

The Christian Church in Hungary:

Lessons from History and the need for a greater Ecumenical
Missiology

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Forward	3
Introduction	5
An Historical Overview of Christianity in Hungary	8
The Early Years and the Emergence of a Christian Kingdom (1000-1526)	8
The First Blow: Sowing the Seeds of Division	12
The Turkish Invasion and Occupation (1526-1686)	12
The Reformation and Turkish Occupation (1540-1686)	13
Liberation, Habsburg Occupation, and the rise of Nationalism (1686-1848)	16
Nationalism and the Protestant Churches (1848-1914)	18
The Second Blow: The 20 th Century and the Consequences of Disunity	21
World War I and Nationalist Succession (1914-1920)	21
The Peace Treaty of Trianon and Hungarian Hyper-nationalism (1920-1938)	22
Trianon and the Protestant Churches (1920-1944)	24
Hungarian Nationalism and Anti-Semitism (1920-1944)	25
Hungary's Alliance with Nazi Germany (1930s-1944)	27
Collaboration, Complicity, and Opposition during Holocaust (1944-1945)	29
The Third Blow: Communism and the Christian Church	32
The Beginning of the Soviet Conquest and Occupation (1945-1956)	32
Communism and the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary (1945-1989)	33
Communism and the Protestant Churches in Hungary (1948-1989)	35
Christianity in a post-Communist Society (1989-2005)	37
Ecumenism and Missiology	39
Major Challenges to the re-Evangelization of Hungary	40
Missiological Critique of Current Expatriate Missionary Involvement	43
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	53

Forward

Before beginning to outline the argument we will make in this paper, we feel that it would be useful to the reader to know what our objective in writing it is, who the intended audience is, as well as some of our operative assumptions.

My wife, Zsófi, and I were married in Budapest, Hungary, on October 2, 2004. She is Hungarian, born in Budapest, but her family moved to Austria after the collapse of Communism in 1989. Therefore, she completed her primary and secondary education in Austrian schools, and then went on to complete a Master's program in Christian Psychology in Germany. Consequently, though she continued to return to Hungary often to visit family and friends, there is also an element of foreignness to Hungary in her. As for myself, I am an American, and though I have spent an extensive amount of time in Hungary over the past six years, there are still many questions both Zsófi and I have about Hungary.

This paper is an attempt to begin exploring one of these questions—namely, the relationship of Christianity to Hungarian culture. Our intended audience, as with the case of any research paper, is primarily ourselves. However, we also hope that some of the ideas contained in this essay will also prove useful for other Christians living and working in Hungary, particularly the expatriate mission community.

Finally, we also realize that not all of our readers will share some of our assumptions. Therefore, in order to any minimize potential misunderstanding, we wanted to clarify what some of these are. One significant assumption we have is that—contrary

to some Evangelical thinkers who believe the Roman Catholic Church is an enemy of Christianity and no longer part of the body of Christ—we *do* understand it to be part of the body of Christ, and we have a significant level of respect for it. Although we recognize the Roman Catholic Church has many flaws and imperfections, we believe that God is still very much active within it. Secondly, throughout our paper we will be taking a critical stance regarding the impact of the Protestant Reformation in Hungary. This does not mean that we disagree with the ideas of the Reformers, *per se*, as there were many legitimate grievances taken up against the Catholic Church. What we are evaluating are the historical consequences of the disunity introduced into the Christian Church via the Reformation, not whether or not the Reformation itself was legitimate or necessary. The Roman Catholic Church is not without sin in this matter either, and has done its share to exacerbate the disunity among Christians in profound ways. Our assumption is simply that if the body of Christ is divided, all the parts will suffer. Unfortunately, this assumption seems to have played itself out in Hungarian history. Our hope is that the next century will witness an opposite movement within the Christian Church; where the various Christian traditions that are presently seen by the unbelieving world as different religions, “will be brought to complete unity” so that Jesus might be made known to them, and “that the world may believe.”¹

¹ C.f. John 17:20-26.

Introduction

Like several other former Eastern-bloc countries, Christianity in Hungary is an interesting puzzle. Beginning with the coronation of Saint Stephen in 1000 A.D., Hungary has boasted over a millennium of Christian history. Yet, given the social and religious changes in the 20th century, what does it mean to call Hungary a “Christian” nation today? Depending on the set of statistics one employs, Hungary is either a country with only 15% of the 10 million inhabitants identifying themselves as ardent followers of *any* church or religion,² or alternatively, Hungary is a country that is astoundingly 92% Christian.³

The disparity between these two figures, however, is not the result of poor demographical analysis. Its root lies much deeper--embedded and interwoven with the historical development of Hungary as a nation, as well as the Christian churches within Hungary. Throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries, the word ‘Christian’ began to take on a very different meaning than what it has traditionally denoted—namely, a group of people who share common religious beliefs. By the end of the 19th Century, the word ‘Christian’ had developed a *political*, *social*, and *racial* meaning, as opposed to a religious one.⁴ It became a nationalist term; a term used to distinguish the ‘authentically Hungarian’ people from the Jews, Socialists, and Liberals living in Hungary.⁵ Thus, although 92% of Hungarians designated themselves as “Christian” (either Roman Catholic or Protestant)

² Michael J. Jordan, “Now-secular Hungarians reluctant to return schools to church,” Christian Science Monitor 88, no. 199 (9 September 1996): 7.

³ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster USA (2001), 305. It is important to note that Johnstone and Mandryk would quickly point out that despite this significantly inflated figure, there are only 2.7% Evangelical Christians in Hungary, as is identified in their “trans-bloc groupings.”

⁴ John Lukacs “The Church in Hungary Today,” America 165, no. 9 (1991): 220.

⁵ *Ibid.*

on the recent national census, only a little over half (55%) of the population claimed to believe in the existence of God, a supernatural being, or a creator—a belief traditionally regarded as foundational to Christian faith.⁶ In other words, over one-third (37%) of the Hungarians who identified themselves as “Christian” are self-described atheists, creating an obvious challenge in interpreting statistical data pertaining to Christianity in Hungary.

Therefore, this paper attempts to answer two questions. First, what happened to ‘Christianity’ in Hungary —both in terms of the definition of the word, as well as the gradual disappearance of the set of beliefs it used to designate? Through investigating the impact of several significant historical events on the unity of the Christian Church, our argument will be that the initial divisions created between Hungarian churches were later strategically exacerbated by political forces, further weakening the strength and unity of the Christian Church, and ultimately exposing it to the influence of nationalism. Consequently, instead of serving as a united moral voice and able to stand in opposition to social evils such as the Holocaust and the Soviet oppression, the now deeply divided churches infused with nationalism became political pawns, stripping the Church of one of its most significant charters—to defend the cause of the oppressed. Unfortunately, because of this intertwining of nationalism and Christianity, the Christian churches seem to have almost entirely lost their credibility with the Hungarian people, producing the kind of mass exodus from Christianity that has been evident in the second half of the 20th Century.

⁶ Results from GfK survey commissioned by the Wall Street Journal, excerpted from Kossuth Radio, Budapest (in Hungarian) 17:00 GMT, 23 December 2004 , in “Survey on Hungarians' Attitude to Religion,” Financial Times Information, Global News Wire - Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, BBC Monitoring International Reports, 24 December 2004. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis.

Secondly, if this argument is true, what implications do these conclusions have on our strategies as missionaries, seeking to work with the existing Hungarian churches to reach the people of Hungary for Christ? The final sections of this paper wrestle with that question, and begin to sketch out some initial revisions that might need to be made to our current missiology related to church planting in Hungary.

Finally, though many sections of this paper will critically assess parts of the Christian Church in Hungary at various times throughout Hungarian history, it is important to emphasize that it is not our intention to pass judgment on the entire Christian community. As János Pasztor points out:

If we keep in mind and record only the activities of collaborators and of people of weak character, we distort the real state of our church. In that case, coming generations will think that there was no real church life during that period, and will not hear anything about the people who remained faithful to the church, about ministers, deacons and elders who fought the good fight and proclaimed Christ in the unity of word and deed.⁷

This paper is an attempt to understand, in broad strokes, the development and interaction of the Church as a whole with Hungarian society—intentionally focusing on the mistakes and failures—so that we might be able to both understand the present situation in light of the past, as well as to begin formulating an informed and refined missiology for the future. However, we hope that one day we will have the opportunity to write about the other side of the story—all those who did fight the good fight during very difficult times, and in their authenticity to the gospel, demonstrated the way for the next generation of Christians in Hungary.

