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CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE IN BUDAPEST

G. Clarke Chapman

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A virtually unprecedented bilateral conference of 8 Hungarians and 8 U.S. citizens took place in Budapest, June 20-25, 1988. The theme was "Changes in the Evaluation of Religion and the Churches in the Last Decade in Hungary and the U.S.A." Chaired by Prof. Paul Mojzes (Rosemont College) and Dr. Tamás Földesi (Dean of the Law School, Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest), the conference was structured to encourage mutual understanding through papers and discussion, but also through the valuable personal experiences of sharing meals, conversation, and a day trip to Lake Balaton and the historic abbeys of Tihany and Pannonhalma.

The conference was financially supported by the New Ecumenical Research Association. The purpose of the conference was to enable an exchange of information and experience on recent trends and evaluations of religious life in Hungary and the United States, with the hope that such an exchange will lead to a dialogue. In the Hungarian group there were four Christians and four Marxists, while in the U.S. group there were seven Christians and one Marxist.

This report will focus especially on the presentations of our Hungarian hosts. Prof. Földesi opened by describing the process of de-Stalinization which began in Hungary after 1953-56 and which is still in process. There have always been two wings of Marxists, the dogmatic and the humanitarian. The early 1960s saw a shift from the former to the latter, as an attempt to save Marxism as a creative philosophy rather than being merely a defender of the political realities. Dogmatic Marxists are those who use only selected Marxist texts and a conceived rationalism, viewing religion as false consciousness and a reactionary guardian of exploitation. Humanitarian Marxists however have a more refined view of the church's social role and moral values, and see religion not as a source of alienation, but as a fight against it. Subsequent discussion prompted the comment that Hungary's great contradiction is that its structures are Stalinist, governed destructively by leaders bereft of ideas, while the distinctive (and majority) brand of Marxism in Hungary is humanist. Like the early Christians, sobered by the delay of the Parousia, the humanistic followers of Marx come to learn by experience. Certainly, it was agreed, socialism encompasses many meanings!

Dr. Károly Proehle, dean of the Lutheran theological seminary in Budapest, reviewed the folk and civil function of reli-
igion in this nation that historically has been 66% Roman Catholic, 21% Reformed, and 4% Lutheran. Vast changes in lifestyle were brought by the 1945 socialist revolution. But in 1958 with the policy of alliance, there began a more positive valuation of religion. By then it was concluded that neither Christianity nor Marxism are going to fade away but both will last indefinitely, and that even though incompatible as worldviews they should live together and work for common goals. The dogmatic bias against religion gave way to an appreciation of the progressive role it has often had in history, as well as in the struggle for reforms today. Now a "theology of a serving church" has emerged, and the number of citizens claiming to be religious has grown from 36% (1978) to 43% (1985).

Three periods of Hungarian church history in the Twentieth Century were outlined by Prof. László Lukács, editor of the Roman Catholic monthly *Vigilia*. 1. The time of "The Triumphalist Church" in power lasted through World War II, in which memories of Christian empire induced an authoritarian religiosity. 2. "The oppressed Church" (1947-1970s) lived under severe restrictions of any activities outside actual worship services, as the state took over most of its former institutions and functions. Improvements in the situation began with the new government in 1957 and after Vatican II, and several treaties permitted more pastoral and even religious education activities. "In many cases: what used to be illegal in the 50s, became tolerated in the 70s and ended in day by day practice in the 80s," even though the long tradition of "Josephinism" (state regulation of even tiny details of church life, named for the emperor Joseph II, 1780-1790) has certainly not disappeared. The effects of this oppression has been to push religion into privatism and inwardness, as Christians (especially in urban areas) find themselves a minority in a pluralistic and increasingly secular era. But there has also been an increase in intellectual interest in the faith among professionals and youth, and more voluntary small groups and lay activity.

3. Finally (1980s) the church is reentering public life. For both church and state the doors are unlocked--but not yet entirely opened. There have been two discoveries: social change does not automatically cause change in human mindset and needs, and new types of poverty and moral illiteracy demand attention. So there are new opportunities for dialogue and Christian social commitment on behalf of justice and love, expressed through aid to the poor and moral education of the young.

Dr. Zoltán Freyó, member of the university’s Research Group Studying the Theory of Religion, spoke on Christianity’s function in producing and preserving culture in Hungary. Marxist theory has changed from its earlier evaluation of religion as an alienating force, and now there is a good deal of new publication of biblical criticism and education in the nation’s religious heritage. Since Vatican II Catholic thinking has also experienced a revival, as exemplified in the influence of Teilhard de Chardin and the theme of humanity’s cosmic mission and responsibilities. Now there is new interest in church history, since in Hungary religion, literature, and political life have been linked ever since its founding by King Stephen (also St. Stephen). An ex-
ample of this fusion is the debate on Imre Madach's 1862 play, "The Tragedy of Man," in which Adam and Eve appear in each successive scene of history. Controversy on theological fundamentals is ageless!

There is no alternative to continuing dialogue, according to Dr. Pál Horváth, leader of the university's Research Group Studying the Theory of Religion. The three successive levels of dialogue are joint service to the world, practical cooperation, and eventually ideological confrontation of ideas. Both believers and nonbelievers must acknowledge the world can be perceived differently. The existence of God cannot be proved nor disproved, and neither can the Marxist theory that religion is a false consciousness. The atheism of Karl Marx was less theoretical than practical, aiming only to overcoming alienation, and now his followers should grant that religion at least intends to attain human happiness and integrity.

