László's "Church and State in Hungary, 1919-1945" - Book Review

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humanistic discourse (with few emotional escapades) of the former, and much more analytically
reserved, ‘colder’ tone of the latter. Anyway, I had the impression that the silent layer of both studies is
a typical intellectual dismay and incapacity in the face of the frenzy in their own countries, as can be
observed for example in Ernst Cassirer's posthumous *The Myth of the State* (1946) or Adorno and
Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

It must be emphasized, however, that this was not at the expense of analytical profundity and
validity. The authors’ difficult personal experiences did not spoil their ability for critical and reflexive
thinking on these complex, controversial, and highly delicate issues. Cvitković's and Perica's books are
examples of excellent, analytically sharp studies: intense, precise, critical, convincing, able to point out
general factors and similarities, but not forgetting many important differences and specific cases. As
such, they can be compared with some of the best on these same issues, written or edited so far by
authors like M. Sells, P. Mojzes, S. Vrcan, N. Malcolm, R. Radić or X. Bougarel. If science is to
provide answers and to help make people live better, then studies like these should became a ‘must’ not
only for scholars, but first of all for decision-makers within and outside religious hierarchies. Precisely
because religious organizations were part of the problem, now it would finally be time - instead of
avoiding the responsibility, even complicity - to become part of the solution.

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by Csaba Fazekas.

The publication of this work, which has long been completed in manuscript, in many respects
is a great delight for researchers dealing with ecclesiastical history in Hungary. Despite the fact that
comprehensive monographs have already been published on the topic – the work of Leslie László has
its place in the historiography of the ecclesiastical history in Hungary, as it is a good reference book, an
aid in research as well as in teaching. Research in the field of ecclesiastical history produced several
outstanding results in the course of the 20th century; these findings, however, were not available to
researchers in the English language. Therefore this work summarizes in English the historical
knowledge of the first half of the 20th century concerning the topic.

The author himself gives reasons at some length as to why he felt it possible to publish his
dissertation, which he defended more than three decades ago – in 1973 – at a university in the United
States. He rightly concludes that it is worth rereading the manuscript after some years. And we can also
add that this work is well worth adding to the research and study of ecclesiastical history in circulation.

Anyone could easily rebuke the author (who emigrated in 1950 as a young man of 25) that in
his work he utilized only a limited number of sources, therefore his work is necessarily one-sided. This
criticism, however, is not correct. On the one hand, it is true that documents from the archives were not accessible for him, still Leslie László did use the printed sources as fully as possible. In the large American libraries he read and intensively studied practically everything which was printed about the topic. Had he collected sources for his work in Budapest, his bibliography would have been just as rich, though less complete, but the author used not only the Hungarian sources, but with great competence he also linked the Hungarian data with the international studies and findings of the Christian social and political movements. Furthermore, his statements about the relationship between the church and the state have been confirmed by the documents published in Hungary since, so these statements could definitely not be questioned. We have to mention that the author analysed not only books but also an enormous amount of newspaper articles. He reviewed the published documents of the archives (a good example for this is chapter 3.3), and a further positive feature of the work is that he also used handwritten memoirs. (The latter occasionally substituted for those document which were not available for him, see for example chapter VI).

In appraising Leslie László’s work we have to point out that he could not take into consideration the findings of the growing ecclesiastical research of the past 15 years in Hungary. At one point he uses an unjustly simplified classification describing the ecclesiastical historiography of the past decades, and the Hungarian reader may object that László has overlooked the works of, for example, Jenő Gergely or others. On the other hand, he shows his objectivity by widely adapting the relating literature written after 1945, the written monographs completed with scholarly thoroughness in the same way as certain products of the political propaganda. The historical attitude of Leslie László can be taken as well balanced as a whole. In case of questions concerning the relationship between the state and the church he maintains a fair distance from the sources which he examined, and he gives a competent picture of the different political attitudes. He helps the reader to judge these aspects, but he leaves the audience to decide, an apologetical approach is usually far from him. In certain questions (without doubt these questions are regarded as rather delicate issues) similar to several works on ecclesiastical historiography, he could not resist the constraint of an apologetical or rather publicist, rather than an historical approach. Concerning the relationship between the churches and anti-Semitism, for example, he only accepts in general that the former may have something to do with the latter, and to some extent – with the perceptible self-justifying intention of his church – finds excuses for the high priests of the churches in connection with their participation in voting in favor of the first two anti-Jewish laws in the Parliament. The arguments and data he had collected, however, are not at all convincing concerning the latter, and he could not even modify the doubts regarding the public manifestation of the churches in connection with the Jewish population.

