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THE CHURCH IN SOCIALISM*

by Károly Tóth

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I

Prior to defining the theme "The Church in Socialism," a few observations should be introduced which should help to determine the approach, demands and required methodology for the treatment of the questions related to the theme.

1. This exposé is neither theoretical nor abstract, but rather an attempt to discuss the real church in real socialism. One must avoid all idolization [Schwärmmerei] and look reality in the face if one wants to recognize it as it really is. Difficulties should not be concealed, but one must also have the courage and the clarity to publicize all true achievements in this sphere.

2. It would be beyond the scope of this discourse to present a detailed historical survey of the phases in the development of the problems under review. Nevertheless, it will sometimes be useful to make a few historical references, although the task here undertaken should rather be considered as an attempt to evaluate the experiences to date of the churches in socialism.

3. Naturally the findings and assertions which follow are based first and foremost on experiences gathered in the Hungarian People's Republic, that is to say, on the development of the relationship between a socialist society and the Hungarian Churches between 1945 and the present day. This analysis is of course complemented by the diverse experiences of the Christian Peace Conference and other ecumenical bodies. In short, what I will treat is, in a sense, sketchy and fragmentary; it requires elaboration and above all discussion.

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II

In discussing the church and socialism and in considering all that we know about them, it should on no account be forgotten that these are not two self-contained, monolithic entities. Both—the church as much as socialism—differ considerably from country to country as a result of the influences of different national characteristic and cultural heritage, and—as far as the churches are concerned—denominational and faith-related historical conditions, which have stamped them distinctively. In addition—and with regard to the socialist countries—it is worthwhile to remember that there are already several non-European countries which have recently chosen the road to socialism, and in which church-state relations are still very young—or as we might say, in statu nascendi. The Christian population is in a minority in almost all of these countries, with the exception of Ethiopia. Since the non-Christian religions play a considerable role, the situation is more complicated.

2) When discussing socialism, we are really using the plural form. At the same time it must be stressed that socialism cannot be identified with any one particular country. Nevertheless, socialism is unified in the sense that a common point of reference, a common direction, exists for all socialist countries, which is irrevocably linked in the eyes and hearts of millions of people with the hope of liberation, justice and decent conditions for human development.

3) The relationship between religion (the church) and socialism, in all their different manifestations, is not a static relation: it is a dynamic process in which the basic principles in each case remain constant, while at the same time it is possible, and indeed necessary, for them to be clarified and deepened. Experience shows an undeniable common learning process which has permanent communication as its precondition. The results and consequences in terms of development of this praxis-oriented learning process are of great importance, and what matters is that they should be thought out theologically and philosophically in order to answer appropriately the exigencies of the historical development.

4) In the wake of this it must be said that in recent decades we have come a long way from the basic attitudes first assumed in the mutual relationship between the socialist governments and the churches in their
respective countries. Nearly 20 years ago Martin Niemöller appropriately remarked that one could characterize the relationship between the church and socialism at the time of the emergence of socialism as a combination of two basic attitudes: "A socialist can never become a Christian, and a Christian will never be a socialist."\(^1\) At that time the socialist position was frequently characterized by a simplified interpretation of the churches, whereby in the course of a number of years or decades, once the economic, social and cultural structures and conditions of the bourgeois society had been dismantled, religion (the church) in socialism would disappear. As we know, this did not come to pass. At the same time, however, it must also be clearly understood that the basic conception of many Christians and churches who held that the church could only exist in a bourgeois society has also proved untrue. One of the most dangerous consequences of this ahistorical approach was—and to some extent still is—the churches' "defense reflex" with regard to socialism. At that time, years ago, only a very few theologians could see, in a kind of prophetic vision, that the positions and expectations of both sides were inappropriate. In Hungary, for example, it was Albert Bereczky, and in Prague, Josef L. Hromádka. Bereczky said the following: "The Church cannot be coupled with any one social order." Professor Hromádka used different words, but the message was the same:

> It must be stated clearly that the Gospel and the Living Church of Jesus Christ are not dependent upon any external order, that they rise majestically above the ruins of the old civilization and social order and give Mankind the courage and all the freedom and love needed to enable him, on the threshold of a new socio-political experiment, to make a new beginning.\(^2\)

III

The separation of the churches from the old feudal and bourgeois social structures was, undeniably, a protracted, complicated and painful process, rendered more complex still by the mistakes made or tolerated by both sides. On the one side, the churches did not want to believe that socialism was viable, and many Christians were encouraged in the erroneous belief that socialism was merely a passing phenomenon. On the other, the administrative methods adopted by the representatives of the
Marxist party on the assumption that such methods would serve to render religion and the church superfluous, were doomed to failure. This mistaken tendency was further reinforced by the theory of the withering away of religion which, in its turn, presented the enemies of socialism with a cheap, quasi-argumentative excuse for the "justification" of anti-communism.

It is important at this point to take into account two particular points of view. Socialism's struggle against the backward political positions of church thinking was misunderstood by the church as a struggle against religion as a whole; and the aforementioned theory of the withering away of religion afforded a hasty and unjustified opportunity to those who wished to extinguish religion by the use of administrative measures.

All in all, an important result of this complicated development was that in its course, the churches returned to their real vocation: preaching the Gospel and giving loving support to those who had fallen victim to the historical processes of change, without awakening false political hopes in the process.

The churches had to learn to appreciate that the holding of cultural and social privileges, a role which they had maneuvered and held for centuries must now, in socialism, be discharged, and their material essence translated into more humble forms. Educational and cultural activity devolved, for the most part, upon the socialist society as a whole. Nevertheless, the humbler measure of church participation in the cultural and educational life of society by no means implies that the church has set aside its co-responsibility in these important areas, for the preaching of the Gospel is allied—whether we like it or not—with social, cultural and pedagogical aspects of life. It is simply, as I have already indicated, that the distribution of these tasks and—which is at least as important—their legitimation, has changed. This could be illustrated in detail, however a few references should suffice. Although religion can be seen as a matter of private concern, sermons and preaching the faith are public matters; for centuries, public worship has presupposed the general public. Originally, religious services have certain important subordinate functions to fulfil, in the preservation of literary, musical, artistic, architectural and linguistic traditions, and
cultural treasures. Religion and public worship stood in the service of society and the people. They frequently preserved cultural acquisitions and facilitated social progress, for instance through the program of alphabetization introduced by the system of elementary education set up by the Protestant reformers. In 1983, the year in which we commemorated Martin Luther, we also recalled Philipp Melanchton, the "Praeceptor Germaniae." That the educational privileges which went hand in hand with the monopoly on public worship were misused by some priestly orders is undeniable; nevertheless, this cannot detract from the important services performed by that institution. Finally, more recent developments should be brought forward to illustrate where the new emphases of church activity lie in the full interest of society as a whole, that is to say, including non-believers: in the diaconal sphere, whose work is aimed at fulfilling certain human and social needs—for example the care of the mentally and physically handicapped, the care of those who are lonely or abandoned without loss of their dignity, among them elderly people who, without the support provided by the prestige of their work and by daily working life, are in danger of losing their stability and self-awareness. It should be made clear that this social service function, or the role of the church as a servant to society, continues in socialism, where, it is true, the antagonisms inspired by class struggle no longer exist, but in whose developmental structures conflicts of a personal nature and physical problems still exist with all their attendant consequences, so that the pastoral services of the churches in handling and overcoming the burdens of such psychical conflicts remain indispensable even in the most modern and progressive living conditions.

To conclude this section of my deliberations, three closing comments:

1. In the course of the process of separation of the church from the old social structures, it became clear—and church history will confirm this—that there have in fact always been two churches: a church of power and elites, and a church of service in love. In socialism, the church of service in love can and must increasingly take the upper hand.

