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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN NEWLY PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES OF EASTERN EUROPE

A PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

By Jakub S. Trojan

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Introduction:

The theme chosen by NEW ERA for this conference requires in my view one or two corrections:

Firstly, it is worth pondering that part of the legacy of the Cold War is a sweeping division of Europe that does not correspond to the historical traditions which were constantly respected until the beginning of World War II. At that time, apart from a number of further distinctions, it was normal to distinguish between Western, Central and Eastern Europe. This distinction is far from being just a geographical one. Western and Central Europe, (and by Central Europe, I mean principally the eastern part of Germany, the Bohemian lands including the western part of Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and part of Poland) had undergone the Reformation and the Enlightenment, which had had a far-reaching impact on the social institutions and the mentality of the people in these different countries. By contrast, this impact was either completely absent or diminished in the areas eastward and southward of the Carpathian Mountains. This common spiritual climate and traditions, formed in these countries over several centuries, were powerful enough to resist for several decades the effects of the Iron Curtain.

Secondly, I would like to make a corrective comment on the idea/concept of "religion." I count myself among those people for whom this is only a very general and inaccurate way of describing Christianity. Christianity is not religion. Obviously, I cannot spell out the reasons for this thesis here, as that would mean going beyond the range of issues with which
we are concerned. At the same time, I am aware that the intention of the organizers was obviously to identify by means of that concept the participation of Christians and the Churches in the processes of radical change in the pluralistic societies, in which they represent the "religious" component of their population.

Thirdly, as a Protestant theologian I am very happy to be able to proceed with my main attention given to Czech Protestantism, since the contributions of Catholicism and Orthodoxy are being covered by my colleagues from Poland and Bulgaria respectively. This, so to speak, triune scheme of ecclesiological division has been an exceptionally wise decision on the part of those who prepared this conference and has made my task easier.

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I. Czech Protestantism, which as in other countries was divided into several churches, had an uneasy history. It goes back to the first Hussite Reformation at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. Europe of that time was enriched with an enormously important tradition which was later taken up and further systematized in the second Reformation, incorrectly called the World Reformation, the one of Luther and Calvin. It was a spiritual discovery, which, until the appearance of Master Jan Hus, was known in Europe only in a fragmentary way and only in the form practiced by a number of nonconformist groups such as the Waldensians. As presented by Master Jan Hus, however, this discovery attained a sophisticated, academic, theological level and at the same time he displayed a personal commitment in the way he introduced it into the European discussion. He did not hesitate to sacrifice his life in order to uphold this principle. Here we can find the basis of the enthusiasm with which it spread in Central Europe, in Bohemia and in the neighboring regions. This discovery was the sovereignty of the Lord's Truth over all human institutions, both the secular and the spiritual and ecclesiastical ones, as Master Jan Hus argued at the Council of European Christianity, which was held at Constance in 1415. In relationship to the Truth, we are in the position of obedient followers. It is the call of truth that is binding upon both our reason and our conscience.

This ideal of a transcendental Truth--transcendental in the sense of being sovereign over the proclaimed absolute demands of the political or church powers--has become an inherent feature of European consciousness and as such ran counter to the rule "cuius regio, eius religio" preferred by the European nobility of that time and by those who held power in the totalitarian regimes of modern history. I agree with Paul Tillich when he used the term "the Protestant principle" to describe this courage to be nonconformist in the name of the victorious Truth which upsets any attempt at ultimate judgement and breaks the monopoly
of power. This principle is one of the fundamental traditions of European thinking for the future of our continent.

II. This conception of Truth as the norm for all institutions, concepts, and power aspirations that makes it impossible for us ever to say we have reached the limits of our knowledge. It affects our approach to history as a set of disclosed alternatives. These are to be carefully sought out and critically examined. It is this which contributes to an atmosphere of tolerance and makes dialogue a priority. As humankind: nations, groups and individuals, we are all exposed to a constant stream of appeals urging us to establish relationships with each other and a new attitude to the Creation based on respect. Thus, we confirm our awareness of the open nature of all questions with which we are confronted. Any "would be" ultimate response sooner or later will be revealed, at best, as a temporary arrangement, and at worst as being ideologically derived in a way that hardly withstand critical examination.