A few words about the volume itself. In the rather lengthy introduction the author – being a catholic priest – points out that he does not take the history of the Christian church independently from the spiritual founder of the Christian church, what is more, he also gives an international overview of
the European historical patterns of the state-church relationship. Generally speaking, in his work Leslie László resisted the great temptation to write an ecclesiastical history in the most literary sense of the word but rather an ecclesiastical-political historiography. In other words not the internal relationship of the churches was put into the focus of attention, but he regarded the church as a social institution in his work and he was searching for the answer: how could this important institution be fitted into 20th-century Hungary among its social and political conditions? We can say that he tried to take all those aspects into account where the state could have any connection with the churches. In this way his monograph became a very thorough political-historical as well as ecclesiastical historical overview at the same time.

Unfortunately the title of the book (State and Church in Hungary, 1919-1945) is rather misleading, as the first chapter does not talk about the period given in the title but about the preceding decades. László followed an excellent procedure when he went back to the roots of the 19th century bourgeois changes. He provides details about the religious policy put on a new foundation in 1848 as well as about the acts passed by the liberal state in the second half of the 19th century, and about the debates on ecclesiastical policy. He is very good at illustrating the changes at the turn of the century, how did the social questions come into the limelight, the periods of the First World War and the revolutions and all those reactions which the churches gave as an answer to these challenges. Among the tendencies evoked by the renewed Catholic politicising, he emphasised Christian Socialism and the position represented by Ottokár Prohászka.

The period between 1919-1944 is described in three chapters of the book. The author offered a new but very good idea for the analysis of the Horthy-era. In the second chapter he summarized the events of the so called ‘Christian course’ between 1919-1922, then breaking with the rigid chronological approach, he wrote two thematic chapters. From an ecclesiastical point of view it is really worth separating the few long years of the foundation of the Horthy-era from the period of consolidation and stabilisation of the regime. The third chapter deals with the most important factors of the ecclesiastical policy of the state starting from the right of patronage through the inauguration of the bishops and the question of the concordat, to the institutional public role of the churches (e.g. participation in legislation). More briefly he dealt with the financing of the churches and the question of education. The fourth chapter shows a different approach: it does not show the church from the side of the state administration but it views society and public life from the perspective of the latter. It also examines the Christian social and political organizations (parties, trade unions etc.), and those questions which engrossed the attention of those forming Christian social politics. (I find it especially important that the author dedicates a whole chapter not only to the agrarian question but also to the questions of the industrial workers as well as to the Hungarian population living outside the country’s borders). The final three chapters of the book focus on the relationship between the extreme right groups – which show a sudden advancement at the close of the era – and the churches. Besides the
‘spiritual home defense’ he also illustrates the aspects of Christian resistance against the persecution of the Jews, Nazism and the Hungarian Nazis.

The final chapter summarizes the most important points of the book, and besides a thorough bibliography and a short summary in Hungarian, adds a statistical appendix which gives details about the denominational division of the country. The statistics concentrating on the changes of the era demonstrate the social and demographic processes shaping the background of the political history. I would comment that the author should not have published the data from the census carried out in Hungary in 2001, as – unlike the census before 1949 – it was not based on a general population census but on voluntary declaration. In Hungary that process was subject to debate.

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