2. Time has shown that the Marxist critique of religion can be very salutary for the church. This critique reveals the deep and painful schism between the noble ideas of religion and the disobedience, or even
denial, of its impulses and goals in practical human life. This is the reason for which many politically active people turned their backs on the church and abandoned it. In socialism, the church has an important opportunity to return to its original calling and, in doing so, to answer the Marxist critique. On his point Nicholas Berdyaev, although he himself showed no particular enthusiasm for Marxism, remarked with good reason: "The Churches carry far more responsibility for the successes of Marxism and the spread of atheism than do the Marxists for the loss of faith on modern life."

3. In the course of the aforementioned separation of the church from the old social structures, many Marxists were forced to recognize, or perhaps to discover, that religion is more than a creation composed of reflexes to the economic and cultural conditions of earlier social forms, living on as a fading remnant in the consciousness of believers. Since the human being is not only a social but also a historical being, whose humanity derives from her or his awareness of history, then religion can be considered the result of long-term, collective, human development processes rather than as a reality sui generis, with the implication that if the signals and content of religion are sufficiently well deciphered, religion could even help to open up new roads to unity, and thereby to the survival of humankind.

IV

The present situation in the relations between the socialist states and their respective religious communities and churches varies from country to country. To be accurate, relations between Marxist parties and churches in non-socialist countries also show definite variation. In this context, there are three possible variations—and only three—which may briefly be characterized as follows:

1. Opposition: the defense-reflex, or even hostility-reflex of the churches to socialism can lead to an antagonistic attitude on the part of Christians and representatives of the church which can take many forms, for example: the frequent mention and enumeration of mistakes made in the socialist development of society. Such remarks are often felt to be Schadenfreude and are relished by their audience. It ought not to be forgotten that the mistakes of socialism in the 65 years of its actual
existence to date are much fewer and less significant than the mistakes and inadequacies which can be attributed to Christianity in the nearly two thousand years of its existence. Such opposition of the church to socialism can also take more sophisticated forms, for example that of aloofness, or of criticism directed at society [this will be discussed later under the prophetic office of the church] and here it is already clear why Karl Barth emphasized so strongly that the political role of the church should not be exhausted in mere negation.

2. The second variation of the relationship in question consists in the mixing or combination of Marxist philosophy and theology, for example in the sense of Leonard Ragaz's Religious Socialists, their supporters and successors. This combination of Marxism and theology, which led Christians to the Social Democrats, brought them as a result into opposition to the Communists after 1917. Over and above this, it is fundamental to recognize that in a liberal bourgeois society the mixing or linking of philosophical ideology and Christian faith represents a far greater danger than the combination of Marxist philosophy and its critique of religion with Christianity, for the very reason that the bourgeois ideologies want very much to appear "Christian" or "religious." Marxism, on the other hand, strictly rejects all ideological convergence, a situation which is frankly beneficial to the real church in real socialism, since any power struggles for greater participation in a dubious ideological partnership are excluded from the outset, and each side is free to develop its own clear intellectual position in the interests of useful, practical cooperation.

3. In the third variation, although no ideological mixture or convergence exists or is striven for, it is still clear that there are certain affinities between the Christian faith and the socialist objectives of Marxism. Basically, both are anxious to develop fully, or to help develop fully, the considerable potential for good which is present in all human beings. However, in the use of the concept "affinity" two temptations must be avoided: firstly, to try or to want to try to effect a primitive legitimation of socialism through the Bible; and, secondly, to tolerate or exploit the misuse of the Bible as an ideological weapon for anti-communism.
I would now like to raise one or two disputed questions which arise and are dealt with repeatedly, in fact almost regularly, in the relationship between the church and socialism:

1. Strictly speaking, the fundamental difference between religion and Marxism (or theology and the church on the one hand and real socialism on the other) is based on the incompatibility of their respective interpretations of the human being, that is, on the opposing positions of their anthropologies. It is well known that the idealistic philosophers Kant, Fichte, Hegel, the theologian Schleiermacher and their followers regarded the human being as a creature who yearns for a higher being (a super-ego) and hopes to free himself/herself from the slavery of temporal and spatial finiteness by aspiring to fulfillment of religious yearning. The anti-transcendentalists, on the other hand, the eminent philosophers Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, and, in another form, Sartre and Herbert Marcuse, renounced transcendence in all its forms and professed the self-realization of the human being.