III. With regard to truth, tolerance, dialogue, has Czech Protestantism remained faithful to its own traditions in the period of persecution (1948–1989)? If not, in what way has it turned aside from them, and how can they again be applied in the struggle for a developed pluralistic society in the future? The admiration in which Christianity in our countries is currently held in the West is far from being appropriate. More exact analysis may show that the Protestant Churches were nonresisting rather than resisting in the spiritual struggle against Communist domination. After allowing themselves to be pushed into a defensive position, they acquired a ghetto mentality, and apart from some more hopeful periods when the will to oppose prevailed for a short time, for example, in 1961, their main concern was simply to survive. Something even worse happened: the individuals and groups in the Protestant Churches both in Bohemia and in Slovakia--here I remind you particularly of my own Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and the Slovak Lutheran Church--who after the invasion in 1968 had chosen nonconformity and later joined Charter 77, were considered by the church leadership as disturbers of the attempts that the churches were making to ensure their own survival, and as a result such people were isolated from the mainstream of church life. The worst aspect of all this was not the fact that the Communist state administration removed the licenses to carry out their work as ministers from the pastors who adopted a critical attitude towards the regime but the fact that those who suffered in this way were directly or indirectly attacked by some of those who remained in office in the church, without having any chance to defend themselves within the church assemblies or in the church press. An anonymous force dividing the Church into those who accommodated themselves to the pressure and those who resisted it demonstrated more efficiency than the
most profound tradition which characterized Czech Protestantism in the past. Instead of a faithful witness to Truth, a spirit of adapting to the current circumstances prevailed. Intolerance or indifference took the place of tolerance, and the dialogue was interrupted.

The November Revolution in 1989 exposed these shortcomings and failures. The Protestants in our country are still struggling with the woeful heritage of the past. There are, however, no institutional or canonical provisions that could be formally applied to those who carried their loyalty to the regime too far. Consequently, a discussion about the failures of the past, sometimes a very painful one, has been carried on in the Church for months and is now also to be seen in both the church and secular press. This discussion is not concerned with passing judgement. The fundamental human insufficiencies, like fear, the unwillingness to run risks, envy, selfishness, and so forth are common to all of us. They are what our ancestors rightly called the sins of Adam. What matters is something different. We are obliged to re-examine when and how these "eternal sins" have been modified by the political sins which are conditioned by the situation in which we find ourselves. We have to explore to what extent we were subject to the Zeitgeist, to the mechanisms installed by the Communist power and to how much we had imperceptibly begun to apply them in spheres where different moral and spiritual values ought to have been displayed. In this regard our balance-sheet is far from being a positive one. It is quite understandable that the majority of the Church is not enthusiastic about undertaking an analysis like that. The spirit of triumphalism which started to grow in the first weeks after the Revolution does not yet seem to have disappeared. The public had appreciated the Christian Church for having been the only area in which the holders of the power could intervene only indirectly because the churches were considered by the regime as strongholds of hostile "ideology." The churches understandably are not willing to abandon this credit and thus wish to suppress a feeling of complicity for having allowed the Communist regime to assume such a horrific appearance. They remind us, in some circles within the churches in strong terms, that we must be primarily concerned with the tasks facing us in the future, and not be preoccupied with the past.

IV. It is true that our future obligations are to be taken seriously. Yet the sins that have not been overcome will inevitably continue to weight us down in the future. Only through forgiveness can we completely deal with the problem of guilt. But it is only guilt which has been revealed and acknowledged which can be overcome in this way. It is true that love covers a multitude of sins. However, it is only possible to cover things when they have first been exposed to view. Consequently, Czech Protestantism has first to overcome the burdensome heritage of the past four decades. I have already outlined the issue that in my
view with which we have to cope. As far as the future is concerned, the following issues are the priorities:

a. In order to have a pluralistic society established on democratic principles, it is tremendously important to have a public which is aware of its responsibilities. It cannot ever be achieved by professional politicians alone. They have many times demonstrated that they are powerless at times of great upheaval and crises in society. The tools of daily technical politics are not even capable of understanding such crises, let alone coping with them. We are in urgent need of having responsible citizens who consider corporate concerns to be more important than individual ones. What we need are thoughtful, critical citizens who are dedicated to the truth. It is not enough just to establish a pluralistic society. It is not enough to introduce democracy either. What matters is which principles and which moral and spiritual foundations are used when building up the pluralistic society and how vigorous and creative is the participation of all those who care about the fate of the community. Who else ought to hurry to aid and assist the *polis* in good and bad times if not Christians and churches? In order to be capable of doing that, they have to revitalize their determination to witness to the Truth, regardless with whom they are dealing. Hand in hand, they must be willing to re-examine the roots of their national identity in a way which is respectful yet confessionally resolute. All of this, like the fundamental re-orientation of our society at the economic, social, and political level should, of course, be dealt with in a patient dialogue. This again can be achieved if there is no privilege for anyone participating in the discussion.