⁷ János Pasztor, “What Does it Mean to be a Missionary Church Today?” Religion in Eastern Europe 24, no. 4 (2004): 38, *Footnote* 29.

An Historical Overview of Christianity in Hungary

“The Hungarian is well known, in the first place to himself, as someone apt to contemplate his past as a matter of extreme, almost unbearable gravity, his nation known as one robbed of its erstwhile greatness by a combination of vicious contingencies, some of which can be identified as personages in the great drama of history, in which Hungarians have been all too often rendered helpless outsiders, a small nation struggling and surviving with the greatest difficulty against the odds.” —László Kontler

The Early Years and the Emergence of a Christian Kingdom (1000-1526)

In order to understand the present relationship between Hungary and Christianity, one must take history into account—in particular the events that have played a significant role in both the development of Christianity in Hungary, as well as events that introduced complexities and critical tensions within the Hungarian Church. However, before tackling those questions, we must first turn to the question of Hungary itself.

The origin of the Hungarians or Magyars, one of the few peoples of Finno-Ugric derivation wedged in the middle of Indo-European people groups, is a topic that has fascinated both modern and medieval historians.⁸ A.M. Kool observed that, “Hungary is the only state in Europe that was founded by one of the nomadic mounted peoples originating from the Eurasian steppes.”⁹ The earliest Magyars were nomadic warriors from Eurasia who migrated westward from the Ural Mountains in central Asia,¹⁰ to finally conquer and settle into the Carpathian Basin in the late 9th Century.

⁸ See István Deák, “Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Hungary,” The American Historical Review 97, no. 4 (1992): 1041-1063.

⁹ A.M. Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way: The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), 21.

¹⁰ The Ural Mountains separate Russia from Siberia, extending from the Arctic Ocean in the north, to the border of Kazakhstan. This mountain range also traditionally separated the continents of Europe and Asia.

During this migration westward, the Magyars had extensive contact with the Huns, Avars, Khazars, Slavs, and Onogurs. However, as in many other areas of Hungarian history, “the origin of the Hungarians; the circumstances that brought them into the Danube Basin; the extent of the lands they occupied; the success of the conquerors in integrating the many peoples they found in the region,” have been debated since the 14th century.¹¹ Despite this contact with other peoples during their conquest of the Carpathian Basin, their language remained unrelated to any of the Indo-European languages of the surrounding peoples. Consequently, the Magyars became an island of sorts within Europe, ethnically and linguistically distinct from the other peoples in the region, which throughout Hungarian history has produced a sense of isolation.¹²

In 896 C.E., Árpád, one of the chieftains of these ten tribes, rose to power through the ‘Covenant of Blood,’ and it is this date that the Hungarians celebrate as the birth of the Hungarian state. These pagan tribes were far from friendly neighbors though. Throughout the 10th century, “[l]aunching sporadic, havoc-wreaking raids upon Central and Western Europe, these fierce horsemen seemed to relish terror for terror's sake, destroying churches and castles and...even drinking the blood of their victims”.¹³ In fact, these ten tribes seem to have severely destabilized the region, and much of what we know about the early Magyars comes by way of written accounts from other neighboring countries that referenced them with fear and loathing.

¹¹ Deák, 1043.

¹² László Kontler, “The Need for Pride: Foundation Myths and the Reflection of History in Modern Hungary,” *The Hungarian Quarterly* 41, no. 160 (Winter 2000). Available at <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no160/054.html> (accessed 20 April 2005).

¹³ Nancy L Bentrup and Jay Tolson, “Of Kings and Commoners,” *U.S. News & World Report* 127, no. 7 (16-23 August 1999): 35.

However, by the end of the century, these “marauding hordes were transformed into a bulwark of stability”,¹⁴ when their leader, Saint Stephen, converted to Christianity, was baptized, and on August 20th, 1000 C.E., was crowned King of Hungary “by the power and grace of God and the Roman Catholic Church,” thereby founding the first Hungarian monarchy.¹⁵ After his coronation, Saint Stephen worked towards breaking the resistance of the pagan chieftains by reorganizing the country into territories instead of retaining the existing organization based on blood relationships and kinship.¹⁶ He also required all Hungarians be baptized into the Christian Church and mandated attendance of church.¹⁷ Saint Stephen, even to this day, is still regarded as the “Great King” of Hungary.

Surprisingly, though the Magyars initially threatened the core of Western Europe, during the 11th century, after being integrated into the community of Christian nations, Hungary became one of the early “protonations”—stabilizing the political system in Europe, and indirectly contributing to the rise of other “civilized” nations throughout the region. Several centuries later, Hungary understood its mission in Europe to be “a bastion of Western Christianity against the pagans, against such Balkan heretics as the Bogomils, against Byzantium, and (beginning in the fifteenth century) against the Muslim Turks”.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See also Deák. In the literature, there are slight variations of the actual year of Saint Stephen’s coronation. It could have been as early as 998, or as late as 1001. However, for this paper, we have chosen to use the traditionally accepted year.

¹⁶ Kontler.

¹⁷ In order to enable everyone in the country to attend mass, Saint Stephen took on a kind of pre-modern “saturation church planting” approach, by requiring one church to be built for every ten villages.

¹⁸ Deák, 1043

It is also important to note, however, that defining who these “original” Hungarians were is still a question of intense debate. As mentioned above, not only did the Magyar tribes mix with other peoples throughout their westward migration, but also over the years, many other non-Magyar peoples were allowed to settle in Hungary, and lived in peaceful partnership with each other.¹⁹ One modern-day example of this is the Kun people, a “hardy, horse-riding, nomadic Turkic-Tartar group,” known in ancient times as the Cumanians,²⁰ who migrated from present-day Kazakhstan, and were allowed to settle in the “Great Plain” between the Danube and Tisza rivers in central Hungary.²¹ However, unlike their now-Christian neighbors, the Kuns were very resistant to Christianity, holding onto their pagan traditions for centuries, and even today, “many towns and villages still retain former Kun settlement names such as Kunszentmártón, Kunszállás and Kiskunfelegyháza.”²²

¹⁹ Kool, *God Moves*, 21.

²⁰ The Kuns were known to Herodotus and other ancient historians as the black and white Cumanians, and were said to be related to the Parthinians.

²¹ Eszter Vecsey, “Revival on the range,” *Budapest Sun (Hungary)* 9, no. 4 (25 January 2001), Section S: 1.

²² *Ibid.*

The First Blow: Sowing the Seeds of Division

Although there was much reason to be optimistic for the Hungarians during the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times, two events in the 16th century radically undermined that confidence. First, the Turkish armies of Süleyman invaded Hungary, laying waste to the country, as well as the Christian churches that Saint Stephen had so boldly built. Then, only a few decades later, the Reformation swept across Hungary, initiating a division and battle within the remaining Christian community, and sowing the seeds of disunity that would later culminate in the devastation of the Christian Church when confronted with the events in the 20th century.

The Turkish Invasion and Occupation (1526-1686)

The first blow to Hungary came in 1526, during the tragic Battle of Mohács. Süleyman I and his Turkish armies had been invading Hungary, but during this battle King Louis II of Hungary was killed.²³ This battle “was the prelude to ‘the most miserable part’ of the history of Hungary: the Turkish occupation of more than one and a half centuries, reducing a third of the country to a ‘near-desert.’”²⁴ In the years that followed, the Turks destroyed almost everything Christian, and Hungary’s population was reduced by half, due to the Turkish policy of sending Hungarians to Istanbul to be slaves, while others were simply killed.

Due to the struggles and rivalries that took place in the years following the Battle of Mohács, Hungary was eventually trisected by the Treaty of Nagyvárad (1538). The

²³ Deák, 1044. See also Rhoads Murphey, “Süleyman I and the Conquest Of Hungary: Ottoman Manifest Destiny or a Delayed Reaction to Charles V's Universalist Vision,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 5, no.3 (2001): 197-221.

²⁴ Kool, *God Moves*, 22.

