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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

In Search of Faith, Part 3: Religious and Secular Impulses Among Hungary's Ex-Marxist Intellectuals

JONATHAN LUXMOORE & JOLANTA BABIUCH

Since the end of communist rule Hungarian public life has been dominated by a deep division between liberal and conservative political factions in which attitudes to the country's Christian churches have played a defining role. Ironically, although this division has its roots in the late nineteenth-century era of urban and industrial expansion, it was perpetuated among communist-era opposition groups. By the mid-1970s, when opposition personalities in Poland and Czechoslovakia were seeking and finding common values in their struggle against communist injustices, Hungary's putative dissident community had produced no comparable dialogue. Many Hungarian intellectuals, it is true, were being touched by the same crisis of confidence, as the perceived failure of Marxism produced a yearning for new sources of energy and inspiration; but it was destined never to move hearts and minds to the same extent as in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Under its economic reform programme the regime of János Kádár had stressed efficiency, but moral and social bonds had been weakened. By the 1970s growth was slowing and the social services infrastructure was in decline, while the visible decay of community life was matched by growing poverty, inequality and corruption. Hungary still stood a long way from the crisis of the late 1980s, but rising tensions and uncertainties were already generating pressure for change, as well as stimulating a search in some quarters for non-material values. This stimulus had reached former Marxists from Hungary's preeminent 'Budapest School', whose members and associates now spanned three postwar generations.¹ The youngest had not experienced the trauma of the Stalinist years in Hungary or participated directly in the bloody 1956 Uprising. After spending their formative years in the communist youth movement they had come under the influence of the School's founder, György Lukács, and his older followers while studying at Budapest University in the mid-1960s. Most had reacted with dismay to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The death of Lukács three years later had removed Hungarian Marxism's foremost architect and figurehead. There were Marxist ideologues still at large, but no personalities capable of matching Lukács' incisive influence. For the youngest members of the School the resulting vacuum of authority posed particular dilemmas. The limits of criticism and open discussion were in any case tightening rather than relaxing as remnants of the Lukács fraternity were gradually excluded from official cultural life. Whereas for some this was reason for caution, for others it was an invitation to

defiance. As job prospects and career opportunities receded, the regime found it increasingly difficult to recruit and coopt active intellectual supporters.

A Crisis of Conviction

Zoltán Endreffy was one for whom disillusionment was proving irreversible. After being talent-spotted by Lukács as a mathematics and philosophy student in the late 1960s, he had become close friends with János Kis, György Bence and other young Budapest School contemporaries. In 1972, after two years' work underground, Kis, Bence and György Márkus completed a large *samizdat* study titled *Lehetségese kritikai gazdaságtan?* (*Is Critical Economy Possible?*). The book convinced Endreffy that a successful planned economy was in reality an ideological pipedream. In so doing, it appeared to confirm that Marxism was sociologically and economically dead, touching off in him something akin to an existential crisis. At the time, Endreffy was still teaching Marxist theory at Budapest's University of Technical Engineering, but since he was no longer convinced by his own words, his was a schizophrenic existence. In 1974 his endurance finally snapped, and he signed on for work as a factory labourer.

I like to think I was influenced by Tolstoy, who also undertook manual work, as an aristocrat, during a certain period of his life. During a visit to Transylvania the previous year I had taken *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* as light reading. But it had made an unexpected impact on me, showing that those destined for salvation were not those who wished to be happy, but those prepared to make sacrifices and serve others without hope of reward. I had also concluded with Rousseau that science, technology and cultural advancement, far from promoting the welfare of mankind, actually did more harm than good. I felt the privileges which intellectuals enjoy – higher pay, greater freedom, more creative work, fuller independence – were not justified by our contribution to the wellbeing of our fellow-men.²

The dramatic gesture lasted just nine months. If he alone was right, Endreffy realised, then his intellectual contemporaries were either foolish for failing to see the same obvious truths, or cynical for failing to draw the same correct conclusions for their way of life. A far more likely explanation, he concluded, was that his own thinking was wrong. He therefore gave up the factory and returned reluctantly to intellectual activity, beginning full-time work as a translator of philosophical and sociological works. His enthusiasm for Marxism had by now been supplanted by a no less intense preoccupation with Christianity.

Endreffy's personal quest was far from typical. It could be seen as one symptom, among many, of a spreading intellectual turmoil, as nationalists, libertarians, human rights activists and proponents of alternative lifestyles all vied for a share in the growing market for independent ideas. Religious experiences like his own were rare among Hungarian ex-Marxist intellectuals, however. As in Poland, many of the most articulate had themselves grown up in communist party families, and this had severely restricted their contact with religious ideas. It had also tended to set limits on exploratory political thinking comparable to that under way in Poland, and to restrict the impetus for philosophical rapprochement of the kind seen in hard-pressed Czechoslovakia. An additional factor was that the communist authorities in Hungary had treated the churches relatively mildly, thereby depriving them of credibility as a

focus for opposition and preempting the spiritual backlash certain to result from acts of persecution. Since the Second World War the Catholic Church had produced some formidable political symbols, not least Cardinal József Mindszenty, in exile for 15 years, and Bishop Áron Márton, whose defence of Hungarian minority rights in Romanian-ruled Transylvania had stirred national consciences; but unlike its Polish counterpart it had ceased to express any general solidarity with opposition forces. By the 1970s it had become at best a passive observer and at worst an active collaborator. If opposition groups had sought a refuge in the Catholic Church, the Church would have turned them away.