2. For this reason I consider it necessary to make at least brief mention of the importance of addressing and discussing openly and honestly the problem of what is called human self-realization, for it is a problem which, after all, stands at the very focus of Marxism. I consider it one of the greatest mistakes of Christian theology that it has, until now, merely concerned itself with directing political and social-theoretical criticism at Marxism, without attempting a positive and creative treatment of the thesis of human self-realization. Traditionally, Christian theology has condemned and rejected this non-transcendental self-realization as a presumptuous revolt against God, as the original sin. The question is never raised as to whether this problem can be dealt with from another angle. There are at least three theological points of departure which allow a positive approach:

   a) The thesis that the God-like image in which the human being was created should be understood not as a definite ontological quality, or the existence of a final reality, but as a task which God has given to the human being with the commission to realize God's image in all its fullness. The human being must, in this case, be very active if he/she is to develop his/her humanity fully, the measure of which is oriented to
the likeness of God.

b) The science of biology has confirmed that the human being is no perfect, finished being. Luther made a similar comment about Christians, that "a Christian is always in the process of growing, never in the state of having grown." The realization of human life is a task which lies before us all: this is expressed in such specific theological concepts as Renewal, Change and Rebirth, etc., which can be understood as dissatisfaction with the present state of human development. Further development can only be termed humanization.

c) The other theological thesis holds—in accordance with the disputed idea of creatio continua—that God did not complete the creation of the world and of humanity, but invited humanity to work with God to help bring about the unfinished creation. With respect to this possibility, the question must then be raised as to what extent the institutions of the existing religion act as barriers or communication-blocks between God and the human being, thus hindering the progress of creatio continua. This in turn raises the painful but vital question of whether the wrongly interpreted functioning of religious institutions could perhaps be seen as a denial of God's commandments and as a block to the progress of God's creation (at least in those areas entrusted to human co-work). Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out that there is a considerable difference between humanity's religious striving (which he equates with the concept of God) and the response to this striving given by the religious institutions, a response denying fulfillment (see "Jenseits von Gut und Böse"). Unfortunately it is not possible here to investigate the "non-religious Christianity" of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this point.

3. The problem of atheism must also be addressed openly and honestly. Atheism is, of course, as old as religion itself. When all is said and done, this struggle about the question of God reaches, consciously or unconsciously, deep into each and every soul. St. Paul said that we are all atheoi without Christ (Ephesians 2:12). We are very aware of the atheism of Marxism, and it is all too easily forgotten that practical atheism, which is presupposed or made use of by the bourgeois ideologies, exists in very different forms. Atheism is not a question of theory—for us it is a question of life, a question on which, from a
Christian point of view, it would be foolish to engage in polemics. It is far more appropriate for believers to answer the challenge of atheism with a practical approach in the spirit of Jesus Christ. In making this recommendation it is by no means my intention to make light of the difficulties of these complicated problems; the attempt to overcome everything which checks the possibilities of human communication, and therefore human work on the continued development of creation, lies, understandably, behind my concern.

4. Here, I would like to comment on the prophetic office of the church: it cannot be claimed either that the duty of the church to safeguard this function is superfluous, or that it has already been safely dispatched. However, it must also be recognized that this office of the church can easily lead to the disguising of hostile attitudes, particularly if the church in question has never been critical of the bourgeois societal form. Therefore it is important to begin by setting down the moral basis of the prophetic office of the churches so that under the new conditions—that is from the new position in which there are no privileges, either in the state or in society—this task can be used credibly and effectively to serve all sections of society.

VI.