Roman Catholic Habsburgs were given control of the Western part of Hungary; the central, and most fertile area, was occupied by the Muslim Turks; and the Eastern territory—Transylvania—was given a level of autonomy. Several Hungarian aristocratic families ruled this eastern principality of Transylvania and it is interesting to note Deák's following observation about this special situation:

As vassals of the sultan, these princes paid tribute to the Sublime Porte, but the best among them were able to exploit the conflict between Vienna and the Turks to make Transylvania virtually independent and quite powerful. The...ability of such princes as the Calvinist Gábor Bethlen (r. 1613-1629) to turn the principality into a significant actor on the international scene and to elevate his court into a great cultural center, has been a major topic in Hungarian politics and historiography. The quest was, and still is, whether or not to approve of a cautiously collaborationist policy with a neighboring (especially a heathen) great power, and whether or not to applaud a culture developed in conscious defiance of Habsburg, Catholic, and German culture.²⁵

Illuminating a link between Calvinism and Transylvanian Hungarians, this quotation anticipates arguments that are made later in this paper about Ethno-nationalism and inter-Christian conflict. However, there are also hints about another significant connection, namely, the danger inherent in collaborating with occupying or external powers—the myriad implications resulting from interconnected social issues—and the potentially harmful effects on Hungarian culture at large.

The Reformation and Turkish Occupation (1540-1686)

The division of Hungary into three parts was also accentuated by religious differences. Virtually conterminous with the Turkish conquest, the Reformation rapidly

²⁵ Deák, 1044.

swept across all three territories in Hungary, including the central province under Ottoman control. Unlike the Balkan region, conversion to Islam was virtually non-existent in Hungary; however, the Turks did everything in their power to exploit the emerging rivalry between the Christian denominations.²⁶ In particular, the animosity of the Turkish Sultan toward the Holy Roman Emperor aided the spread of Protestantism by prohibiting any Catholic bishops from entering the Turkish controlled territories, thereby leaving a deficit of Catholic leadership in the churches.²⁷

By 1565, Hungary was solidly under the influence of the Reformation—where a majority of the population had left the Catholic Church and had begun adhering to the teachings of Reformers such as Luther, Malancthon, or Calvin.²⁸ The Reformation’s rapid charge through Hungary, compounded by the wake of destruction resulting from the Turkish conquest, severely weakened the Catholic Church to the point that its fate became increasingly uncertain.²⁹ However, in the second half of the 16th century, a small group of Franciscan missionaries from Bosnia exerted a significant influence on the fate of the Catholics living in the central territory of Turkish Hungary. It is impossible to know the full extent of this influence, but it is conceivable that this small band of Franciscan missionaries from Bosnia saved the entire Catholic church in Hungary during the Turkish occupation.

Earlier, in the 13th century, the Pope had declared the entire Bosnian Kingdom missionary territory, and sent a group of Franciscan friars from England, Germany, Italy,

²⁶ Kontler.

²⁷ István György Toth “Between Islam and Catholicism: Bosnian Franciscan Missionaries in Turkish Hungary, 1584-1716,” *Catholic Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (July 2003): 409-410.

²⁸ Kool, *God Moves*, 22.

²⁹ Toth, 410.

and Aragon to Bosnia in order to combat the Bogomil heresy³⁰ that had become deeply entrenched in the churches there.³¹ These Franciscan Friars successfully converted the Bogomil heretics, thereby founding a number of Franciscan monasteries in Bosnia. Some time later, after Bosnia fell to the Turkish invasion in 1463, unlike other Christian groups, the Turkish rulers tolerated and even helped these Franciscans because they needed them to keep peace and help control tax-paying Catholics, and prevent them from emigrating. Therefore, instead of fleeing Bosnia after the conquest, these Franciscans were incorporated into the Sultan's empire.³²

Additionally, beyond merely using these Bosnian Franciscans to help stabilize their economic interests, it is interesting to note that the Sultan saw strategic value in perpetuating divisions within the Christian Church.

At the same time, the Turks also had an interest in provoking differences between Christians of the various denominations. . . . Bitter rancor among the non-Muslim populations reduced the likelihood of a united Christian uprising against Ottoman rule. A united stand by Christians that ignored denominational differences was a constant fear of the Turks. Events during the great wars at the end of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proved that this fear was not without foundation.³³

This “danger” of unity among Christians despite denominational differences has some interesting implications for both the Church of the 16th century, as well as the Church of the 21st century; but this argument will come later. The irony of the situation, however,

³⁰ The Bogomil heresy flourished in the Balkan region between the 10th and 15th centuries. Bogomil, a Bulgarian priest, was the first to spread the heresy, in which the central belief was that the material world was created by the devil.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 411.

³³ Ibid.

was that this relationship between the Ottoman administration and the Bosnian Franciscans became a double-edged sword.

Due to the uniform commercial territory without frontiers within the Turkish territories, in the second half of the 16th century, the Bosnian Franciscans began expanding their missionary activity into other areas under Ottoman rule. In Hungary, where the Reformation and Turkish persecution left an ecclesiastical vacuum, these Bosnian Franciscans settled into the vacant parishes in Southern Hungary. By 1656, there were at least 38 Bosnian Franciscans serving in parishes throughout Hungary.³⁴ Therefore, instead of doing further damage to Christianity, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the arrival of these Franciscan missionaries from Bosnia played a significant role in survival of the Catholic Church in Hungary.³⁵

Liberation, Habsburg Occupation, and the rise of Nationalism (1686-1848)

In 1686, after over 150 years of Turkish rule in Hungary, an international military force coordinated by the Austrian Habsburgs, liberated the capital, Buda, from the Turks. However, after the 13-year campaign to expel the Turks finally succeeded in 1699, the Habsburg treated Hungary and Transylvania as a conquered territory, annexed to their hereditary lands.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, this immediately produced anger and backlash against the newly instituted Habsburg control. One of the most significant rebellions was led by Prince Ferenc Rákóczi from 1703 to 1711, defying the Habsburg forces, and even

³⁴ Ibid, 412ff.

³⁵ Ibid, 432.

³⁶ Kontler.

proclaiming the independence of Hungary.³⁷ Despite the failure of this revolution in 1711, the Habsburgs took notice and compromised, by promising to allow Hungary to be governed according to its own customs and statutes.

Throughout this time, a massive influx of new immigrants was underway, including Southern Slav, Romanian, and German settlers. Compounded by the devastating impact the Ottoman rule had on the Magyar population, the demography of Hungary underwent significant transformation during the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, by the end of the 18th century, the ethnic balance between Hungarians and non-Hungarians had reversed from 3:1 around 1500 to 2:3 around 1800.³⁸ Now, for the first time, the Magyar race had lost its earlier absolute majority, something that set the stage for an emerging Hungarian nationalism.³⁹

Complicating this demographic change, the Habsburg Empire, unwilling to relinquish control over Hungary and fearing the democratic movement of the Magyars, began exploiting the hostilities between Hungarians and the national minorities in order to break up the developing democratic movement.⁴⁰ Language became another source of contention. In 1790, Latin had been re-established as the language for official use, but later Emperor Joseph II attempted to impose German as the language of administration, sparking an intense nationalist reaction. These Magyar nationalists “wanted the Magyar

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kool, *God Moves*, 35

⁴⁰ Ibid, 36; See also Kontler.

language to be the official language of the country, and this issue was to be in the center of national attention for many years to come.”⁴¹

In addition to language reform, the Habsburg Empire, which was closely aligned with the Roman Catholic Church, had begun enforcing a Counter Reformation during this period. Severely repressive measures were enacted against the Protestant Churches, which were accused of spreading ‘democratic’ (nationalistic) ideas, as well as contributing to the moral decline of the nation.⁴² Whereas by the end of the 16th Century, the Protestant Reformation had been so successful that less than 10% of Hungarians remained Roman Catholic, this process of re-Catholicization reclaimed three-fourths of the population.⁴³ “While no actual religious wars were fought, the conflict was so severe that it produced lasting mutual bitterness that is in evidence even today.”⁴⁴

Nationalism and the Protestant Churches (1848-1914)

Amidst the social and political unrest that ultimately led to an unsuccessful war of independence from the Habsburgs in 1848, throughout the 1840’s there was a significant effort made towards closer cooperation between the Lutheran and Reformed churches, of which even figures such as Lajos Kossuth played a significant role.⁴⁵ However, from the very beginning of their emergence during the Turkish occupation, the Protestant churches had been divided along ethnic lines. The Reformed Church, which gained ascendancy in the Eastern province of Hungary during the Turkish occupation, consisted of 99.8%

⁴¹ László Deme, “Writers and Essayists and the Rise of Magyar Nationalism in the 1820s and 1830s,” *Slavic Review* 43, no. 4 (1984): 626.

⁴² Paul Mojzes, “Religious Topography of Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1999): 17. See also, Kool, *God Moves*, 36.

⁴³ Mojzes, “Religious Topography,” 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Kool, *God Moves*, 49.