Bishop Asztrik Várseghi, at that time master of the novitiate at the Benedictine monastery of Pannonhalma, believes it would be wrong to assume that the Hungarian opposition was necessarily secularised or 'opposed' to religion. Its best-known Budapest figures, however, *were* overwhelmingly opposed to large-scale structures of authority, whether in the form of party leadership or church hierarchies. Their own notions of personal freedom were much more narrowly defined. Although some might look to Hungary's Reformed Church as a past symbol of national independence, neither the Protestant nor Catholic Churches held any particular attraction. As a student in the early 1960s Várseghi had known 'very few convinced Marxists'; but most of his contemporaries has been of strictly non-Christian origin, and had shown a deepseated indifference towards any talk of Christian spirituality. The few who had inherited Christian ideas from their families had generally had a sounder grounding in culture, and this had usually made it easier for them to contemplate civic duties and envisage possibilities in civic life. Those with only a socialist upbringing, however, had lacked a secure centre of gravity in this sphere. 'In both Poland and Czechoslovakia', Várseghi recalls,

there were always clearly defined groups, who were ready for dialogue on the basis of clearly elaborated differences and similarities. But there, the differences couldn't be seen so clearly. While many intellectuals had fled to the West, from where they could play little part in events, those left at home lacked space to develop. The best-known dissidents were continually shadowed and interrogated, while other potential opposition personalities were still languishing in prison.

In the mid-1970s ex-Marxist dissidents like János Kis hoped to witness the formation of a Catholic intellectual stratum corresponding to that of Poland. Under its primate Cardinal László Lécai, however, Hungary's Catholic Church remained politically accommodating and culturally weak, and lacked any capacity to encourage and protect its more articulate and assertive members. In a much-quoted 1977 essay the Catholic Church's leading spokesman, Bishop József Cserháti of Pécs, with considerable wishful thinking eulogised the 'socially constructive communication tendencies now evident in the Catholic conscience of our times.' It had long since come to recognise, Cserhati added, the 'inexorable reality of our country – the new phenomenon of pluralism'.³ For most Hungarian intellectuals, however, the Church remained beyond the pale. It could claim to have produced few if any theologians and philosophers of note, and hardly any approachable, intellectually accomplished priests. Its unattractiveness posed a major barrier to educated potential converts. After the near-total eradication of Catholic culture and literature in the 1950s the works of some Hungarian Catholic writers had been republished underground. The early 1970s had also brought the publication of documents from the Second Vatican Council, while state publishers had begun to reissue selected titles by western writers such as

Graham Greene and Heinrich Böll. Yet such gestures had had little visible impact on the Church. Miklós Tomka, a leading Catholic sociologist, remembers sensing that nothing had changed, even by the end of the decade, in the light of the Second Vatican Council. While his wife had been studying in Leipzig, Tomka had become a regular visitor to East Germany, where he had been regaled at length about the significance and meaning of what the Council had done. When he returned to Hungary, however, he had been unable to find a single theologian ready to discuss the Council's achievements. Even in the late 1980s at a retreat Tomka attended graduates of a lay theology course were unable to use documents from the Council because they had never been informed about them. 'The Hungarian theologians who had resisted communism and tried to uphold Christian values faced a serious problem,' Tomka explains. 'Many could not accept the new theological ideas and simply gave up trying. By the latter half of the 1970s a preconiliar attitude clearly predominated here.'

***Vigilia* and its Critics**

There were, of course, certain exceptions. The best-known was the group of Catholic intellectuals, numbering around 20, who edited and published the church-owned monthly review *Vigilia* from an office in central Budapest. As an official church publication which while guarding a certain independence was also obliged to reflect the hierarchy's position, *Vigilia's* influence as an intellectual alternative was destined to be limited; but it was the only officially-tolerated periodical in which religious ideas could be explored at a high cultural level, and the only forum in which the 'silent literature' of officially disapproved writers still stood some chance of finding a readership. In 1969 *Vigilia's* longstanding editor, Vlad Mihelics, had been succeeded by the poet György Rónay, who had set about belatedly introducing modern theological ideas to Hungarian Catholicism. In particular, Rónay had tried to counterbalance the journal's traditional German theoretical orientation by looking to French Personalism and its progressive successors. His ideal was of a church open to dialogue with the world and capable of raising itself up by forgiving its enemies and encouraging its friends. The ideas of such luminaries as Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Teilhard de Chardin and Yves Congar all made their contribution, through their appearance in *Vigilia*, to the emerging model of church-state coexistence in Hungary.

