

# Documents

## Should a Christian Teach in Atheistic Schools?

*Should a Christian teacher teach in an atheistic school? This is a question that vexes the consciences of many believing teachers in Hungary. Since the nationalisation of 1948 only about ten church schools remain. The rest are dedicated to the promulgation of atheistic Marxist-Leninist ideology. Though the Hungarian state is today far more tolerant towards religion than in the 1950s and 1960s, Christian educationalists still face many practical and theoretical problems in the state system. The samizdat journal Beszélő, an organ of the Hungarian "democratic opposition movement", took up this issue in 1985 following two unofficial meetings of believing teachers. It published an interview with a young teacher who participated in the meetings and a follow-up article written by another under the pseudonym Hallgatag Kornél, or Cornelius the Reticent.*

### *Conversation with a young teacher*

*Beszélő:* Schools want to raise people with a Marxist-Leninist outlook. According to the oath that teachers must sign, they have to promise to obey their official superiors. Is this obligation compatible with living Christianity?

*Teacher:* At the meeting many said that they append a written statement to the oath, stating that their obedience is limited by conscience. Nowhere is it written that a religious person cannot be a teacher. Nevertheless, the schools expect that the believer will keep his or her convictions secret. In practice the teacher must decide whether or not to accept this. It seems to me that non-confession of the Christian faith is incompatible with that faith.

*Beszélő:* Doesn't the confession of faith place the teacher in direct conflict with the school?

*Teacher:* We don't have to parade Christianity. However, if we are confronted with questions that demand an open answer, we must confess the faith, in the first place in front of the children. In practice many years often go by before a collision takes place. [. . . .] It is conceivable that headmasters and governors are unaware of teachers' religious convictions. On the other hand, they may know about it and tolerate it. Of course, it sometimes happens that they treat religious teachers unfavourably. That is to say they may supervise teachers more strictly, persecute them and ultimately drive them out of schools.

*Beszélő:* Are you saying that a teacher's work and Christian convictions are only temporarily reconcilable?

*Teacher:* Anyone whose Christianity is not detected within a few years is not really a Christian. Of course, there are those who believe even this postponement of confrontation to be unprincipled. They say that a teacher has three options: she may fulfil her duty towards the atheist school and cease to be a Christian; withdraw her duty and cease to be a teacher; or else she accepts a compromise which deceives both the school and herself.

*Beszélő:* On this basis believers would exclude themselves from the teaching profession.

*Teacher:* There are other arguments against teaching. The primary vocation of a Christian is to serve and proclaim God's kingdom. Teaching — as any other profession — is secondary to that. A teacher's

work is itself a vocation and for that reason it distances us further from our real calling more than, say, factory work. And it is not just the content of the teaching that distances us from the higher vocation but the fact that it cannot be squeezed into eight hours. If we teach and also have families, there is increasingly less time for a Christian communal life.

*Beszélő:* Isn't it somewhat selfish for people who have been called to be teachers not to fulfil their duty because of some sort of spiritual squeamishness?

*Teacher:* I do not think we can ever call standing by our convictions selfishness. But I personally do not agree with an inflexibility of outlook that would bring about a voluntary exodus of Christian teachers from schools. The aim of teaching is the development of intellectual, spiritual and physical strength. This must also, I think, include the shaping of one's capacity for and experience of love. A large proportion of the curriculum offers a possibility for the discussion of [...] certain important questions. Of course such possibilities are found mainly in the humanities, especially literature and history. Children are curious about the "God-question", the person of Jesus, the Gospel, about religion as a way of living. This is precisely because officially these things are not included in the timetable and because they have had more than enough of the atheistic answers. Moreover they are curious to know what a believer has to say about them. We must answer these questions, but our answers are accepted only if they are endorsed by our whole personalities. You see, the main problem with the atheistic answers is that they ring hollow. In today's schools there are probably fewer convinced materialists than believing Christians.

*Beszélő:* How does the "God-question" fit into the curriculum?