Magyar people.⁴⁶ The Lutheran Church, on the other hand, emerged in the central province of Hungary during the Turkish rule through German and Slavic immigration, and afterwards continued to consist of mainly German and Slovak people.⁴⁷ Therefore, despite the desperate need for cooperation between the two Protestant Churches to fight against the oppressive Habsburg rule, “it was nationalistic feelings on both sides, that militated not only against union, but against any kind of cooperation.”⁴⁸

With the failure of the Revolution of 1848-49, there was an immediate backlash against the Reformed Church. Because the Reformed Church was virtually wholly Magyar and closely linked with Magyar nationalism, “Reformed people were the most suspected of all the Hungarian people by the authorities. All ministers and teachers, who had actively sided with the Revolution were charged with disloyalty. Some were shot, while many others were imprisoned.”⁴⁹ Until the constitutional settlement in 1867, the Habsburg policies recognized only a unified monarchy of the Habsburgs without any legal independence of Hungary, and attempted to “Germanize” the whole population, as well as reinforce the predominance of Roman Catholicism.⁵⁰

Following the constitutional reforms of 1867, a new Hungarian middle class began to emerge, strongly influenced by contemporary nationalist ideas. Though the Nationalities Law of 1868 did not recognize any difference of privileges or rights based on a person’s ethnicity, this law was largely ignored, and an attempt to assimilate other

⁴⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 46.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

nationalities was prevalent throughout the society, including even the education system.⁵¹

This attempt at ‘Magyarisation,’ with its intent to wipe out the multiethnic character of Hungary, completely failed.⁵² In the end, it seemed only to have added fuel to the already simmering ethnic tensions.

⁵¹ Ibid, 45.

⁵² Ibid, 46.

The Second Blow: The 20th Century and the Consequences of Disunity

World War I and Nationalist Succession (1914-1920)

In 1914, Germany's aggressive foreign policy, along with the growing nationalism and ethnic tensions throughout the allied Habsburg Empire, finally erupted in what would become a massive global war. Germany, Austria-Hungary and their allies lost this First World War, and the existing political order of Europe came crashing down. The German, Austrian-Hungarian, and Russian Empires ceased to exist; new nations emerged and ethnic conflicts erupted. In 1918, Hungary regained its long-sought independence, and the Hungarian Republic was declared.⁵³

Unfortunately, this period of national jubilation did not last long. Following the newfound independence from the Habsburgs, Hungary enjoyed a brief period of democratic leadership under Mihály Károlyi. The Károlyi government, rejecting the autocracy of the pre-war ruling elite, and called for true democracy and massive social reform, including greater generosity toward the national minorities.⁵⁴ However, because most of the people taking part in this government were Jews, this call was largely ignored by Hungarian Society.⁵⁵ Subsequently, these national minorities, backed by the Entente armies, proclaimed secession.

Unwilling to use military force against the successors, the Károlyi administration was unable to adequately deal with the succession. In March 1919, Béla Kun took over

⁵³ Ibid, 54.

⁵⁴ Kontler.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Kool also comments that although the Jews were respected as businesspersons in the pre-war period, they were expected to stay out of politics.

the government, and then two days later, formed an alliance with Soviet Russia and instituted a communist dictatorship.⁵⁶ “In a moment of profound economic deprivation and national frustration, the Communists took their chance, and in concurrence with rapid Sovietization and a Red Terror, they held out against Slovak, Romanian and Entente forces from March to August 1919.”⁵⁷ Employing draconian economic measures and organized terror, this brief stint of Bolshevik revolution in Hungary was perhaps one of the darkest chapters of Hungary’s history.⁵⁸

On July 31, 1919, another revolution, ironically led largely by disenfranchised peasants, overthrew the Communists and forced Béla Kun to flee to Vienna. However, the country remained in disarray, desperately needing a more stable government.⁵⁹ Responding to this lack of law and order, the Allied powers stepped in almost a year later, and on June 14, 1920, ratified the Peace Treaty of Trianon.

The Peace Treaty of Trianon and Hungarian Hyper-nationalism (1920-1938)

Hungary, already in an unfavorable position as one of the vanquished enemies of the Allied Powers and accused with partial responsibility for the war, was further disadvantaged by the revolutionary chaos which “turned both the enemies of Bolshevism, the Allies, and the Bolshevists themselves against Hungary.”⁶⁰ In the end, the peace terms settled on by the Allied Powers at Trianon, dissected the country, reducing Hungary “to one-third of her former size, and one-third of ethnic Hungarians found

⁵⁶ Kool, *God Moves*, 55.

⁵⁷ Kontler.

⁵⁸ Kool, *God Moves*, 55.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 56.

themselves citizens of neighbouring states, in an evidently hostile environment.”⁶¹ In a country already struggling to rebuild what was destroyed during the war, the blow to Hungarian economic resources was even worse, multiplying the devastating effects of the war.

Not surprisingly, by effectively ending ‘Historic Hungary,’ the Peace Treaty of Trianon produced a considerable nationalist sentiment among Hungarians. Consequently, right radicalism gained popularity and Admiral Miklós Horthy—a Hungarian nationalist and anti-Semite—took control of the government.⁶² Territorial revisionism became the focal point of Horthy’s regime. “Nem, nem, soha!” became the dominant slogan, meaning, “No, no, never... (shall we accept this truncation!).”⁶³ Additionally, twice a day millions of Hungarian children recited the new ‘Hungarian Credo:’

I believe in one God,
I believe in one Fatherland,
I believe in one divine eternal Truth,
I believe in the resurrection of Hungary. Amen.

This was usually followed by, “Truncated Hungary is no country, Whole Hungary is heaven.”⁶⁴ Through sloganeering like this, the country was galvanized for the reconquest of the territory that was formerly part of Greater Hungary.

⁶¹ Kontler.

⁶² Kool, *God Moves*, 56.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Trianon and the Protestant Churches (1920-1944)

The Treaty of Trianon also significantly affected the Protestant churches. For the Reformed Church—almost completely Magyar in composition—large numbers of Hungarian Reformed people were now living in the three neighboring countries: Romania, former Czechoslovakia, and former Yugoslavia. Before Trianon, there were 2,621,329 Reformed people in Hungary; however, afterwards, this number had dropped by 916,906 people.⁶⁵ This also included losing 600 congregations and 500 primary schools to Romania alone. The Lutheran Church in Hungary suffered a similar fate, losing over half of its members.⁶⁶

As discussed in earlier, the Protestant churches were already struggling with divisions along ethno-nationalist lines. Trianon only served to exacerbate these tensions, and became a catalyst for a resurgence of the old concept of “Historic Hungary’s” mission to defend Christianity, which provided a new justification for Magyar supremacy in the Carpathian Basin.⁶⁷

Historian Gyula Szekfű popularized a version of this doctrine in his work, “Three Generations: The History of a Declining Age,” published in 1920.

In it, [Szekfű] traced what he saw as the early flourishing and subsequent deterioration of Hungarian political and spiritual life between the beginning of the reform age in 1825 and the collapse of the Hungarian state in 1918. His culprits were Hungarian liberalism and its practitioners: the gentry and the Jews....

⁶⁵ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 57.

Szekfű formulated the ideology of a new state and society. Since Hungary was no longer an important power, he contended, it had to shine through its unique spiritual values. Immigrants, whether Germans, Slavs, or Jews, fit poorly into the new society formed by the tragic Hungarian experience, one that only those with a Hungarian soul could genuinely perceive.⁶⁸

Szekfű's assertion of cultural superiority gained widespread acceptance and was adopted by scores of historians, as well as the minister of education.⁶⁹ Additionally, Szekfű's views were endorsed by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in Hungary.⁷⁰ Therefore, the lines between Hungarian nationalism, anti-Semitism, and Christianity—previously only blurred together—were now inextricably linked.

Hungarian Nationalism and Anti-Semitism (1920-1944)

The factors contributing to the rise of anti-Semitism in Hungary constitute a vast and complicated web within Hungarian society. However, though a full treatment of the topic is outside the scope of this paper, a few of the leading causes are worth mentioning. First, the political compromises between the traditional Hungarian elites and the emerging, upwardly mobile emancipated Jews seem to have been instrumental in holding together the weakening Habsburg rule before WWI.⁷¹ Already irritated by the ever-increasing proportion of non-Hungarian ethnic groups to Hungarians in the country, this sense of Jewish collaboration with their “oppressors,” produced significant antipathy. Secondly, the economic devastation from WWI left millions of workers—primarily the

⁶⁸ Deák, 1050.