Like the lay-edited *Tygodnik Powszechny* in Poland, *Vigilia* had as its task to remain loyal to the Church while also maintaining an openness to the mainstream of Hungarian intellectual life. To achieve this, it pledged to uphold an informed dialogue with those of 'progressive, leftist leanings' and to keep the journal up to date with both modern theology and Hungarian culture. At the same time, it followed the church hierarchy's line on the need for believers and nonbelievers to cooperate in pursuit of the 'economic and social goals of socialism', provided that the Christian faith suffered no injury and was guaranteed by legal and institutional mechanisms. 'Christians have to find answers by themselves, in the light of the Gospel, in every historical case, and in every new phase of social progress,' Rónay wrote in the early 1970s.

Dialogue is not an aim in itself; its purpose is a sound future. Social *realpolitik* and a sober church leadership which also thinks in historical terms have recognised that there is no fruitful ecclesiastical and religious

life without a tolerant society, while at the same time there can be no developed and harmonious society without the active cooperation of believers. We are being asked questions from both within and without, and we should not attempt to eschew them, but should instead do our best to clarify them.⁴

Rónay's own talents were not to be compared with those of the great Hungarian writers and poets of the interwar period. Through him, however, *Vigilia* could claim links with the second generation to have emerged, in the footsteps of Endre Ady and Mihály Babits, via the prestigious and influential literary periodical *Nyugat*. Since the foundation of *Vigilia* under its first editor László Possonyi in 1935 its policy had been to accept contributions (provided they were of the highest quality) from writers of all kinds; it saw here a criterion of its own catholicity, as Fr László Lukács, the journal's editor from the late 1980s, explains.

At a time when all other independent publications had been closed in the late 1940s, it was the only surviving literary outlet for many bourgeois writers who were unwilling to compose poems in praise of Stalin. During the years of repression of the 1950s and 1960s, as Hungary's only Catholic monthly it had taken over the functions of other closed journals, offering a refuge to non-Catholics and non-Christians, too. This had given it a unique role, and lasting prestige in intellectual circles.

Among the literary names associated with *Vigilia* one of the most popular was János Pilinszky, who was widely believed to have found his place among twentieth-century Europe's greatest mystical poets. Pilinszky was to die relatively young, aged 60, in 1981. His short poems, infused with visionary meditations on the meaning of heaven and hell, inspired many young Hungarians to look again to Christianity for an answer to life's deeper mysteries. Besides his excellent poetry, Pilinszky was also admired as a deep, original thinker.⁵ The same combination of poetry and philosophy characterised the work of other Catholic contributors to *Vigilia* such as Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Géza Ottlik, Péter Nádas and the avant-gardist József Tillman. In most cases, though, there was little in their work to lend them a specifically Catholic identity. One of the best-known, Fr László Mécs, a native of Hungarian-inhabited southern Slovakia, brought an innovatory, metaphor-rich style to his work, vibrantly reaffirming the possibilities of faith and redemption during the worst years of Mátyás Rákosi's Stalinist dictatorship. Like his *Vigilia* contemporary Sándor Sík, Mécs soon found himself in prison with his works banned. Although the journal also reprinted classics by older figures like Endre Ady and József Attila, the communist censors ensured that the best works of authors like these were excluded. Meanwhile, the foremost contemporary religious writers and poets – with the partial exception of Pilinszky – were never fully recognised as Catholic by the Church. This fact made it hard to speak of a corpus of authoritative Christian literary figures, and even harder to regard *Vigilia* itself as a forum for genuine dialogue between opposing currents. After the Second World War, one writer, Gábor Thurzó, had formally broken with the journal, accusing its editors of failing to atone, through their 'passivity', for the collective guilt of Hungary's prewar Catholic establishment. By his death in 1979 Thurzó had still found no reason for relenting.⁶

For all its limitations, *Vigilia* was widely considered an important feature of the intellectual landscape. In asserting their independence, Rónay and others claimed to have had to fight on two fronts: against communist party hardliners resenting

Vigilia's existence as an intrusion into the area governed by the state's cultural policy, and against 'retrograde and repressive' church authorities opposed to the innovations of the Second Vatican Council. In the words of Béla Hegyi, who was to succeed Rónay as editor in August 1980, both groups had sought to lock the journal away in a Catholic ghetto, transforming it into a 'glasshouse of sacristy literature out of touch with reality'.⁷ Even if *Vigilia's* potential as a mediating force was a lot more restricted than some of its staff might like to imagine, however, it could at least stimulate a 'friendly confrontation' between philosophies and worldviews, positing values, as it had done since the 1930s, which lay against the current mainstream. Nevertheless, for all its claims, the *Vigilia* circle seemed to be playing a marginal role when compared with the *Znak* and *Więź* groups or the network of Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs (KIKs) in Poland, to which Catholic intellectuals all over Eastern Europe were looking increasingly as a model. At a time when even a simple seminar or discussion meeting was likely to encounter severe bureaucratic obstacles in Hungary it was questionable whether *Vigilia* could be regarded as a 'circle' or milieu at all; and with a print-run of just 12,000, its availability would always be restricted. What is more, *Vigilia* conspicuously lacked a middle generation of contributors born during or after the Second World War. Its collaborators tended to be relatively old or relatively young. Few if any boasted the vitality shown by ex-Marxist dissidents of the generation of János Kis.

