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Emmerich András

University of Vienna

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THE HUNGARIAN PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE

Emmerich András

Emmerich (Imre) András, S. J., was born in 1928 in Csikszereda, Romania. Joining the Jesuit order in 1947, he studied theology in Szeged, Hungary, and Innsbruck, Austria, where he was ordained a priest in 1959. Since 1962, he has been the director of the Hungarian Church Sociological Institute in Vienna. In 1974, he received his doctorate in sociology at the University of Vienna. He co-authored (with J. Morel) Bilanz des ungarischen Katholizismus (Munich, 1969), and wrote Handbuch des ungarischen Katholizismus (Vienna, 1975).

If we wish to investigate the social role and responsibility of Christians in Hungary today, that is, under the prevailing intellectual and political circumstances, we must make several things clear at the outset. First of all, there are a series of problems in this connection, which do not concern only Hungary in particular. The assumptions which have resulted from social and spiritual developments in the country would also have to be analyzed. One would have to concern oneself with the papal encyclicals, Populorum Progressio, Pacem in Terris, and Octogesima adventiens, which have opened a number of new perspectives for Christians.

We would like to view the question here primarily from the empirical side, starting with actual practice, trying to ascertain under what conditions a dialogue between Christians and Marxists in Hungary is carried on, and in what areas results of the collaboration can be seen. Where original inquiries are lacking, we can support our analyses with published reports and articles.

According to the 1971 Small Dictionary of Religious History, the concept "dialogue" means "intellectual exchange between Marxists and Christians for the purpose of revealing possibilities for common action." In the second edition of this dictionary, two years later, this rather-too-pragmatic definition is extended by the addition that also to be understood under the word "dialogue" is the intellectual exchange between "the hierarchy and the faithful of the Catholic churches as well as the different Christian churches and non-Christian religious bodies." As a further purpose of the Christian-Marxist dialogue, the "search for potential rapprochement" was also mentioned. So, from the fairly significant modifications promulgated by the country's Marxists, we can see that there is a lack of clarity among the pragmatists who engage in dialogue as a vocation concerning how the term "dialogue" is to be understood. Nonetheless, we can confidently proceed from the first definition which clearly reflects its political nature: intellectual debate for the purpose of clarifying possibilities for common action. Therefore, we now wish to as-
certain under what conditions Christians and Marxists in Hungary today can enter into conversation with one another and what form of action they can undertake in the interest of achieving common goals.

As the most important thing in this regard, the fact should be mentioned that Christians as a group can enter into dialogue only if they accept certain assumptions. We cannot speak here of a dialogue between free partners in the Western sense, where the Christian side wants to have its fundamental position understood on the basis of its inner persuasion or as emanating from assumed or experienced insights. The possibilities for common action take their direction first and foremost from the carrying out of a certain political program, especially from consideration of just how far the Christian counterpart could be drawn into the political program of "participation in the construction of the socialist society." The program itself cannot be the subject of debate; the political program is determined exclusively on a scientifically determined, objective basis (but, actually, by the prevailing power position). The possibilities which might be revealed in the course of intellectual exchange are, therefore, largely limited, if not prescribed. It is because of this point that Christian-Marxist dialogue draws the most criticism. The unequal position of the partners, the lack of equality, poses not only a cosmetic problem, but also places a heavy burden on the discussion. Dialogue only makes sense if it is not a mere exercise, but is actually a means to practical action.

One can actually say that a certain characteristic path is being followed in the Hungarian Christian-Marxist dialogue. If we consider the fact that not long ago a war against the church, carried out with police and administrative resources, was the order of the day, as revolutionary excesses and arbitrary measures in the era of the cult of personalities characterized church politics in Hungary, then the fact that we have progressed to the present methods of more subtle surveillance can be regarded as a certain advance—though not a distinct improvement—for the benefit of the church. On the basis of prior experiences, in fact, we have no reason to display much optimism. But it would be wrong—and also harmful to the church in Hungary—to rule out from the start the possibility of reasonable progress.

One of the fundamental factors in the Hungarian Christian-Marxist discussion is a given situation: the Christian faithful of Hungary are also citizens of a Marxist-ruled state. The Communist regime, whose ideology is based entirely on Marxism, and the community of Christians, that is, the church, are forced to live with each other. Dialogue is absolutely necessary in order to bring about understanding as well as awareness of the basis for possible coexistence "in order to
search for what unites and not for what divides." In Hungary (but also in the West) transforming prejudices into an appreciation of actual contrasts is a necessity of life. The course of mutual experience must be directed to consciously accepted ways of behaving. Methods must be worked out for the neutralization of conflicts; a definite basis of mutual trust must be created, if for no other reason than that the life of the church must not be allowed to be exhausted in struggles centering around the state. The church should, rather, generate enough energy for its own development. This must be viewed as its primary interest, so that the church functions effectively. We must not allow ourselves to forget that the church in our day does not have the sole task to dialogue with Hungarian Marxists—in which we include all aspects and accompanying phenomena of religious politics—but also faces the multiplicity of tasks connected to aggiornamento. These tasks arise out of industrial innovations and secular changes. Comparative research has proved that the challenge of the latter problem areas is much weightier than the entire question of religious politics.