*Teacher:* It cannot be avoided in any subject, be it the physical order of the universe, or the religious poetry of Balassi.\* I am talking about something more than the acquisition of religious knowledge: that is receptiveness to religion, without which there cannot be a full understanding of literature. Babits's \*\* "Zsolttár férfihangra" ("Psalm

for a Male Voice") is meaningless to a reader who shuts out the possibility of a religious cosmology. We are not talking about religion and belief alone, but more generally about the dynamic phenomena of the world. What is meant by poverty, what is meant by violence, what is meant by omnipresent selfishness? The rousing Marxist-Leninist answers to these questions are hopelessly contrary to the children's daily experience. The Christian answer does not offer a comforting solution, but it demands something from each individual: the sharing of our wealth with the poor, setting non-violence with violence, and placing self-sacrifice against selfishness.

*Beszélő:* Now an obvious question: Why doesn't a believing teacher teach at a church school?

*Teacher:* There is a practical answer: there are many more religious teachers than places in church schools. The real reason, though, is more profound. The work of a believing teacher in a school is to teach not religion but rather to cultivate a life-style guided by beliefs; children must be able to develop a solid foundation for their lives and that includes world-view, moral values and taste.

*Beszélő:* This, actually, is also the aim of the Marxist-Leninist teaching.

*Teacher:* The problem is that the atheist school wants to promote only one way of life which would be one-sided even if the atheist world-view, moral system and taste were more coherent. A solid scale of values can be developed only through the comparison of opposing ideological systems. In reality it would be in the atheist state's interest to bring up intellectually mature people of strong character. The believing teacher is often obliged to explain the religious and atheist points of view one after the other. I think it would be good if a religious teacher could share his class with an atheist teacher and the children could partake in a debate in which both participants are involved with their full personalities. Children in church schools get to know the Christian ideals of life both at home and at the school — they don't need us.

*Beszélő:* How much can the children be influenced by a believing teacher?

*Teacher:* It depends on how good the teacher is. Children, at least in the grammar school age group, are very susceptible to everything a believing teacher may tell them, because it is *different* from the precepts they are used to hearing. A teacher

\*Bálint Balassi (1554-94) was a Catholic Renaissance poet — *Ed.*

\*\*Mihály Babits (1883-1941) was a Catholic poet influential between the two world wars — *Ed.*

speaks in vain about the beauty of accepting a conviction when the children know very well that he does not really accept his own supposed convictions — if he has any. On the other hand, the teacher whose Christianity is well known — that is to say, who accepts a conviction which is fraught with risks — is an example even to the child who doesn't accept his outlook on life. Witnessing can become amazingly intensive and can have a permanent impact on people's minds. This influence can reach beyond the community of a classroom; it can reach the children's friends and even their parents.

*Beszélő:* And what is the reaction of the parents?

*Teacher:* First of all, one of surprise. Most of them went to school in the fifties and are even surprised at what is included in the textbooks. Believing teachers talk of various kinds of incidents. There are state officials who are grateful that their children are hearing of things they (the parents) know little about, but there are also some denunciations. And the authorities are more understanding towards the complainant than towards the believing teacher whose position is not yet clarified. In the provinces even half-hidden beliefs can be

dangerous. It is still a regular occurrence for country teachers to worship in neighbouring parishes.

*Beszélő:* Not only in the provinces. Recently a teacher had to leave a school in Békásmegyér [a suburb of Budapest — *Ed.*] for leading a church choir.

*Teacher:* For a believer to be a teacher is not without risks. Those present at our meetings came to the conclusion, however, that today's society, which is at its lowest level intellectually, morally, in social values and in its life style, does need believing teachers, however small their influence and however great their risk. Only some people should become teachers: those who have determination and flair for it, who can come to terms with never making a career of it, those who have enough strength to bear an excess burden, and those who are well aware that their employment could come to a sudden end.

*Beszélő:* This must be a difficult decision, especially for someone at the beginning of her career.

*Teacher:* Nobody should be talked into it. But I wouldn't let myself be talked out of it.

*Beszélő:* Thank you for this conversation.

### *Religious teachers in state schools*

School regulations decree that teachers must educate young people in Marxist-Leninist ideology. At the same time, it is common knowledge that religious teachers work in every teaching community from nursery schools to universities. Some hide their convictions, others openly admit them and not a few belong to Catholic basis communities, or the evangelical free churches. Because of the balanced relations between the state and the church — or in simpler terms, for the sake of peace and quiet — school governing bodies, headmasters, employees of local councils and the party ignore the religious convictions of those under their supervision. However, the tiniest trouble — for example, an anonymous denunciation, a parental complaint, or some argument amongst the teaching staff — can immediately make conviction a point of indictment.