⁶⁹ Deák, 1051.

⁷⁰ Kool, *God Moves*, 57.

⁷¹ Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, “Rationality or Irrationality? The Annihilation of Hungarian Jews,” *The Hungarian Quarterly* 45, no. 174 (Summer 2004). Available at <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no174/4.html>; accessed on 20 April 2005.

peasants in Central and Eastern Hungary—practically destitute.⁷² Combined with a growing perception of disproportionate Jewish wealth, nationalistic Hungarians began focusing their hostility on the 900,000 Jews living in Hungary.

Previously, throughout the 19th century, Jews had achieved significant positions within industry, commerce and the liberal professions; a presence within these occupations that was well above their proportionality to the general population. For example, by 1910, Jews constituted a majority of the people involved in commerce and professional careers.⁷³ This disproportionate prevalence of Jews in the professional world continued through years following the Treaty of Trianon. In 1930, without including the number of ethnic Jews who had converted to Christianity, Jews constituted:

55.2% of the Physicians
49.2% of the Practicing Attorneys
30.4% of the Engineers
59.4% of the Bank Officials
45.7% of the Salespeople

Conversely, out of the 900,000 Jews living in Hungary, only 3% were involved in Agriculture, and only 13% were Industrial workers.⁷⁴ Therefore, compared to the millions of non-Jewish Hungarians living in poverty, it was true that the majority of Jews had a modest amount of wealth, and some Jews possessed considerable wealth.

This disproportionate level of wealth became wildly exaggerated and served as a rallying point for the growing anti-Semitic movement throughout the interwar period. In 1938, Alajos Kovács, an anti-Semitic statistician, calculated that Jews possessed 20-25%

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

of the entire national wealth in Hungary.⁷⁵ Later in 1944, Zoltán Bosnyák, another anti-Semitic theoretician, claimed that 20.8% of the national wealth was owned by Jews.⁷⁶ However, these figures were conservative compared to what was widely believed by the Hungarian public. Henrik Péchy, founder of what became the Arrow Cross Party,⁷⁷ set the figure at an astonishing 60% of the national wealth—a figure many Hungarians found credible.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, the convergence of this exaggerated public belief in disproportionate Jewish wealth, together with the residual resentment toward Jews for cooperating with the oppressive Habsburgs, and further compounded by the growing radical-nationalism—produced the greatest human tragedy in Hungarian history.

Hungary's Alliance with Nazi Germany (1930s-1944)

The first anti-Semitic laws were passed in 1920, with the *numerus clausus* (restricted admission) in higher education.⁷⁹ Then, following the economic crisis of the early 1930s, the radical right gained even more ground, and coupled with the increasing German economic penetration and political influence, “the prospect that Hitler might assist Hungary in achieving her revisionist goals was too tempting for the Hungarian political élite to resist.”⁸⁰ Impressed with the early foreign political successes of Hitler in

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ The Arrow Cross Party (Nyilaskeresztes Párt) was the leading Hungarian fascist political party, and was closely aligned with the German Nazi Party. Led by Ferenc Szalasi, in 1939 it numbered close to 500,000 members and won 31 seats in parliamentary elections.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Erzsébet Bori, “The Second Wave: Speaking Out on the Holocaust,” *The Hungarian Quarterly* 46, no. 177 (Spring 2005). Available at <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no177/11.html>; accessed 20 April 2005.

⁸⁰ Kontler.

Germany, the anti-Semitic Horthy government formed an alliance with Nazi Germany, hoping that by doing so, Hitler would help Hungary regain its territories lost from the Treaty of Trianon.⁸¹

This alliance paid off. In 1938, as part of the first Vienna award declared by Germany and Italy, Hungary regained ethnically Magyar territories north of the borders set by Trianon.⁸² A second award followed the first, where even more territories were returned. In exchange for these territories, Hungary enacted more aggressive anti-Jewish laws, aimed “at the gradual elimination of Jews in cultural, economic, political and social life.”⁸³ The First Jewish Law, ratified on 8 April 1938, severely restricted the economic and civil rights of the Jews. No professional chamber could consist of more than 20% Jews. Eight months later, this law was followed by the Second Jewish Law, which reduced the permissible level of Jews occupying white-collar professions to 6%.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, the bargain with Mephistopheles for “Historic Hungary” did not end there. In 1940, Germany and Italy awarded the northern portion of Transylvania back to Hungary. However, the price for regaining territory had increased. In the spring of 1943, Hungary’s reluctance to ‘solve the Jewish question,’ resulted in a shouting match between Hitler and Horthy.⁸⁵ Consequently, although Hungary began secret talks with the Allied powers in the fall of 1943, by March of 1944, German troops rolled into Hungary and set up a puppet government. Immediately upon arrival, the German troops embarked on a campaign of terror, and began the exportation of thousands of Jews to

⁸¹ Kool, *God Moves*, 59.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Bori.

⁸⁴ Kool, *God Moves*, 59.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

concentration camps. On April 14, 1944, following Adolf Eichmann's visit to Budapest to engineer the Nazi extermination plan, the first group of Hungarian Jews were rounded up in eastern Hungary and sent to Auschwitz.

Collaboration, Complicity, and Opposition during Holocaust (1944-1945)

Between May and July of 1944, the Hungarian countryside was almost entirely cleared of the remaining Jews. Within a year, 565,000 of the original 825,000 Hungarian Jews were either executed or deported and exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. By a bizarre twist of fate, the only safe place for a Hungarian Jew during 1944 seems to have been those that were drafted into the army as forced laborers.⁸⁶

However, the question that haunts this period of Hungarian history is, how could hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews be so speedily and efficiently removed from Hungary? Reflecting on this chapter of Hungarian history, Hungarian Ambassador András Simonyi wrote:

Make no mistake: The people being deported in 1944 were Hungarians. And while the German occupation ignited the process, it cannot be denied it was Hungarians who deported Hungarians to the death camps.

The deportations could not have happened without the willing participation of the Hungarian gendarmerie, state bureaucrats, and the Arrow Cross Party - Hungarian Nazi - thugs. Hungary in 1944 was a country gone insane, a country that had totally lost its sense of orientation, a country that was failed by its leadership, betrayed by its government, by its elite, and which failed to protect its own

⁸⁶ Ibid.

citizens. It was a country that allowed the mob to take over.⁸⁷

Simonyi makes an excellent point. The atrocities perpetrated against the Jews during this short interval of time are almost incomprehensible; but what *is* clearly evident, is that deporting hundreds of thousands of people living throughout the Hungarian countryside to concentration camps was not an unfortunate accident, or an evil plan executed by a *small* group of people. Hungary was failed both by the masses of Hungarians who blamed the Jews for their hardships, as well as by their political leaders. However, lurking in the background behind the failure of political leadership is the question of the involvement of church-leaders.

Answering the question of Christian complicity in one of the most horrendous evils ever to be perpetrated is a difficult, yet incredibly important task. There are instances when Christians shone in their opposition to the Nazis, and there are times when a dark shadow was cast over whole Churches.⁸⁸

Churchleaders were not unanimous in the Jewish question, some took an antisemitic stand since Jews were associated with being the instigators of communism. Others, however, when, in 1944, the terrible deportations to the gas chambers of Poland began, closed its ranks in defense of the Jews and were involved in all kinds of relief work or in the underground resistance movement.⁸⁹

Though some Christian leaders stood in active resistance to the deportation of Hungarian Jews, unfortunately there were many others who chose to side with the Nazis. Because

⁸⁷ András Simonyi, "Remembering the Hungarian Holocaust," The Washington Post (DC), 16 April 2004, Section A, 21.

⁸⁸ For an excellent article describing the perception of Christian opposition from a Jewish perspective, see Eugene L. Pogany, "In each other's likeness: Twin brothers separated by faith after the Holocaust," Cross Currents 45, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 5-24.

⁸⁹ Kool, *God Moves*, 62.

Hungarian nationalism and anti-Semitism had become interwoven with Christianity, the Christian Church was ultimately rendered incapable of speaking out against the holocaust with a unified voice of opposition and condemnation.