The Limits of Dialogue

By the mid-1970s, literary and cultural life were areas where increasing tolerance was being experienced. Under the personal control of György Aczél, a member of the ruling politburo, state policy showed signs of a growing pragmatism in place of a slavish subservience to doctrine. The number of tolerated writers was rising, as fewer literary figures faced prohibition. Most Hungarians could read and write what they chose, provided it posed no direct challenge to official Marxist doctrine.

Several writers and artists associated with Hungary's 'Populist' or *Népi* tradition had achieved national standing on the fringes of the communist-approved official culture. They were only loosely connected, and lacked a common political or cultural outlook, but their ideas formed an integral part of the emerging consciousness of intellectuals, especially among the rural population whose values and traditions they claimed to embody. The best-known Populist poet, Gyula Illyés, had campaigned for social justice and political rights in the prewar period, before withdrawing from public life under Rákosi's dictatorship in the early 1950s, but his poetry, in which the theme of national survival against tyranny mingled with a humanistic and ultimately hopeful vision of the future, had remained the object of mystique and admiration.⁸ Few other Populist figures could claim to have achieved comparable popular respect, but there were other younger poets and artists who kept the *Népi* ideal alive, such as the Protestant poet Sándor Csoóri, the dramatist István Csurka, the film director Sándor Sara and the philosopher and historian István Benedek.

Despite such phenomena, some still saw the Communist Party's apparent tolerance as nothing but a hollow compromise: the state would offer creative intellectuals limited and harmless opportunities to voice discontent while requiring in return absolute subservience to its own ideological hegemony.⁹ Nevertheless it was all a far cry from the denunciations of 'bourgeois decadence' which had characterised the 1950s, when the party's monopolistic claims extended to all areas of life and only a few carefully selected western writers were tolerated in print. If writers and artists

now chose to comply with party directives their choice could not simply be dismissed as meek self-censorship. It could also be seen as a natural attempt to defend personal integrity, by attaching priority to cultural self-expression rather than political protest. Even among the youngest intellectuals, memories lived on of the 1956 Uprising, when Hungarians had made a determined attempt, like their predecessors of 1848, to wrest their country from the grasp of an outside power. It was hardly surprising that the brutal suppression of the Uprising should continue to affect intellectual attitudes, not least in engendering scepticism about the potential of any united opposition effort. From the late 1960s onwards most of the Hungarian intellectuals, whether Populists or Urbanists, already had a good deal to lose, and were understandably cautious when it came to talk of acting against the system.

There were some, however, for whom the work of writers and artists still carried a special duty of radical opposition, just as it had done in the nineteenth century under Austrian occupation. For people of this kind, *Vigilia* and its Catholic associates seemed disappointingly passive. Was it not morally questionable to regard one's own cultural activities as a private affair only, unrelated to any sense of social and political commitment? Were Christians of this kind failing to see the social and political implications of their faith and allowing the duties of opposition to be dominated by secular, non-Christian personalities? A very similar charge could be brought against members of the steadily expanding network of Christian renewal movements and base communities. By the end of the 1970s these would claim over 50,000 young members, giving them a potential importance which opposition activists took notice of; but their political and social impact was destined to be limited. The most politically assertive movement, known as 'Bokor' (Bush), was headed by the Piarist priest Fr György Bulányi, a one-time follower of the Croatian 'underground' Jesuit Fr Tomislav Kolakovič. Bokor was openly confronting the regime in its vigorous opposition to military service. It was also winning recognition from secular *samizdat* journals for its attempts to widen the sphere of autonomous activities, as well as for its sensitivity to social and ecological issues. The hostility of Bokor to the church hierarchy led to its being ostracised by other Catholic groups, however, who found its style and methods too provocative.¹⁰

Fr Miklós Blanckenstein, the youthful pastoral leader of the 'Regnum Marianum' renewal movement, founded in the 1880s by the Catholic social reformer Fr Ottokar Prohaszka, remembers the dilemmas clearly.

There was no possibility to live a political life, or even to hold opinions on political matters, so one of our main tasks, in view of our predominantly intellectual membership, was to form personal judgments instead, each according to his abilities, on political and economic developments and on the most valuable areas of our national culture. But of course, the very idea of a 'movement' had poor political connotations in Hungary. Regnum Marianum itself was as old as the century, and had always been open to the questions of the day. But we believed the answers were to be found in the church's sacraments. The movement's role had to be explained ultimately in a theological rather than social sense.