The greatest contradiction in the area of Christian-Marxist dialogue in Hungary probably concerns the personalities of the dialogue partners. The Marxists in power have limited their dialogue partners to a circumscribed number of people, namely, the bishops and priests—or, stated more precisely, the peace priest movement. Lay people are not accepted as dialogue partners. Naturally, it is not the task of Marxists to put into effect the religious concept of the "people of God," including the laity, which was placed so strongly in the forefront by Vatican II. It is, nonetheless, serious that the Marxists are well on the way to dividing their Christian dialogue partners from their "base" by their one-sided strengthening of the peace priest movement, by their effort to preserve the already tradition-bound bishop's aula and the definite aura of the parishes. This means that the discussion takes place on a high level, as if undisturbed by the interests of lay people, who often have no idea of its existence, even though aspects of their religious lives are being modified.

But the composition of the Marxist dialogue partners is likewise not without its contradictions. The majority of the present discussion leaders from the Marxist camp are members of the political "old guard," who do not always fully assimilate or carry out decisions made on the highest level. From the Marxist perspective, the dialogue is certainly not a central concern. Correspondingly, the carrying out of the decisions of superiors does not hold a high priority with such "intentionally slow-witted" party functionaries. Often, individual measures are taken which run contrary to the official position. The comfortable solution consists of taking advantage of the vulnerable Christian clergy by means of adminis-
trative procedures. Often insuperable pragmatic difficulties are raised in implementing stated and recognized rights; force is used against people who insist on the letter of the law. All of these are circumstances which the contradictory situation reflects all too clearly.

In this connection, it should also be mentioned that the Marxist institution which was created and well organized in the past to police and combat the church, and which functioned to carry out the old political aims against the church, has not been dismantled as part of the process toward dialogue. Following Parkinson's Law for organizations, the institution helps itself by creating work for itself as it pleases.

The intellectual level of the dialogue can be characterized in many respects as quite impressive. On the side of the Roman Catholic Church, among others, several articles by Bishop József Cserháti have appeared in both Catholic journals, Vigilia and Uj Ember. These journals continually print articles about the Christian-Marxist dialogue. The best expert on the church's side at present is Thomas Nyíri, Professor at the Theological Central Academy in Budapest, who is also the appointee of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference as the national representative to the Secretariat for Non-Believers, which has been led for a considerable time by Cardinal König of Vienna. A very interesting initiative, begun because of the movement toward dialogue, is represented by a task force called into being by the peace priest movement of Szabolcs-Szatmár, which has published its own book about the Christian-Marxist dialogue—The Christian in a Socialist Society.

On the Marxist side, the most significant group to mention is the research team of religious criticism which functions within the framework of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. One of the leading personalities of this subject matter is the chief editor of the periodicals Világposság and Filozófiai Szemle, József Revai. The research team began its work in 1966; in 1971, it laid out its research program for the next fifteen years in which, among other things, a scholarly presentation of the fundamental principles of politics toward the church is anticipated. The research team derives encouragement in its work and development from the fact that the political leadership supplies it with projects and uses its research results. The reduction of old administrative procedures in church politics and the substitution for them of newly-worked-out and more refined intellectual methods—in some senses more dangerous for the church—can be traced to the preliminary studies of this team. Among them is, for example, the subject area in the schools entitled "Fundamentals of Our View of the World," which was established in 1969 and introduced as a kind of "catechism." A further forceful initiative was carried out on
the order of the Ministry of Culture in all regions of the country with the establishment of organizational offices for social celebrations. These offices arrange social events, so-called socialist ceremonies, using large financial resources, above all in connection with weddings, name-giving celebrations, and funerals. In this case, the Christian-Marxist dialogue points up clearly an area of competition, in which the Marxist side is making use of intellectual as well as administrative means.

In summary, one could characterize the intellectual discussion between Christians and Marxists as follows: While the efforts of Marxists are directed to conclusive arguments ("The materialistic view of the world is correct."), the Christians have a more defensive posture ("People can also participate in the construction of socialism on the basis of Christian ethics."). This conclusive or defensive tone is characteristic of the current formulation in church politics as a whole whereby the church is supposed to have "found its place within the socialist society." The adjectives, "conclusive" or "defensive," are applied according to whether the statement is being made by a representative of the state or of the church.

In the everyday Christian-Socialist dialogue, the strength of Christianity is revealed over and over. The moral behavior of Christians in society simply puts the behavior of non-religious people in the shadow. Christians are more aware of responsibility, more honorable, and more reliable. Since these virtues are of great significance in economic affairs, the Marxists--operating on the principle of utility--expect the functioning church to place particular emphasis on singling out and teaching these virtues. Christians have achieved the task of proving to those who are not among the faithful that they were and are very capable of overcoming societal difficulties (persecutions, prejudices). They have demonstrated that they possess significant inner strength where individual problems are concerned, that their family life is better than that of non-believers, and that they possess more love, trust, hope, ability to forgive, and humanity—all of which are moral values which are as desirable for Marxists as they are for Christians.

A large question mark for Hungary's Christian-Marxist dialogue is the attitude of the young. They have not internalized the Marxist-offered picture of humanity despite the radical obstruction of religious interpretations of the world. They sympathize with religious groups, feeling themselves drawn instinctively to Christian ideas and values.

Translated from the German by Dr. Erlis Glass, Rosemont (PA) College