The Third Blow: Communism and the Christian Church

“The Freedom of human beings is not a condition, but a task. What an absence of shackles means is our duty to know and to establish our limits. It is often more difficult to be free than not to be free—as the great Greek thinkers, as well as St. Augustine, knew and said.” —Monsignor Béla Varga

The Beginning of the Soviet Conquest and Occupation (1945-1956)

The situation in Hungary following WWII only seems to have worsened. By the time the Russian Army “liberated” Hungary from the Germans in April 1945, the country was in ruins. Budapest, the capital city, was especially devastated from weeks of intense battles to gain control of the city. To top matters off, Hungary was required to pay \$3bn in war reparations over a six-year period. These payments absorbed almost all of Hungary’s national production, leaving little or nothing left to rebuild the country from the devastating effects of the war.

Despite the economic dislocation and Soviet military occupation, on November 4, 1945, Hungary held the first national elections, and a glimmer of hope of becoming an independent democratic country was in the air. This optimism, however, was short lived.

The great events of 1945—the land reform and the general elections—still reflected the spirit of democracy, pluralism and progress; thereafter, the Hungarian Communists ruthlessly exploited the combination of the broad appeal of a utopian dream and the political offices they obtained on the insistence of the Soviet occupying authorities for pressure, blackmail and manipulation. By 1947 their main rivals were either in exile or in prison, their parties demoralized or subsumed into the Communist party... [U]ntil 1953, Hungary's form of government was terrorist dictatorship.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Kontler.

Unable to withstand the Soviet plans to create a socialist bloc of nations in Eastern Europe, the Communists took over and imposed a rigid Stalinist state. Destroying the Hungarians fledging hopes of gaining independence, the Soviet “liberation” of Hungary ultimately turned into nothing less than another totalitarian conquest and occupation.

With Stalin’s death in 1953, Hungary had a brief respite when Mátyás Rákosi—one of Eastern Europe’s worst Communist tyrants—was replaced by reform-minded Imre Nagy.⁹¹ This period of reform ultimately culminated in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against the Russian occupation. However, without any hoped-for assistance from Western countries, Khrushchev and the hardliner Soviet Politburo decided to act decisively against Nagy and the Hungarian uprising. The Russians rolled in the tanks, and in the process, once again turned Hungary into a killing field.⁹²

Communism and the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary (1945-1989)

In the early years of Soviet occupation, there was a great deal of uncertainty, especially among church leaders, regarding what the best approach would be to take with the Communists. When the Communists took over in 1948, they proclaimed freedom for all religions on paper.⁹³ Though this illusion of peaceful coexistence did not last long, for the first few years it was unclear whether the Christian Churches should make concessions in the hopes of moderating the Communists, or whether they should openly

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Daniel Schorr, “Forty years later, learning what happened behind Kremlin walls,” Christian Science Monitor 89, no. 134 (6 June 1997): 18.

⁹³ Mojzes, “Religious Topography,” 18.

resist the Communists.⁹⁴ The Roman Catholic Church, led by Cardinal Mindszenty, chose the latter.

Cardinal Mindszenty was an interesting person to have been chosen to lead the Catholic Church in Hungary. Born to a poor peasant family in Western Hungary, Mindszenty had not received the education one might expect of a senior church leader. Instead of accepting a scholarship to attend a Catholic university in Vienna, Mindszenty instead chose to attend seminary after completing secondary school.⁹⁵

Mindszenty was by no means an intellectual; he was strict, ascetic, and courageous, but he was also narrow-minded, conservative, and extremely inflexible. The bitterness of his opposition to the modern world was extreme even among senior churchmen, not only in Hungary but also throughout Europe. He was a man who never changed his ideas and beliefs.⁹⁶

However, it was precisely this courage and inflexibility that caused him to be the most influential and powerful opponent of the Communist takeover. According to Kenez, “no single individual was such a thorn in the side of the Communist leaders as the cardinal.”⁹⁷

This (hostile) relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Hungarian Communist Party, proved to be a unique one. Whereas the Communist Party had almost completely succeeded in replacing the Protestant Church leaders with Communist collaborators, the Catholic Church remained the strongest of the remaining opponents of

⁹⁴ Peter Kenez, “The Hungarian Communist Party and the Catholic Church, 1945-1948,” Journal of Modern History 75, no. 4 (2003): 864.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 871.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

the Sovietization of the country.⁹⁸ Secondly, due to this significant base of opposition from the Catholic Church, the Communist Party attempted to find compromises and ameliorate conflict wherever possible, as opposed to the frontal attack they employed against other Christian Churches.⁹⁹ In a land where the Christian voice against Communism was becoming fainter by the day, this Catholic opposition turned out to be a rare audible Christian witness to an increasingly atheistic Hungarian society.

Communism and the Protestant Churches in Hungary (1948-1989)

Unlike the strict hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church, the more democratically structured Protestant Churches turned out to be much more susceptible to the repressive policies of the Communists

Church properties and schools were nationalized, and there was blatant interference in the life of the churches, so that Reformed and Lutheran Church leadership were coerced into collaborating after those who opposed this process were brutally eliminated. The activities of the churches were severely limited, but, as in other communist countries, the government undertook a very aggressive process of proselytizing people to atheism. The process of atheization was promoted by all the power the communist state could muster.¹⁰⁰

Although the Catholic Church was also the recipient of sustained repression and persecution, it had leadership outside of, and independent of the Communist authorities in Hungary. Ultimately, the Vatican was unassailable by the Soviets, which partly insulated the Catholic Church in Hungary from the Communist assault. However, the Protestant Churches, with largely national/local leadership structures, did not have these external

⁹⁸ Ibid, 889.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Mojzes, "Religious Topography," 17.

protections. Therefore, by systematically removing Protestant leaders and pastors—often through imprisonment or execution—the Communist regime was able to coerce or create ‘Christian’ churches and institutions that were largely controlled by the State.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the *deformation* of the Protestant churches—and in some measure the Catholic Church as well—was entirely the consequence of this totalitarian assault. In many ways, the problems began much earlier. As argued in previous sections, the seeds of disunity and nationalism can be found even as far back as the Turkish occupation. However, as this mixture of division, nationalism and Christianity continued to grow, the Christian churches became increasingly syncretistic—combining elements not from another religion, *per se*, but from a particular ideology of national identity.¹⁰¹ Yet, part of the essential nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that, “in Christ there is reconciliation between people separated by race, class, and events of history.”¹⁰² Promoting an intolerant, aggressive, racist attitude against other nations, is ultimately antithetical to the Gospel, and ultimately strips the Church of its strength and vitality to society.¹⁰³ Therefore, it was not a strong and unified Christian Church that was attacked by the Communists. Rather, it was a seriously weakened and divided Church that had already lost part of its essential footing in society, that staggered against the onslaught of totalitarianism.

¹⁰¹ Pasztor, 40.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 41.

Christianity in a post-Communist Society (1989-2005)

In 1948, according to a public opinion poll, over 90% of the population considered themselves believers, where 50% of the people attended church regularly, and another 25% attended church occasionally.¹⁰⁴ One generation later, in research done by the Gallup Institute in 1993, while the vast majority of Hungarians still considered themselves ‘Christian,’ only 10-14% claimed to attend church each week, and only 16-18% claimed to participate in the life of their congregations.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, even though freedom of religion was guaranteed in the post-communist environment, there had been a significant drop in the number of *active* Christians.

Part of this evident disparity between the percentages of those who claimed to be Christian and those who considered themselves to be involved in church-life, can be attributed to the natural tendency to emphasize ‘Christian,’ as well as ‘national’ values after the 40 years of Communist oppression.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the very definition of the word ‘Christian’ had undergone significant revision.

Beginning about 100 years ago, the adjective ‘Christian’ acquired a political, social and racial meaning in Hungary, as well as in some other Central and Eastern European countries, that is does not have in the West—except, perhaps, in the odd, and now vanishing, English Protestant usage of ‘Gentile.’ When ‘Christian’ is used in this sense it not only suggests but simply means non-Jewish and, on occasion, non-Socialist and non-Liberal. It is a nationalist

¹⁰⁴ Kenez 2003: 866. This research employs a broad sociological definition of ‘Christian,’ which encompasses the Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Tamás Földesi, “Mission and Proselytizing: The Hungarian Case,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, no. 1/2 (1999): 155. This research also employs a broad sociological definition of ‘Christian,’ which encompasses the Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches.