The Catholic sociologist Miklós Tomka thinks the reluctance of the movements and communities to assume a political profile was the result of circumstance rather than of conviction. To have opened a dialogue with ex-Marxist opposition groups would have required, first and foremost, a clear formulation of identities, but this was made difficult by the eclectic, uncertain atmosphere. 'Catholic groups were more interested

in attempting to live an integral Christian lifestyle than in complex discussions', Tomka explains.

They were also convinced that the main priority must be to resist social atomisation and anomy. But they also distrusted any practical concentration on social and economic problems, and were generally unaware of the political possibilities which their well-organised communities presented. This was the main reason why dialogue with the neo-humanist opposition never really got started.

Budapest's ex-Marxist and Urbanist intellectuals tended to be dismissive of Christian attitudes in any case, Tomka points out. None of his own academic colleagues, even with dissident links, showed any interest in religion, whether as a transcendental or a cultural phenomenon.

Most had started their active life in Budapest's student milieu, often coming from well-off, politically influential families. They had found their way to an opposition stance only after a long period of Marxist education, and still displayed Marxist and communist elements in their thought and behaviour. There were, as a result, enormous divergences between the Budapest-centred liberal ex-Marxist circles, often with no religious ties at all, and the rural middle- and lower-class elements among whom populism and religion were strongest.

At a time when the option of political activity was being recognised increasingly by ex-Marxist groups, Catholic reticence was certain to prove a problem. There were non-contentious national issues around which opposition unity was achievable, such as the fate of Hungarian minorities in Romania and Czechoslovakia, which had increasingly preoccupied Populist figures like Gyula Illyés, and the need to generate pressure against growing poverty and corruption at home. But while the shock of 1956 resided darkly in the national consciousness, Hungarian intellectuals would remain far more reticent than their Polish and Czech neighbours when it came to organised political action. Dissidents of the calibre of György Konrád, later to become one of the country's best-known contemporary writers, and his collaborator Ivan Szelényi might try to promote a debate about political alternatives, or to recreate the semblance of a political culture among sympathetic intellectual circles, but their work was little known outside the narrow circle of Budapest's Urbanist elite. Educated Catholics remained defiantly aloof from any direct opposition involvement. The expanding field of political *samizdat* publishing, soon to be characterised by well-produced titles like *Beszélő*, *Hírmondó* and *Demokrata*, was dominated by ex-Marxists, and Catholics made little contribution. Although personal and local ties might be maintained, the opportunities for a sustained authoritative dialogue were in consequence severely limited. Fr Tamás Nyíri, a theologian and philosopher who played a key role as architect and apologist for the conciliatory policy of 'small steps' in church-state relations, admits that this posed a serious problem. 'The Hungarian Church had no link at all with opposition movements', Nyíri remembers. 'It had no way of showing its true potential, of conciliating its critics or of overcoming fears. The opposition, for its part, had no interest in cooperating with the Church.'

For János Kis, the overall aims of the Hungarian opposition could be summarised as 'addressing that segment of the population which places its hopes neither in the

reform of the apparatuses nor in the improvement of the Communist Party, but which could serve as the foundation for independent movements and organisations.' The real problem, however, says Kis, was always a lack of trust.

There were dissident personalities who could claim to stand within the mainstream of national culture, with at least some potential to bridge the gap between rival intellectual traditions. György Konrád was a prime example. Although most closely associated with the Budapest Urbanists and disillusioned followers of Lukács, Konrád was also on close personal terms with Populist writers like István Csurka, and his philosophical outlook was wide-ranging enough to provide some common ground. Among his own key influences he counted foreign authors ranging from Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to Joyce and Beckett, while his sources of literary inspiration from twentieth-century Hungary included the experimentalists Gyula Krúdy and Miklós Szentkuthy, both of whom had come from Catholic backgrounds and imbued their work with religious elements.¹¹ Konrád may have been acceptable to liberal Catholics, but their more conservative counterparts still tended to look on most secular dissident intellectuals as inherently untrustworthy – people whose friends and forebears, though now in opposition, had largely accounted for the rise of communist power in the first place.

For people like Kis, such attitudes seemed anachronistic and unacceptable. Whatever their antecedents, ex-Marxist opposition activists were now defending the freedom of church groups too, a fact which deserved to be reciprocated by a more engaged and open-minded Catholic stance. While the Catholic communities and movements were undoubtedly an important phenomenon, however, they had mobilised people of a younger generation and from a different intellectual background. Few if any of their members could claim much in common with the élite Budapest academic circles from which Kis and his contemporaries had emerged. Kis himself followed intellectual fashion by reading religious writers like Teilhard de Chardin, Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but he read them 'as literature only' without imputing wider significance to their conclusions.