In the Hungarian People's Republic the relations between church and socialism can be presented most clearly by defining three different levels of activity: 1) the level of official state policy on church affairs, which incorporates all links between government authorities and the leading bodies of the church; 2) the level of academic dialogue; 3) the level of practical cooperation, that is, of manifold social, human and personal links and inter-relations. This last level is also particularly important for the level of academic dialogue because it is well known that the "pure" established interpretations often and inevitably lead to unproductive paralysis and even to enmity if there is a conflict of dogma; on the other hand, the level of cooperation must be prevented from sliding into the opportunism of "mere action," through continued awareness of clear intellectual criteria.

As far as the first level is concerned, the Hungarian government and
party constantly emphasize that the relations between the state and the churches are not only good, but friendly, and that in this way they serve to promote the common good of all Hungarian citizens. In Hungary, with regard to state-church relations, one speaks of a "new quality in relations." This friendly relationship does not mean that there are no further problems, but it does mean that problems can be discussed openly and honestly, and that there is a common concern in solving these problems in the spirit of the good relationship.

It is a question, therefore, of a "new quality" in the relations which form the basis of a domestic policy of agreement. They make it possible for a mutual relation not to be a question of tactics, but rather a result and concomitant circumstance of an honest, open partnership based on firm principles. On this positive basis, all citizens are invited to make their specific contributions, believers and non-believers alike; and believers can participate in the cooperation of this partnership without conflict of conscience, because we are all concerned with a new kind of society for all, which all are building together. The results of this common effort benefit everyone, and the present generation has already shared the fruits of our common concern. None should be asked to wait until later: the difficulties we face today cannot and should not be made light of, far less justified, by hints of future solutions. All parties should take care not to let mistakes intervene in the first place.

It is also emphasized that the objectives of socialism lie in the development of new, more just and more humane social relations and conditions and not in a struggle against religion and that the successes in the construction of socialism should not be measured as successes or progress in a struggle against religion. It is also stressed that the religious Weltanschauung can in no way be countered or overcome by the use of administrative measures, that is, through state restrictions. In other words, the situation cannot come to the point where dividing lines are drawn between believers and non-believers; but, if need be, the differences within the respective groups can be established on the basis of generally accepted ethical norms. 4

Further, it is stressed that the use of recognition of the Principle of Spontaneity, according to which, for a while at least, it was somewhat
undialectically and naively thought that an improvement in individual morality must automatically follow from the improvement of social conditions, should be avoided. In this connection, great emphasis is laid on the fact that precisely in socialism, general ethical principles such as truthfulness, humaneness, helpfulness, politeness, kindness, etc., are accorded importance. Common ethical principles and norms such as these can be described, established and formulated from opposing philosophical points of departure; but this means, too, that philosophical differences and contradictions do not exclude joint, productive cooperation.

With reference to the third level (practical cooperation) it should be added that not all those who turn away from the church automatically become Marxists. There is a 'grey area' of indifference which can be accompanied by more serious problems, particularly for the young. This is because secularization cannot be attributed to Marxism alone; the mainstream of secularization set in with the end of the ascendancy of feudalism in state and society—with consequences reaching deep into the personal thinking and behavior of the individual. It has been shown to be more fruitful for society as a whole not to abandon people, particularly the young, to this grey area of passivity, but to help them on the basis of Christian Church motivation to the recognition and practice of good work ethics, sensible attitudes on the question of collective and personal property, human and responsible morality with regard to the family, non-chauvinistic patriotism, the support of work for peace, a universalism or internationalism geared towards humanity—in short, to help to educate them in thinking and behavior corresponding to the ethical norms of society as a whole. This educational assistance offered by the church in socialist Hungary is not—and this is quite in keeping with state-church relations—first and foremost a religious question. It is a question of the growing-up of an industrious and responsible youth, and we are convinced that the church can make a substantial contribution here. Of course in addition to the moral aspects which have been mentioned, the specifics of Christian faith are also passed on as a basis for long-term serious motivation to responsible thinking and behavior: in this context they cannot be excluded.

