delicate balance worked for by László Cardinal Lékai since he became Archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary in 1977. His policy has been not to insist on the legally assured rights of parents and the Church to have religious instruction in the schools - this had become a hopeless endeavour - but instead to organize classes of catechism on church premises. Although this "Sunday school" type activity has been also placed under strict control by the state - the size of the classes, the frequency of the meetings, and the scope and method of the teaching are all narrowly circumscribed and subjected to frequent inspection - Lékai seems to have been confident that this route will prove more passable, and in any case less irritating for the Communists and thus more easily tolerated by them than religion in the public schools. Whether the Pope's call to the faithful is a sign of his displeasure with the timidity of the Hungarian bishops (it was widely reported that Cardinal Wyszynski reproached the Hungarian Primate for exactly that) or a skilful ploy to strengthen the

bishop's hand vis-à-vis the regime which places great value on its relations with the Vatican, we do not know. What effect it will have on the Hungarian situation, only time will tell.

Conclusion

The thesis of this paper is admittedly tenuous: the data are, as yet, too few to be sufficient to speak of any radical change in Communist views and policies toward religion and the churches in Hungary. However, just as the hard-pressed Stalin gratefully accepted the moral and material help of the Russian Orthodox Church during the Great Patriotic War, there are definite indications, as I have tried to show in this paper, that the Hungarian Communists are beginning to appreciate the positive moral values of Christianity in their combat against the "vulgar materialism" of today's consumer society. The time might be near when they will no longer be ashamed to call upon the churches for help in their battle against the many ills plaguing their much vaunted socialist society. If indeed this is the direction in which church-state relations are heading, we might be witnessing the beginnings of extremely interesting and important developments.

FOOTNOTES

1. See my chapter "Towards Normalisation of Church-State Relations in Hungary" in Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, edited by Bohdan R. Bociurkiw and John W. Strong (London: Macmillan, 1975) pp.292-313.
2. In 1949, the last time the census contained information about religion, 70 per cent of the population was Catholic, 22 per cent Calvinist, 6 per cent Lutheran, and just over one per cent Jewish. The remaining one per cent consisted of Eastern Orthodox, Unitarians, Baptists, Methodists, and a small number of non-believers.
3. This is the theme of the official publication Staat und Kirchen in Ungarn ("State and Churches in Hungary") (Vienna: Ungarisches Pressebüro Wien, 1977).
4. The study first appeared in the January 1977 issue of Világosság ("Light"), the monthly for the propagation of the "materialist world view"; was reprinted under the title "Beziehungen Neuen Typus" ("New Type of Relations") as the lead article in the above mentioned government publication, Staat und Kirchen in Ungarn, pp.5-13. Quotations on p.9.
5. There is, however, a Hungarian Institute for Sociology of Religion (HIS) in Vienna, Austria, founded and directed by the Jesuit fathers Emeric András and Julius Morel, which tries to remedy the situation by collecting and publishing data concerning Hungarian Catholicism.
6. Béla Csanád, "A katolikus vallásosság mérése hazánkban" ("Measuring the Degree of Catholic Religiosity in Our Country") Vigilia, XLI (May 1976) 294-299.

7. Tamás Nyíri, "Világi keresztények" ("Secular Christians") Vigilia, XLI (May 1976) 303. Nyíri quotes the figures from the research done by M. Tomka.
8. Ibid., p. 306.
9. According to Nyíri, "Secular Christians", p.307, no more than 7-8 per cent of Hungarians are Marxist-atheist by conviction.
10. Jenő Bangó, "Vallásszociológiai kollókvium Budapesten" ("Colloquium on the Sociology of Religion in Budapest") Katolikus Szemle, XX. No. 3 (1968) 274.
11. Although the birthrate has risen from the 1962 low of 12.9 per 1,000 inhabitants to 18.4 in 1975, but regressed again to 15.0 in 1979. Cf. Statistical Pocket Book of Hungary, 1977, p. 7., and Statisztikai Havi Közlemények, January 1980. The rate of suicides passed the figure 40 per 100,000 inhabitants.
12. To the already large body of literature dealing with the many ills of Hungarian society some startling revelations were added in recent years about the existence of widespread prostitution and a large and growing Lumpenproletariat of jobless drifters. These subjects were taboo in the past since neither group is supposed to exist in socialist countries. Reports on prostitution are from time to time published in the press destined for the general public, e.g., in Hétfői Hírek, 31 July 1978, Magyar Hírlap, 5 August 1978, Élet és Irodalom, 5 May 1979. A dramatic report on alcoholism, vagrancy and people on the skid row, appeared in Élet és Irodalom, 4 February 1978.
13. The essay by Aczél and three articles by Cserháti, of which the last one was an answer to Aczél, were reprinted (in German translation) in Staat und Kirchen in Ungarn, pp.15-67.
14. Csanád, "Measuring...", pp.300-303.
15. Népszabadság, 13 June 1979, pp.4-5.
16. Jenő Bangó, "Vallásszociológia Magyarországon" ("Sociology of Religion in Hungary"), Katolikus Szemle, XXII, No.2 (1970) 143-155.
17. Nyíri, "Secular Christians", pp.303-304.
18. Ibid., pp.304-307.
19. See "Juvenile Delinquency an Increasing Problem" in Radio Free Europe, Hungarian Situation Report/32 (20 December 1978), pp.6-10. Cf. Statistical Pocket Book of Hungary 1977, p. 209.
20. Quoted by Ernst Kux in "Growing Tensions in Eastern Europe", Problems of Communism, XXIX. (March-April 1980) 35.
21. The Pope's letter was first published in an edited version by the Catholic information bulletin Magyar Kurir, on April 29, 1980. Much of the vigour of the original was carefully toned down by artful translation. His Holiness was not amused. Under Vatican pressure a full and accurate translation was published on May 11 in the Catholic weekly Új Ember.