At a time when progress was being made towards a united intellectual opposition in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the lack of dialogue and common ground in Hungary made the active opposition isolated and vulnerable. For his own part, Kis still blames the collaborationist stance of the Catholic Church.

I am not sure that the quasi-religious approach to the problem of values and existential questions would have become so characteristic of people like Kuroń and Michnik in Poland had it not been for the powerful political and intellectual impact of the Catholic Church there. We lacked this challenge in Hungary – and not only in the sense that both the Catholic and Protestant Churches were politically much weaker and more subjugated. This was only one side of the story. Whereas the Polish activists of KOR could look for interlocutors to the highest echelons of the Church's hierarchy, from Cardinals Wyszyński and Wojtyła down, our few Catholic partners in Hungary were at best members of dissident religious groups, who were persecuted not just by the state but by their own church leaders too. There was also another important difference. Poland boasted a powerful Catholic intellectual tradition, whereas in Hungary the best Catholic thinkers had merely translated and propagated sources from other countries. There was no coherent high-level religious philosophy in Hungary which could pose any challenge to us.

Indigenous Inspiration

Among the few ex-Marxist intellectuals who, like Zoltán Endreffy, had turned for solace to spiritual values, attitudes to the mainstream churches were destined to remain mostly ambivalent. Péter Balassa, a literature specialist, had come under the spell of the Budapest School as a student in the mid-1960s, only to find himself engulfed by the wave of disillusionment and frustration following the events of 1968. Seeking new philosophical inspiration, he had rejected Lukács's interpretation of German classical idealism, and had begun to study the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Camus instead. In the meantime, he had turned to the Bible and been particularly drawn to the Book of Job. He has also reread Dostoyevsky, as well as the Hungarians Ady, Babits and Pilinszky. Of these last three it was Endre Ady who seemed, initially at least, to be offering the most important message. His poetry provided a modern explanation of the Bible texts which had attracted Balassa's interest; but it also posed a question which had begun to seem especially relevant: how could the human being, with all his uncertainties and contradictions, evolve into a single coherent, integral personality? Ady's approach to this dilemma, Balassa sensed, had a certain 'Russian' feel to it, recalling Dostoyevsky, who had wrestled with the same problem in his time. Perhaps it also contained echoes of the exhortation *ut unum sint* in St John's Gospel, which was clearly an appeal for the unity of Christians, but might also, in Ady's view, carry a second meaning – 'let them be one *in themselves*'.

This question – how best to restore human integrity and homogeneity – seemed at the time to be supremely important. It wasn't a case of closing oneself into a single personality, through some painful self-analytical process. It was, rather, a case of opening up, of being united, true and consistent at all important moments. The struggle to reach this stage presents us with an intellectual dilemma. And it was through this dilemma that Christianity became a natural element in my life again.

When Balassa returned to the Catholic faith of his childhood, the part-Jewish identity inherited from his journalist father, a convert in the 1920s, helped to modify his sense of intellectual isolation. He had familiarised himself with the documents of the Second Vatican Council and belatedly realised the importance of what had occurred there. Among other things, the Council had highlighted the dual Christian and Jewish roots of European culture, describing the Jewish faith as Christianity's 'older brother'. Knowing that both traditions were intertwined in his own background contributed to Balassa's long-sought feeling of personal coherence and integrity. It also made him feel at one with his cultural surroundings. After years of adherence to Marxism, however, Balassa knew his rediscovered faith would need time to develop. He still considered himself 'anticlerical at heart' and was determined not to be constrained by denominational pressures. Experience had taught him, moreover, that belief and faith provided no guarantee of morality. By his own reckoning he had met 'many more good, moral atheists in life than good, moral Christians'.

He was helped in his continuing search by the work of János Pilinszky. 'Through him, I got to know a Christianity which had nothing to do with the humiliated baroque Church,' Balassa recalls.

It was a Christianity which didn't make me feel that I had to surrender my freedom, or offer up some essential aspect of my personality as a precondition of church membership. Instead, it appeared to embrace a true

form of dialogue. Pilinszky helped me to see that faith wasn't the end of a process. It meant, as Pascal and Kierkegaard taught, a constant search and readiness to take risks, and an endless, unremitting struggle to reconcile doubts and certainties. The church in Pilinszky's writings was a visible and invisible entity, in which the properties of power and prayer were locked in perpetual contradiction. The figure of Jesus could not be considered identical with the church's history.

It was worth remembering, Balassa points out, that Pilinszky had not addressed himself to the reader as a 'Catholic poet'. He considered confession and self-knowledge to be of great importance, but he also declined to give traditional answers – indeed, he could be said to have declined to offer any 'answers' at all. Instead, he was one of the very few contemporary poets who clearly saw the full complexity of the human condition, and who remained constantly ready to go on searching. In Pilinszky's work, life was an open drama, the drama of a world which had abandoned God, and which would sooner or later return to God as a natural and inevitable fulfilment of human history.