b. At present, we are challenged by a number of alarming issues. Above all, there is the widely-based attempt to introduce a radical reform of the economy. This is something with which the nations of Western Europe never had to cope. For centuries their historical existence was characterized by an uninterrupted continuity in socio-economic development. Even after the most disastrous calamities of the two World Wars, they resumed their work at the point where it had been interrupted. The reverse is true in Central Europe and in Czechoslovakia. The history of our state is a sequence of discontinuities. They have been at work since the events already mentioned in the fifteenth century. Since then, discontinuity instead of continuity in moral spiritual values has been manifest in our history on a number of occasions. Today, we have to redress the economic system which has departed substantially from the one operating continuously in Western Europe. What a challenging task on all levels—moral, spiritual, organizational and political! And how much those who are striving for the rehabilitation of democratic, pluralistic traditions need to be committed. Moreover, the people at the grass-roots level are called to be both loyal and critical, to have an understanding of the issues, and to be actively involved in the process of radical change in our society.
The mission of our churches seems to be much more demanding than what the churches are obliged to do in Western societies. Will we be able to cope with the enormous tasks facing us?

c. Some form of protective legislation in the social sphere in the course of reshaping our economic system is another essential aspect of our commitment. In my opinion, the only kind of market economy which is acceptable in Central Europe is one in which, along-side charitable and non-state aid for the marginalized and weak, reasonable and effective legislative protection including state subsidies would operate. It is not only our own tradition of our First Republic [1919-1939] which leads us in this direction--a tradition which, as we know, anticipated some provisions in the social sphere later developed both by the Scandinavian democracies and by states bordering on Czechoslovakia.

Just as important is the extraordinarily strong social empathy of our citizens. This again is deeply rooted in our history, in the struggle for social justice and equality, as can be demonstrated in the Hussite and Unitas Fratrum Reformation. The same can be said about the significance the workers and simple farmers assumed in the baroque period and during the time of our national renewal in the nineteenth century. The fact that the Czech nation was forcibly deprived of its own nobility after the Habsburgs assumed the throne, as a punishment for the revolt leading to the defeat on the White Mountain in the year 1620, had a significant impact on the national character. The Czechs are very critical of those who exercise power. The lot of the rulers is not easy in Bohemia. Neither the Chartists, nor Havel, are exempt. Again it is up to Christians to be committed to systematic and thoughtful work for social justice. They can, in doing so, be inspired not be their own experiences, but particularly by their understanding of the Gospel that, as we know, is good tidings for the weak and marginalized.

d. Christians have to endorse effective provisions for improving the environment as well. Here, too, they must consider factors that go beyond the purely utilitarian criteria of the market economy. As we know, no respectful approach to nature is built into the market system, just as it is not sufficiently sensitive to people who are not endowed with sufficient purchasing power. Christians are obliged to have respect for nature and the environment due to their eschatological hope. It is related to the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, a town of unsurpassed splendor--nothing unclean shall enter it!--and which can therefore play such an inspiring role in this context. The fact that our Lord, the Savior of the world, who brought genuine love and moral purity to perfection, died behind the city of the worldly Jerusalem, on the most dishonorable spot, where litter and the bones of sacrificed animals used to be brought to be burned (Hebr. 13:11), should again and again prompt Christians to struggle for the renewal of today's devastated world, a renewal in which a clean conscience and a clean environment are both essential elements.
e. Last but not least: Christians in my country and in Central Europe should mobilize themselves and other Europeans to overcome the threatening European "splendid isolation." We in Czechoslovakia, and similarly Christians in other countries who have managed to extricate themselves from the totalitarian past, are under an obligation to try to prevent the other countries of Europe from concentrating exclusively on our needs and poverty, even though this may mean that we will lose out to some extent. At the global level, it is not we in Central and Eastern Europe who stand in the greatest need. It would be a tragedy, if both the material and technical skills and spiritual values of other European nations would be selfishly targeted only to the benefit of those who inhabit this continent. The greatness of Europe, which owes so much to the other continents, will not be revealed unless she is ready to become the servant of them all.