The vague and inadequate charges can be augmented. Not with facts, but with state-

ments that sound frightening. For instance: "It doesn't matter that he is religious, but it matters that he is a member of a sect." "It's not so bad that he is religious, but to cap it all, he openly admits it."

As for the first accusation, it generally hides a basic ignorance. To be precise, it doesn't even hide it. In the course of discussion it generally becomes evident that the official has no idea what a sect is, and that he confuses religious sects with sectarianism within the party [ . . . ] The obvious question — "Is religious conviction manifested in the teacher's work and if so, how?" — doesn't even arise. Instead, the Marxist-Leninist official enters into a religious argument, becomes concerned about church unity and states that "the Pope, the World Council of Churches, Billy Graham, and even Jesus Christ himself declare these views to be incompatible with the positions of the state and the church," as if those people had no other concern than to justify

a non-existent policy of the state (that is, a certain head of department, secretary of state or junior minister).

The open confession of religious conviction sounds a tamer accusation than the first, but it is more dangerous. The honest answer given to the mild-sounding question, "Tell me sincerely, are you a religious person?" becomes a confession that can be documented: "... openly admitted to be a religious person" — or in other words: "... has not yet expounded religious propaganda, but it is possible to assume that at a given opportunity he will openly proclaim his religious convictions in front of his pupils and that is essentially religious propaganda." This crime is made worse if the

person in question is a good teacher and has an attractive character.

Of course, one such report is not sufficient to merit punitive sanctions set out in written form with justifications, but it is enough to poison the air around the teacher. What head teacher enjoys a confused state of affairs amongst his staff, and what teacher cannot be found wanting by an alert inspector? The better the teacher's reputation, the greater the deterrent for the teaching community when their colleague's career is ruined and her life embittered by the fact that she [ . . . ] spoke as she felt.

*Translated from Hungarian by Susanna Thatcher.*

## Reflections on Billy Graham's Trip to Romania

*This samizdat "open letter" to Billy Graham was written by a well-informed Romanian Baptist who evidently took considerable pains to follow the American evangelist's week-long preaching tour of Romania in September 1985.*

*Dr Graham's visit, his first to Romania, took him to a synagogue in the capital, Bucharest, as well as to an Orthodox monastery and churches of several other denominations in various parts of the country. The Billy Graham Organisation's estimate of the total number of people who came to hear him was "well over 150,000" — more than any of the audiences who received him in the five other eastern European countries he has visited since 1977. Like his previous Eastern European tours, this one proved to be a source of controversy.*

Just as at the beginning of any letter, I should like to introduce myself, in the hope that these lines will be better understood. I shall introduce myself in my two capacities: as a Romanian citizen and as a believer in God. From these two standpoints I shall look at Pastor Billy Graham's visit to my country in September 1985.

I learned of his possible visit to my country a long time beforehand, and wanted God to allow it, although with my human mind I was sceptical about the accomplishment of any free evangelism in these times. Nevertheless, I believed God would find the best way for one of His believing ser-

vants to proclaim Him in my land too. My scepticism went as far as saying, "Even if it is only people paid by the Securitate [secret police — *Ed.*] who are allowed to listen to him, it will be of great value for *them* to listen to the gospel of Christ!"

As there had been absolutely no official publicity by radio, press or television, and not even the leaders of the Christian denominations knew a week in advance what his possible itinerary would be or how he would be visiting the churches, I had to piece together the information which I found out from various towns by telephone in order to plan my own tour so that I could see and hear him and rejoice together with him and with many other brothers in Christ. Just one day before he arrived in the country I worked out his planned route. It was not easy for those of us who wanted to hear him to get hold of the petrol to travel by private car (it would have been impracticable by train), or to obtain official holiday time (we knew that we could at any time be stopped and identified so that the legality of our journey could be established), and above all to travel in cars which were allowed to be used on the Sundays he would be in the country (current laws do not permit us to drive every Sunday!). But the greatest fear in our minds was that we would not be able to get into the church or place where he was to preach.

The Lord God, through His working