Penetrating a Secular Culture

Something very similar had happened to Zoltán Endreffy. In his case, the end result would be full acceptance of the Catholic Church, but Endreffy's retreat from Marxism was also destined to be a long, hard process.

The existential crisis I had passed through since the early 1970s had arisen, first and foremost, because of my inability to find answers in Marxism to the great questions which were troubling me. What is life? What is death? Why are we here? Marxism simply didn't deal with deep problems like these. That was why I had lost my interest in it and turned to religion instead.

Until the mid-1970s, Endreffy had had no contact of any kind with religious people. His 'secular atheistic worldview' had told him that the church was an obscurantist, retrograde, feudal organisation: the fortunes and misfortunes of its reactionary functionaries were of no interest to superior Marxists like himself. It had come as something of a shock when, turning again to the Russian writers, he had found a very different picture of religious people set out in their works, such as Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, or Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*, who helps the murderer Raskol'nikov recover his lost soul. Endreffy had read Gandhi's autobiography and the works of Simone Weil and Albert Schweitzer, and had studied great names from Hungary's Catholic culture such as Mihály Babits and Zoltán Kodály. His sustained foray into religious literature and art had still left a key question open, however: what made people believe in God?

It was to obtain an answer to this question that Endreffy applied to study theology. It was a highly unusual step. In 1979, the government would allow the church to inaugurate a correspondence course, designed by Tamás Nyíri, which significantly widened the scope for theology teaching in Hungarian society; but when Endreffy began his own six-year course in 1975, studying Greek, Latin and Hebrew alongside Catholic priests, few if any intellectuals like him had ever darkened the doors of Budapest's dim and musty Theology Academy. It was Nyíri himself who quickly spotted the ex-Marxist's talents. In Endreffy's first term he asked him to help trans-

late the works of Karl Rahner, a task for which Nyíri had been given personal responsibility by the great German theologian. Rahner's *Kleines Theologisches Worterbuch* and *Grundkurs des Glaubens* were issued later in the 1970s by the church-owned St István publishing house.

Endreffy lasted only four years at the Academy; but in March 1979, on St Benedict's day, he was finally received into the Church by Asztrik Várseghi of Pannonhalma. By then most of his former Budapest School contemporaries had come to terms with the disillusionment of the previous decade and had thrown their energies instead into the struggle for human rights. While rejecting Marxism, they had not overcome their disdain for religious belief, however. 'Their reaction to my conversion was quite gentle, but they clearly assumed that I'd gone slightly mad,' recalls Endreffy.

And when I explained my reasons for becoming a Christian, they found them unconvincing. During a conversation with János Kis, a friend since schooldays, I tried to demonstrate why I believed Christ's Resurrection had been a real historical event. He listened politely, but then replied that my arguments left him untouched.

Years later, still bearing the atheist convictions instilled into him by Lukács, Kis would remember Endreffy's spiritual 'switch of allegiances' as the only one involving a top-level Hungarian intellectual, and would attribute it to the lack of moral persuasiveness in Marxist aims. Although other conversions had almost certainly occurred too, Kis concedes, often as a result of prison experiences, they were undoubtedly few in number, and had not involved any symbolic figures comparable to Kuroń and Michnik in Poland. 'The phenomenon of religious conversions was marginal here in intellectual terms', Kis argues. 'Where they occurred they affected only lesser-known personalities, and had no wider cultural or social impact.'

For the time being, there were still no signs of any meaningful opposition dialogue in Hungary, nor any immediate prospects of finding common ground. Ex-Marxist and Christian groups were each in their own ways resisting the same enemy, and focusing their struggle in most cases on the same fundamental issues; but shared values or philosophical viewpoints stood little chance of taking root. While the ex-Marxists were tempted to scorn their Catholic counterparts' seemingly obscure, ineffectual attitudes, Catholics in their turn tended to distrust the ex-Marxists, believing they still enjoyed privileges previously conferred on them as party members or as sons and daughters of party members. Hungary's opposition intellectuals exerted little public influence, and posed no serious political challenge. Even when *samizdat* journals appeared to flourish, it was hard to see to whom their material was addressed, if not solely to other like-minded groups and individuals. Even at its most dynamic, the opposition still had to develop the capacity for 'speaking to society' which was now being shown increasingly by dissident circles in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Unlike its Hungarian counterpart, the Polish ruling party lacked any great school of Marxist philosophy to draw upon, and could boast no more than a few mediocre ideologues who were using Marxist tenets to legitimate the political system. At the same time, however, the Hungarian opposition lacked figures of the calibre of Leszek Kołakowski and Jan Patočka, whose stature was sufficient to present a forceful popular alternative to state-imposed Marxism. A role of this kind would not be performed until the 1980s, when the ideas of István Bibó were posthumously resurrected as a common thread in intellectual discussions. For most of the 1970s, however,

Bibó's life and work were still subsumed by the personality of the late György Lukács, whose revisionist teachings had long since ceased to evolve in a way which might offer real answers to contemporary dilemmas. There were no integrating personalities, Christian or secular, to act as pioneers and models, who could combine personal experience of intellectual dilemmas with a coherent prescription for what might emerge from them, while also opening doors to some form of consensus between contrasting intellectual traditions.