¹⁰⁶ John Lukács, “The Church in Hungary Today,” *America* 165, no. 9 (1991): 220.

term, not a religious one. It suggests the exclusion of non-Christians from the authentic national community.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, it was not just the participation in church-life that had changed, but the very notion of what it meant to be ‘Christian’ had changed. Somewhere along the line of intermingling nationalism with Christianity, the public’s perception of the essence of Christianity had been altered. No longer did being ‘Christian’ equate to being a follower of the teachings of Christ, but rather it now equated to part of a particular national identity—being “authentically Hungarian.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Ecumenism and Missiology

“We can conclude that in Hungary since 1989, as in most other East European countries, even though the conditions for more complete religious freedom have been established, Christian mission still faces some unsolved problems due not only to worldwide secularization but also to the hangovers of forty years of repressive state policies. The slow but steady development of Christian mission is clearly unthinkable without discussions of all related problems. From this angle, both ecumenism and dialogue are of crucial importance. Thus, one of the most important tasks of those concerned with mission seems to be the gradual overcoming of the obstacles that stand in the way of effective ecumenism and dialogue.” —Tamás Földesi

Ever since the fall of Communism in 1989, waves of evangelical missionaries flooded Eastern Europe with little or no background knowledge of language and culture, but with a desire to ‘bring Jesus’ to Eastern Europe. However, falsely assuming that the Communists had completely destroyed the existing Christian witness within these countries, many of the evangelical missionaries perceive themselves to be ‘starting from zero.’¹⁰⁸ This, unfortunately, is a grave missiological error. Eastern Europe is not un-Christian, or devoid of a Christian witness; rather it is ‘post-Christian’ or ‘de-churched,’ where many nominal Christians have been ‘immunized’ against the gospel.¹⁰⁹ As Volf points out,

In Eastern Europe, Jesus Christ has been not only present but also worshiped by millions of people for centuries. Maybe he was worshiped in a wrong way, maybe only half-heartedly, maybe even only with lips. Yet he was there, and he was worshiped. Jesus does not need to be brought to Eastern Europe. What we need to do is to wash the face of Jesus, that beautiful face that has been dirtied not only by Communist propaganda but also by so many

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

compromised our churches—both the established and evangelical—have made through the centuries.¹¹⁰

Therefore, traditional methods of evangelism or church-planting that assume the targeted audiences have not ever heard the gospel, nor take into account the fundamental issues that caused their inoculation against Christianity in the first place, are incommensurate with the task of reaching Eastern Europe for Christ. In order for evangelism and church-planting to succeed, first the relevance and credibility of Christianity to the now secularized societies must be addressed.

Major Challenges to the re-Evangelization of Hungary

Among the many current challenges to the mission of the Christian Church in Hungary is the continuance of nationalism. Speaking about the Reformed Church, Pasztor writes:

In political life it has been relatively easy to swap the horse of communism for that of nationalism...Hatred, which is the source of that kind of thinking and behavior, can be detected in certain circles of Hungarian church and society. Unfortunately this kind of extreme nationalism coupled with hatred has found its way into our church...

As a result some regard the Reformed Church in Hungary as in its totality accepting and promoting an intolerant, aggressive, racist attitude against other nations. This state of affairs has rendered a very serious obstacle in presenting the Gospel in our society.¹¹¹

Instead of diminishing with time, the mixture of nationalism and Christianity in some of the Hungarian churches continues to compromise the Church's credibility to the non-believing public.

¹¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 20, no. 1 (January 1996): 23.

¹¹¹ Pasztor, 39 f.

Another major obstacle to re-evangelization appears to be a serious lack of unity among Christian churches and traditions. Already alienated from each other due to ethnic composition and theological disagreement, the divisions within the Protestant churches were further exacerbated and exploited through the Communist government's strategy "to purposefully create mistrust and divisions between denominations and within the Christian congregations by spreading rumors and creating fear."¹¹² Additionally, the few instances of ecumenism that did exist were monitored and manipulated by the government, which resulted in a perception that the international ecumenical leaders and contacts favored the domestic church leaders who chose to collaborate with the Communist government.¹¹³ Consequently, ecumenical movements were unwittingly manipulated by Soviet propaganda, and later when the churches were finally given religious freedom, many of the new church leaders repudiated any involvement with ecumenism.¹¹⁴

These new church leaders, who were largely elected as a protest against the old collaborationist leaders, often were people who had been exiled or imprisoned by the Communist government. Therefore, alongside their skepticism and cynicism towards ecumenism, the newly elected Christian leaders "neither know the other [domestic] church leaders nor do they trust them."¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, this constellation of fear and distrust among current church leaders has only further challenged the prospect for Christian unity.

¹¹² Kool, "A Protestant Perspective."

¹¹³ Paul Mojzes, "The Cold War between Religions," *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Editorial. Available at <http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/CHURCHWA.MOJ.doc>; accessed on 20 April 2005.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Implicit in the preceding analysis is the assumption that greater Christian unity and ecumenism is something both positive and necessary for the re-evangelization of Hungary. In an article analyzing the conditions and challenges facing modern mission in Hungary, Tamás Földesi argues:

We can conclude that in Hungary since 1989, as in most other East European countries, even though the conditions for more complete religious freedom have been established, Christian mission still faces some unsolved problems due not only to worldwide secularization but also to the hangovers of forty years of repressive state policies. The slow but steady development of Christian mission is clearly unthinkable without discussions of all related problems. From this angle, both ecumenism and dialogue are of crucial importance. Thus, one of the most important tasks of those concerned with mission seems to be the gradual overcoming of the obstacles that stand in the way of effective ecumenism and dialogue.¹¹⁶

The framework for this dialogue as well as the nature and extent of the requisite ecumenism are open questions that warrant significant further debate. However, according to Földesi, without beginning to bridge these barriers to unity among Christians, the Church will remain largely impotent in addressing many of the fundamental problems that have disillusioned modern Hungarians with Christianity. Churches that remain independent of, and antagonistic toward other parts of the Christian body, especially when infused with nationalism, will most likely continue to lose credibility.

¹¹⁶ Földesi.

Missiological Critique of Current Expatriate Missionary Involvement

Over fifteen years have passed since the massive influx of foreign missionaries began in 1989. However, some notable European missiologists have begun asking whether or not this help from the ‘expatriate contingent’ of missionaries has been effective, and whether or not there might be better ways of working together with the established churches.¹¹⁷ As a result, several significant challenges to effective expatriate missionary involvement were identified, three of which have significant implications in light of the preceding analysis of this paper.

The first challenge identified is that most Western missionaries often do not understand the reasons behind the existing churches’ negative reactions to their often good-intentioned activities. Quoting Paul Mojzes, Dr. Kool writes:

Most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are still in the nation building stage, focusing on national unification. Religion plays an important role in affirming this collective identity, often in the form of the dominant historic religion, which was marginalized for so long. Because the missionaries belong to heterodox (interdenominational) religious communities, either from abroad, or from the country itself, they are considered to be ‘obstacles in the process toward maximal homogenization,’ and for that reason, their activities give rise to great resistance from both national political and traditional religious leaders.¹¹⁸

Focusing on international and interdenominational themes such as salvation and truth, these ex-patriot missionaries are out of step with the national churches, which along with other social and political institutions are focusing on re-establishing a collective national identity, and preserving it over and against the rising tide of globalization. Therefore,

¹¹⁷ Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 14.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

unaware of why they are viewed as threatening, these missionaries promoting a trans-cultural message and set of values are oftentimes lumped together into a negatively perceived group and rejected as alien.¹¹⁹

A second major challenge to effective missionary involvement that was identified concerns their differing perspectives on what constitutes a Christian, and its implication for what the target group of evangelism should be. Miroslav Volf comments that evangelical missionaries generally classified most members of the established churches as non-Christian, and therefore valid targets for evangelization.¹²⁰ Volf continues delineating the differing perspectives on what it means to be a Christian by saying,

Established churches are like mothers who embrace all children born to them—that is, all who were baptized. There are various degrees of belonging to the church. There is a place for saints, and there is a place for sinners; all are welcome. Protestants, however, are like stern fathers, and accept only those who behave—who actively believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and act in accordance to their belief. Hence, for Protestants, all those who do not “behave”—believe and act—are legitimate objects of evangelization. Moreover, they ought to be encouraged to leave the places where they are not challenged to behave and join the communities of behavers—the true believers.¹²¹

This perspective of the evangelical missionaries, however, often produces a negative reaction from the historic churches, which, in turn, only reinforces the evangelicals’ belief that the members of the established churches need to be evangelized.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Volf, 26.

¹²¹ Ibid, 27. This is an interesting observation, given the emphasis of grace over works for most of these evangelical missionaries.

¹²² Ibid, 26.

