

# RE-EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY IN HUNGARY

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The re-emergence of Christian democracy and related social reform movements – as indeed numerous other manifestations of institutional and spiritual rebirth associated with it – is seen most evidently in the re-establishment of that political party which bears the name, specifically the KDNP or Christian Democratic People's Party. However, numerous other political parties and movements, including the MDF or Hungarian Democratic Forum, also claim to be involved in the resurgence of this tradition. Needless to say, the resurgence is not limited by any means to the political sphere. The reception accorded Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his historic visit to Hungary in 1991 certainly illustrates the vitality of Hungarian religious life.

Hence any discussion of this phenomenon should not be limited to dealing with political and other formal groups and associations; rather it must focus on the institutional and even personal/spiritual resurgence of Christianity, broadly conceived, as a factor in private and public life. Before dealing with some of the manifestations of a renewed and resurgent Christian life in Hungary since 1989, one should cast a glance, necessarily brief and episodic, backward at the major political parties and institutional structures.

Just as in the rest of Europe, formal Christian democratic and social reform movements in continental political life date back to the waning years of the nineteenth century and reflect the influence of Pope Leo XIII and his epoch-making encyclical *Rerum novarum*, which provided the necessary support for democratic and social reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Evidently influenced by German, French, Belgian, and English thinkers and reformers in this Christian tradition, there soon emerged a mostly Roman Catholic (together with some Reformed and Lutheran manifestations) social and political reform movement which culminated in the formation of the Catholic People's Party in 1892 and eventually led to other organizations and activities including the active involvement of Ottokár Prohászka in Christian social and spiritual reform and the myriad reforming activities of Sándor

Giesswein, in the decades following and the ongoing presence of these movements in Hungarian political life from thence until 1949. The vicissitudes of their activity is one of the yet to be told stories of Hungarian history. It should also be pointed out that in spite of cataclysmic changes in the era of world wars and competing ideological forces, a Christian institutional presence persisted nonetheless in Hungarian life, certainly until 1945 and in a more limited institutional manner until 1949. The current revival reaches back to both the older and more recent manifestations of this Christian democratic and social reform tradition.

Until the closing days of World War II, Christian inspired political, institutional, and cultural life enjoyed a great measure of public support and institutional presence, albeit not without contradictions between the existing order and Christian ideals. Obviously, there always has been and always will be a dichotomy between a transcendental ideal and a secular, i.e. time bound, reality. Needless to say, this situation prevails into the present. It must be noted that much of the reason for the ongoing struggle between church structures, including especially parish priests and some of the hierarchy on one side and some of the bishops, regular clergy (at least in part), and most intellectuals and writers committed to Catholic reform on the other – focusing on the understanding of political and social reform, the role of the clergy and laity, and a host of other concerns related to the life of the Christian in an ever increasing secular world – can be traced back to the either incomplete or unassimilated understanding of the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar church generally; this issue, and many of the conflicts and misunderstandings stemming from it, must be eventually dealt with if the Roman Catholic church in Hungary is to have an impact now and in the future. Given the immense opening and opportunities for a Christian vision of the world, it is imperative that something be done.

The end of the Second World War inevitably called attention to the contradiction between the altered political realities of inter-war and post-war Hungary and the eternity of the Christian message; even so, the effort to sustain the latter was by no means easy in the changed circumstances. After the resolution of internal differences among the various Christian political leaders, István Barankovics called to life the Democratic People's Party in 1945. The name itself indicates not only the changed circumstances and a renewed emphasis on democracy, but also reflected a conflict with an institutional Roman Catholic church which had been too closely identified with the old regime and its essentially public law and neo-Baroque mentality and values. However, even with the changed designation, Barankovics wished to realize an essentially Christian democratic political program. Its contours

become quite clear from his speeches and writings of these years. Consider the following from one of the party program speeches: "The ideals of Hungarian Christianity, its distinctive culture and its believing people carry such a civic desire within themselves that demands a role for itself in the struggle of the parties and the shaping of public life." The further refinement of his ideas can be witnessed in his other speeches, in the activities and writings of many who shared his Christian inspired political ideals, based mostly on the articulation of natural rights principles, from 1945 to 1947, some of which are being reprinted at the present time. During the elections of 1947, the Barankovics led Democratic People's Party, in spite of only limited and not particularly enthusiastic support from the Catholic hierarchy, received the most votes, indeed even a relative majority of the total number of votes cast.

Not only was this broad based support the consequence of the program espoused, it was also the result of a spiritual and social reform movement of the 1930's and early 1940's (the Kalot, Kalász, village and town based youth movements, Prohászka circles, journals such as *Korunk Szava* and *Vigilia* among others, the Soli Deo Gloria movement among Protestants, parish renewal efforts, especially in Budapest and the larger cities, the memory of Sándor Giesswein, Nándor Zichy, and other reformers) which now manifested itself in a large number of votes for a political party, which made every effort to connect with this movement. It was certainly not by chance that the city of Győr was the initial locale of the renewal of Christian democracy and social reform in the years just after World War II; this certainly recalls the central role of Sándor Giesswein in this context; indeed, the earliest Catholic trade unions had been established at Győr in the waning years of the nineteenth century and its bishops had generally supported efforts to foster Christian democracy and social reform.