The communist system had been experienced differently in Hungary than in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Kádárist policy of cooptation, with its slogan 'Who is not against us is with us', had given the post-1956 system a measure of legitimacy by creating a network of small vested interests. It had discouraged intellectuals from risking the meagre freedoms already gained, and had fostered practical professional preoccupations in preference to grandiose moral gestures. If intellectuals were rejecting the system, they were not doing so for the moral and spiritual reasons enunciated in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and were not, for the most part, finding a system of absolute values to take its place. Instead, like their nineteenth-century forerunners, they were moving in the direction of a practical liberalism, which was believed to provide real answers to the hopes and expectations of Hungarian society.

Notes and References

- ¹ The first generation of the 'Budapest School' included József Szigeti and István Király, who later became members of the party leadership during the Stalinist period. The second, identified with the period after the 1956 Uprising, was dominated by Agnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, György Márkus and Mihály Vajda. The third, joining in the mid-1960s, included János Kis, György Bence, Sándor Radnoti and others. In the 1970s, the School acquired the popular designation 'Flying Kindergarten' (*Repülő óvoda*) in a satirical comparison with Poland's underground 'Flying University'. György Lukács (1885–1971) joined the Hungarian Communist Party in 1918 and dominated critical Marxist thought for more than five decades. His major works include *A történelem és osztálytudat (History and Class Consciousness)*, first published in Budapest in 1923.
- ² For a fuller account of Zoltán Endreffy's change of thinking, see Jonathan Luxmoore and Jolanta Babiuch, 'The road to Damascus: three Eastern European intellectuals on the dilemmas of faith and ideology', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 21, nos. 3–4, 1993, pp. 319–44.
- ³ *Ensemble pour une bonne cause: L'Etat Socialiste et les Eglises en Hongrie* (Corvina, Budapest, 1978), pp. 75–86. Published to highlight the churches' close cooperation with the Hungarian state, the collection also included texts by György Lukács, Archbishop József Ijjas of Kalocsa, Cardinal László Lékai, Professor Tamas Nyíri and András Szennay, the archabbot of Pannonhalma.
- ⁴ Quoted by Béla Hegyi in *Vigilia*, January 1981, p. 4.
- ⁵ János Pilinszky's works include *Harmadnapon (On the Third Day)* (1959), *Requiem* (1964), and *Kráter* (1976).
- ⁶ Gábor Thurzó (1912–79), whose influences included G. K. Chesterton, spent his life in Budapest, and vigorously decried the moral passivity and collective guilt of Hungary's postwar generation. His works include *Nappalok és éjszakák (Days and Nights)* (1945) and *A szent (The Saint)* (1966), the latter dealing with the Jesuit novice István Kaszap (1919–35) whose canonisation was sought by the Church during the Second World War.
- ⁷ Hegyi, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ⁸ Gyula Illyés (1902–83), who temporarily left Hungary because of his involvement in the 1919 revolutionary movement, became a prominent contributor to *Nyugat*, and later edited its successor until its closure in 1944. His prose and poetry collections are *Oroszország (Russia)* (1934), *Puszták népe (People of the Puszta)* (1936), *Fáklyaláng (Torch Flame)*

(1953), and *Minden lehet (Everything's Possible)* (1973). His major poem, *Egymondattal a zsarnokságról (One Sentence on Tyranny)* was published during the 1956 Uprising.

- ⁹ This tendency was illustrated convincingly by the ex-Marxist Miklós Haraszti in his book *The Velvet Glove: Artists Under State Socialism* (Basic Books, New York, 1987).
- ¹⁰ Fr György Bulányi, a former language teacher at Hungary's Piarist schools, founded the Bokor movement while working as a university chaplain in the late 1940s, and later spent four years in prison for illegally teaching the catechism. In 1982 his movement was condemned as 'subversive' by the Hungarian Catholic episcopate and Bulányi himself subjected to a *suspensio a divinis*, a ruling endorsed by the Vatican. At its height in the 1980s Bokor numbered around 2000 members of varying ages.
- ¹¹ György Konrád's second novel, *A városalapító (The City Builder)*, was published in 1977, and contrasted early communist-era ideals with the drab, mediocre conditions of the present. His other books include *A látogató (The Caseworker)* (1969), which was a rapid success in many foreign languages, *Az értelmiség útja az osztályhatalomhoz (Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power)* (with Ivan Szelényi) (1979) and *Antipolitika (Antipolitics)* (1984). After the 1989 collapse of communist rule Konrád became a council member of the Alliance of Free Democrats and president of the International PEN Club.

Any quotation without a referenced footnote comes from personal conversation with the authors.