Additionally, an unfortunate side effect of targeting members of another church for evangelism is that it further entrenches the still lingering communist attitude in Hungarian society that regards someone with an opposing opinion as the enemy.¹²³ Therefore, instead of resolving one of the barriers to effective re-evangelization, this attitude only serves to intensify the Us/Them mentality, one of the factors that weakened the influence of the Christian churches in the first place.

A third, and particularly troubling critique of the expatriate missionary activity in Eastern Europe, is in regards to their strong focus on church planting. Dr. Kool makes the following argument:

The problem of proselytism is aggravated by the strong focus by the evangelical missionaries on planting new churches even in countries where the established Protestant churches are relatively strong. (Hungary has more than 1500 Protestant churches all over the country.) Many argue that the incentive for the priority to planting new churches in these countries is given with the statistical fact that hardly any ‘viable’ churches are available, which can reproduce them. So instead of working on the revitalization of the existing churches they chose to give priority to starting new ones.¹²⁴

Dr. Kool continues with an example of one of the missionaries working in Hungary:

Underlining an “attitude and ignorance of the missions situation in Hungary” a mission leader involved in church planting in Hungary recently articulated his vision with the importance “to acknowledge that we need more churches in Hungary. I estimate that the church buildings in Hungary could not hold more than 30% of the population and the current pastoral structure could not hold more than 20% of the population and that most of the churches in Hungary would not know what to do with new Christians but God

¹²³ Pasztor, 43.

¹²⁴ Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 15.

wants 100% of Hungarians to have New Life in Christ so we better plant churches.” He called on the Reformed Church in Hungary to “repent of their pride and be humble enough to think that they do not own the world and control God.” He added, “I love the Reformed Church in Hungary, but God is able to work without it also.”¹²⁵

This quotation by Dr. Kool is troubling because the negative interpretive frame she presents elucidates well the disjunction between the missiology employed by the expatriate missionaries and that employed by the national church leaders, as well as the tensions that have arisen thereof.

Additionally, Juraj Kusnierik deepens the critique by asking some provocative questions about the contextual effectiveness of Saturation Church Planting (SCP) in particular. Arguing that although ‘saturating’ a country with churches might be a positive goal in itself, the spiritual impact of “reproducing small, closed, theologically superficial and culturally irrelevant communities” might turn out to be quite marginal, especially since there are already Protestant churches available in every geographical area of Hungary.¹²⁶ Kusnierik concedes that these many of these churches have significant problems and are largely nominal, but questions whether or not the alternative churches reproduced through SCP will work any better. Highlighting the tendency of SCP to focus more on quantitative growth rather than qualitative growth, he is concerned that instead of transforming “the existing churches into communities that are culturally relevant and

¹²⁵ Ibid, 16.

¹²⁶ Kusnierik, Juraj, and Marsh Moyle, “Trends - Ten Years On. A Sen Study Paper Describing Major Trends in Central European Church and Society 10 Years after the Fall of Communism.” *SEN Research Paper*, (Bratislava, 1999): 27. Quoted in Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 16.

might have a greater spiritual impact on society,” we are merely creating more introverted churches.¹²⁷

On the other hand, the SCP advocate would surely point out that there is no logical necessity for the churches planted through an SCP movement to be small, closed, theologically superficial, or culturally irrelevant communities. In fact, the stated goal of SCP is to reproduce vibrant, biblical, disciple-making churches that transform society for God’s glory. In addition, the existing Protestant churches that Kusnierik offers as an alternative to reproducing ‘new’ churches, are largely just nominal, with little or no spiritual impact themselves. Furthermore, it is unclear whether a viable renewal movement would ever be efficacious in transforming these existing churches.

Ultimately, the missiological debate between Kusnierik and the SCP advocate appears irresolvable and boils down to a matter of where one places his/her faith. Kusnierik does not seem to have much faith in the viability and efficacy of Saturation Church Planting in terms of reproducing quality churches that will have a significant social impact; instead, he places his faith in the prospects of reforming and renewing the multitude of existing churches within Hungary. On the other hand, the SCP advocate does not seem to have much faith in the viability and efficacy of initiating significant reform and renewal within the existing churches, but instead places his/her faith in the SCP movement’s ability to reproduce quality and spiritually significant churches. Nonetheless, Kusnierik’s question is a haunting one. If the underlying issues that ultimately produced the current state of affairs in the church—as well as the broader Hungarian culture’s disillusionment with the church—are not addressed and resolved,

¹²⁷ Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

what makes us think that by reproducing a bunch of new churches, these new churches will turn out to be any better than the 1500 churches already there?

Conclusion

Whichever missiological strategy we adopt for the future, the need for greater ecumenical dialogue is becoming increasingly self-evident. Theological dispute, division, ethnic identification and nationalism have marked the history of Christianity in Hungary and as a result, instead of ecumenism, belligerent attitudes and interdenominational conflict ensued.¹²⁸ Consequently,

There remains a great need for well-equipped leaders in the churches of Eastern Europe, able to deal with the burning issues...like the churches' response to nationalism and ethnicity, revitalization of the churches for local and global mission, how to communicate the Gospel in a relevant way to the secularized de-churched (nominal) and un-churched people of the former communist countries, and how to move towards reconciliation in church and society."¹²⁹

Thus, the need for a new *modus operandi* has become vital to the future success of mission in Hungary today.

Recently, there have also been some initial positive steps towards greater ecumenical missiology. Throughout the previous few years, missiologists in Central and Eastern Europe have been meeting together at various conferences. One of the first fruits of these conferences has been the realization that,

[Eastern European missiologists] all face more or less the same struggles in formulating and addressing the missiological issues of our 'post-communist' contexts and in introducing a new discipline in the theological curriculum: missiology. It also became clear, that we

¹²⁸ Földesi.

¹²⁹ Kool, "A Protestant Perspective," 11.

hardly know of what each of us is doing in the area of research, teaching and publications.¹³⁰

Consequently, in November 2002, the Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies (CCEAMS) was officially inaugurated at the Protestant Institute for Mission Studies in Budapest, Hungary.

The establishment of CCEAMS is a positive first step; however, much more Christian thinking and missiological refinement is still needed. As Kool suggests:

The re-evangelization of Europe and the revitalization of its churches poses for us new missiological issues: The issue of reaching out to de-churched people, ‘nominal Christians,’ the issue of how to cooperate with the mainline churches in true partnership, as well as the issue of church renewal versus church planting, to mention just a few, all require profound study.¹³¹

Our hope is that the resultant missiological development of this association as well as others to come will commence a new era in Hungary Church history, where missionary cooperation with existing churches, as well as a new kind of interrelatedness among the existing Christian churches, will gradually begin to reverse the tide of indifference and disillusionment within Hungary toward Christianity.

The question remains, however: Are expatriate missionaries still needed and/or are there missiological adjustments that we need to make to SCP to become more effective in this region? Despite being critical of current foreign missionary activity in Eastern Europe, Kusnierik and others suggest that foreign missionaries *can* be important and needed agents of change:

¹³⁰ A.M. Kool, “Report on the Central and Eastern European Association of Mission Studies (CEEAMS),” Report presented to the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) in Malaysia, 31 July – 4 August 2004.

¹³¹ Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 23.

Big visions are often missing.... A foreign missionary is in a good position to question some of the old habits, break notorious taboos, and show new and creative ways in encouraging a healthy diversity in an otherwise quite uniform environment.¹³²

If this assessment is correct, expatriate missionaries *do* have an important role to play in the re-evangelization of Eastern Europe. Many church leaders have received a stimulus from the exposure to other models, as well as from exposure to the missionaries themselves, particularly in the area of focusing on the future instead of the past, as well as proper planning and management.¹³³ However, Kool argues that for foreign missionary involvement to make a significant impact on the Christian landscape in Hungary, “a radical refocusing is needed away from independent church planting efforts towards partnering with local churches in working towards their revitalization.”¹³⁴

Whether or not foreign missionaries need to abandon independent church planting efforts and radically refocus on the revitalization of existing churches is a question that warrants further debate. Perhaps, the two ostensibly opposing strategies of SCP and church renewal will prove to be a false dichotomy, and some permutation of the two will gain traction. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: pursuing the present course of an SCP strategy without further examination and serious debate will only continue to drive a wedge between the foreign missionaries (and the churches spawned by them) and the leaders of the established churches. Given the historical context above, this increasing disunity will simply exacerbate the already widening chasm between the

¹³² Kusnierik and Moyle, 25. Quoted in Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

¹³³ Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 21.

Church and the disillusioned world outside, ultimately precluding the very end SCP desires to achieve.

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