Prof. János Kelemen, chairperson of the department of philosophy at the university, used linguistic analysis in a subtle but rich dissection of the nature of faith and knowledge. "Belief that" is contrasted with "belief in," the existential involvement which is basic to our very humanity. Religion is not unconditionally necessary for human life, though under some social conditions it is needed; but it nevertheless expresses something essentially human. Marxism, on the other hand, is a methodology, not a fixed position or dogmatic "pseudo-religion." It is a hypothesis about the substructure of reality, and as such is subject to testing and refinement by experience and scientific evidence. It has no need to answer all questions, so it need not resist answers from other quarters. Dialogue presupposes this shared humility, doubt, and risk.

The changing status of the free churches in Hungary was described by Dr. Jenő Szigeti, a Seventh-Day Adventist and dean of the Free Churches Theological School in Budapest. After centuries of persecution and scorn, churches of anabaptist and pentecostal backgrounds first received legal status in 1945. Indeed, since the typical membership consists of lower class laborers known for their Puritan work ethic, and since small voluntary associations could adapt to the new regime better than the traditional churches, these congregations even enjoyed a certain advantage. But now they must also face the temptations common to sectarians: factionalism, divisive self-pity, and subjective pietism.

Finally, Dr. László Kürti, a bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church, discussed the state of that church in Hungary. The suffering of World War II led to a revival of faith and preaching. More religious instruction is now permitted, and some youth are forming Bible study groups. But even in a secular society, the confessional wounds of past Protestant/Catholic strife remain--as reflected in schoolbooks or a choice of terms even by atheists. The ecumenical movement is retarded in Hungary by this legacy of inter-religious mistrust and by some current Vatican policies, but now there is some pulpit exchange and an agreement by both sides to use in the Apostles' Creed the adjective "universal" (rather than "Catholic") for the church.
The eight Americans, for their part, described to their hosts recent religious developments in the U.S.A. Charles West (Princeton Theological Seminary) characterized the 1970s as a decade of debate about the very basis and values of the nation's common life; by contrast the 1980s finds blacks, women, evangelicals, and liberationists retrenching, each preferring to protect its own special concerns. Monika Hellwig (Dept. of Theology, Georgetown University) discussed the changes in the U.S. Catholic Church through the politicization of the women religious, new power of the U.S. Bishops' Conference, and the influence of Latin American liberation theology. The ecumenical dialogues in North America, their history and present crescendo, were surveyed by Leonard Swidler (Dept. of Theology, Temple University). J. Deotis Roberts (George Mason University) described the background of black churches and their present contribution to a holistic, prophetic, and therapeutic Christian ministry.

Thomas Walsh (director, International Religious Foundation) surveyed the new religious movements in the U.S. as a response of "countersecularization," with special attention to the case of the Unification Church. The new appreciation by U.S. Marxism of religion as a revolutionary force was discussed and carefully documented by Fred Carrier (Villanova University). Clarke Chapman (Moravian College) described the positions on peacemaking of the historic peace churches, "Armageddon theology," the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter, and the Presbyterian and United Methodist churches. Finally, Paul Mojzes characterized the inter-religious dialogues in the U.S. and their several forms and positions on truth claims.

The conference was notable for its friendly sincerity and lack of pretense or mistrust in exchanging views. The first session was devoted not only to introductions, but to the telling by each of one's personal story, and this was most important for setting the proper context for subsequent discussions. Since the meeting was explicitly a bilateral one, each side came to know in some depth the nation of the other, so that step by step the sharing progressed in both the personal and national dimensions. Our Hungarian hosts were most generous with their time and energies, and by the conclusion each participant departed in gratitude for the opportunity of this week's experiences. Surely for those who share in a humanitarian spirit, whether Christian or Marxist, the future must hold promise.
CONCERN FOR THE MINORITY PEOPLES OF ROMANIA

WHEREAS, the 1988 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association has received public and private reports in increasing volume of serious discrimination against ethnic minorities in Romania, including members of Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Unitarian churches and other religious communities; and

WHEREAS, the process of relocating the inhabitants of villages in such a way as to destroy invaluable historic churches, homes, and public buildings violates basic human rights and is a violation of the Helsinki Accords; and

WHEREAS, the relocation is also an abrogation of the Paris Peace Treaty of February 10, 1947 which, among other things, guaranteed an autonomous Hungarian region; and

WHEREAS, neither the U.S. nor the U.S.S.R. should look with equanimity upon the violation of this peace treaty, to which they are signatories and particularly since this discrimination includes education and employment opportunities, religious freedom, the right to travel, and the destruction of cultural documents and artifacts; and

WHEREAS, this discrimination has been a continuing problem; but the proposed eradication of historic villages makes the problem a critical one; and

WHEREAS, the 1988 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association is particularly sensitive to this violation of human rights because of its keen awareness of the most serious disruption in the traditional patterns of life suffered by native peoples of North America;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the 1988 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association expresses its concern for the minority peoples of Romania and particularly at this time for the relocation of village populations.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the 1988 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association urges the President of the UUA to consult with other religious leaders on common action to help prevent these wrongs, and recommends that:

1. the Washington Office of the Department for Social Justice be utilized to request prompt U.S. governmental attention,

2. the UU-United Nations Office be requested to bring these violations to the urgent attention of the U.N. Human Rights Commission and U.N.E.S.C.O. and to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, with the object that the affected minority peoples be accorded official refugee status.

3. the Canadian Unitarian Council be requested to bring this matter to the attention of the Canadian government and to work with other groups and churches in Canada with regard to it,

4. assistance be sought from the principal signatories of the Paris Peace Treaty, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and

5. the President take such other action that he may regard as effective.