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Editorial: Theology of Servitude?

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Editorial

Theology of Servitude?

In Vol. V, No. 6, we took a close look at some of the burning issues within the Lutheran Church of Hungary. In the editorial I had pointed out that the malady is not restricted to that church alone, but that some other Lutheran Churches in Eastern Europe as well as non-Lutherans have to cope with the strains of a leadership which has conformed too willingly to the dictates of the state.

The first article in this issue carries on the same theme applied to a church in another tradition but in the same country, namely the Hungarian Reformed Church. The article was written by Dr. Joseph Pungur, a former insider of that church who is intimately and extensively acquainted with the painful dilemmas besetting that church. Pungur finds fault with the same "theology of diakonia" which characterizes Bishop Zoltán Káldy's approach, propounded this time by the senior bishop of the Reformed Church Tibor Bartha. As Pungur sees it, this "theology of service" all too readily transformed itself into a "theology of servitude." Pungur also exposes the three layers of supervision and disciplining of clergy who show too much independence, initiative and success. These layers of supervision can rarely be perceived or observed by outsiders and even by many who live in the country who may be generally aware of the government's supervision but are not privy to the mechanism by which it is carried out. As Pungur observes, there are parallels to the Hungarian mechanism in all socialist societies. In some the mechanism of supervision and control works much more oppressively than in the Hungarian case. At the bottom of it is the fundamental question whether the churches and their leaders should cooperate at all with a government run by a party motivated by an ultimate aim of destroying the churches. Some answer this question with a resounding no. They are impatient at the timidity of church leaders and urge more courage.

Others, like some persons of integrity in leadership positions, do not perceive the conflict in such stark terms and perceive changes not only in communist strategy but even in ideological aims. They feel that a careful, gradual approach is most appropriate to a dynamic situation out of which maximum benefit can be gained by not making unrealistic demands.
Another group are those clergy and laity who have entirely appropriated the Marxist analysis of the social situation within and outside the country and who have consciously and deliberately chosen to cast their lot with the communist aims. They do hope that there will be a place, perhaps a modest one, for the church in the future communist society, but they promote the official government analysis that all efforts should be united in preventing church autonomy or more extensive links with what they deem is a fascist United States of America and its capitalist allies.

The second article is by Dennis Carlson who studied theology in Hungary for a year and whose assessment is that the policy of diplomacy and cooperation with a liberalized government is paying off in steadily improving conditions for theological education. This is the first in-depth presentation of theological education in a socialist country published by OFREE.

Thirdly, we present a translation from German of an article by an Austrian writer, Heinz Gstrein, on Albania. This is one of the most optimistic assessments of the religious situation in that country which boasts to be the only completely atheistic society in the world (previously we published articles by Peter Prifti and Gjon Sinishta describing the totally repressive religious policies of the government of Albania). According to Gstrein, the worst period seems to be over and a somewhat more understanding attitude is being taken by a few people in leadership who at least appreciate the role of religion in Albanian history. This apparently does not signal any permission for reactivation of religious institutions but at least the topic is not as taboo as it was in the 1970's. In Albania's religious policies, one can be thankful even for the smallest blessings!

Paul Mojzes, Editor