Closely tied to these mostly Catholic movements, one must also take note of similar efforts by the Reformed and Lutheran churches. While mostly independent of political parties at first, these Reformed and Lutheran struggles for Christian-inspired socio-political reforms, because of strong confessional differences and the close relationship of the Roman Catholic church to Christian democracy, tended to be more active in other political configurations, especially the Smallholder's Party and its related organizations. Its basic orientation was certainly Christian-inspired, as its motto of "God, Homeland, and Family" amply demonstrated. These Protestant movements were also generally more nationalistic and more in evidence in eastern Hungary.

However, forty-some years of an imposed Communist hegemony have left gaping holes in a Hungary characterized for many years by a Christian

hegemony. Together with gaping holes in the social reality, there is an even broader breach in Christian consciousness, values, practices, and morals, together with the mostly still untold story of the institutional churches of Hungary in our own century. Some of these needs have been addressed by the publication of some volumes on church history.

Even more problematic for the full understanding of Christian democracy has been the virtual silence until just recently about the origins, inter-war, and post-war Christian-inspired social, cultural, and political movements. This remains one of the great future tasks of Hungarian historical scholarship; one must first begin by collecting the documents and the memoirs of its numerous participants, then must follow the examination of the social impact of the movement, and finally there should emerge a comprehensive historical account before it disappears from our consciousness.

Nor can one neglect to study the manifestations of the Christian-inspired political and social reform movements as these began to slowly re-emerge during the days of the revolution of 1956. Some of the political formations dispersed after 1949 (or earlier) reappeared this year in the form of fledgling political parties; most of these were inspired by the movement broadly characterized as Christian democracy. However, one cannot neglect the 1956 role of Cardinal József Mindszenty and numerous Reformed and Lutheran churchmen; the spirit of both the institutional churches and the elemental force of Christian beliefs were and remained an integral part of the tradition of the 1956 revolution, but once again as a mostly neglected part of the larger historical record. After the glorious days of the revolution, much of it was again suppressed for many years, but not forgotten, as the resurgence of those revolutionary ideals was to fuel a multifaceted dissident movement that culminated in the restoration of democracy, including the ideals of Christian democracy, by 1989.

Each historical situation, though, brings its own problems, and at present the problematic issue has become one of toleration for other views and traditions; this seems to be in short supply at present, but it is also, or rather, should be seen as an intolerance born of a committed struggle after many years of oppression or a condition of comfortable stagnation. However, even an essentially positive cast of mind on this issue cannot and should not obscure the concern.

Christian democracy has had an opportunity to function on a mostly level playing field since 1989, and the political parties constituting the current governing coalition are each tied in some way to this political and social orientation. Whereas the opposition is centered mostly on those advocating some form of liberalism or a transformed market socialism. The tension arising

from this situation creates the furor over the issue of toleration in an ever more politicized and polarized society, focused, virtually of necessity, on very compelling economic concerns.

However, let us focus on the intellectual (I hesitate to say ideological) orientations clashing with each other as we approach the elections of the coming year. The currently governing coalition consists of an amalgam of value orientations not alien to the traditions of Christian democracy broadly conceived; this is certainly true of the Christian Democratic People's Party and mostly true of the Smallholders, at least in terms of their earlier noted base-line values. The MDF or Hungarian Democratic Forum is a more variegated political entity and represents essentially the somewhat contradictory traditions of nineteenth century national liberalism, some elements of Christian democracy, and the numerous strands of populist thought with an evident sense of nationalism. Thus, it could be argued that Christian democracy is the common element in this center-right coalition faced with the unenviable task of sustaining the course of a democratic Hungary. To accomplish this, it must fight against the temptation to coalesce or harden into an ideological party because that would ultimately negate its self-professed Christian values. However, the temptation to do that is inevitably present because the combination of nationalism and religion is generally a dangerous, combustible, and often an intolerant one. The extent to which these dangers can be moderated will to a great extent determine the future of Christian democracy and its undeniably positive values in Hungary. This is what the more extreme elements of this orientation fail to recognize and many of the ongoing problems of the governing coalition can be traced to this situation.

Certainly, as virtually all the opinion polls seem to suggest, the short-term prospects of the coalition are not very promising, but that certainly does not negate Christian democratic values in the long term. The ongoing institutionalization of Christian inspired ideals in the emerging social structure is indeed the promise of a future and on-going presence. There are many manifestations of this other than the political and the effort to achieve a greater presence in education is probably the most visible one at present. This too is not without its dangers in an ideologically charged society, but it is an activity which must be undertaken – and in a tolerant spirit – if the ideals of Christian democracy are to be maintained and preserved. The ongoing institutionalization of democracy is the major guarantor of toleration and diversity, an atmosphere to which Christian democracy has contributed in the past and must do so again in the future.