With reference to the second level (academic dialogue) mention should be made of the emphasis of the view, held by the Hungarian
Socialist Workers' Party, that in the interest of the policy of alliance, a balanced ideological outlook must be achieved with regard to the real political objectives to be realized, and this means that the ideology must be in harmony with the general policy, or that the statements of ideology must be subordinated to the policy of alliance in society as a whole.

VII.

In conclusion, let me examine the prospects in the relationship between the church and socialism. They can be seen as two lines running parallel which--to retain the geometric metaphor--eventually meet at infinity. Only history--according to Marxists--and only God--according to the Christians--can decide who is right in respect to the future perspective, whether the church will wither away or not. It would be a serious mistake to argue this question to excess, and an even greater one to conduct sanguinary battles on its account, thereby sapping valuable strength from the important and pressing tasks and problems we face. Looking at our positive experiences in Hungary let it be said that for each country an appropriate form of cooperation must be developed independently, taking into account the respective situation, and particular cultural characteristics of that country. However, there ought to be no dispute that religion, or the church, and Marxist socialism are the two strongest intelligent and directional forces of our time, and will remain so for many years to come. Therefore the cooperation between churches and Marxists in socialism should not be the limited concern of individual countries. To continue in this direction, let me point out three areas in which there are particular joint, international tasks to be undertaken by the churches struggling for unity (the ecumenically minded churches) and internationalist socialism, i.e. socialism taking responsibility for all of humanity.

1. Peace work, which, in the interests of saving life on earth, has become the most urgent ethical demand upon all of us, transcending all philosophical and other differences. Humankind must dedicate all its strength to this task.

2. Justice, the realization of which is extremely pressing, particularly in the revolutionary situation in Latin America. There, cooperation
between Christians and Marxists has been shown to be not only possible, but vital.

3. The development of new structures for peace: the broad concept of peaceful coexistence must be developed to ensure that war can, and will, no longer be used as a means of resolving conflicts. Humanity has reached a crossroads. We must decide between the alternatives of total destruction and the use of new, alternative methods of resolving conflicts and securing peace, as I stated in my speech on World Peace at the General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa in 1982:

Human history has reached its crossroads. History teaches us that up to this point, the human race has always been able, in the interests of survival, to adapt itself to natural or technological changes in its environment. The question is still disputed as to whether the settling of conflicts arising from communal life by means of war is a historical category, in other words a characteristic of a particular stage in human development [Westerman], or whether war is an integral constituent of human existence [Clastre]. Whatever the truth of the matter, humanity today faces a choice between the constructive and the destructive use of technological advances: it is in our interests to develop new and peaceful forms of conflict resolution. Nuclear war, and the total destruction of humanity which it implies, can only be prevented if we succeed in giving up war altogether--and by this I mean conventional as much as nuclear warfare. There is not a single historical precedent for our present situation, and therefore it is impossible to find historical models to aid us in the resolution of the problem.

The universal institutions of peaceful conflict resolution, with all their mechanisms, must be built up with this goal in mind. Here is an urgent task for Christians and Marxists alike. It would give the ecumenical concerns of the churches further substance and purpose, for as transnational media for communication with long experience and tradition, the churches have here a great co-responsibility, and their potential--in this area in particular--should not be underestimated.

In conclusion I would like to make the following observations: Both parties or forces--socialism and the church--possess the capacity and the readiness to continue their development and to react and respond flexibly
to any question raised by history. This means that there will be no revision of fundamental ideological or theological (identity-related) positions, and no syncretistic convergence. There will, however, be practical cooperation, introduced, accompanied and evaluated by honest and open dialogue, which is for both—the the church and for socialism—a real historical mandate, a long-term concern with wider prospects, and will remain so.

NOTES


4Josef Lukács, in a work in Hungarian entitled "The Churches and Religion in Socialist Hungary" (Budapest, 1980).