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The Ecumenical Movement and its Relations with 'Eastern Europe': a Hungarian Perspective*

ZOLTÁN BALOG

I want to talk about the ecumenical contacts of a Central European church, namely Hungary's Reformed Church, during the period of East–West conflict. This is a broad topic, which is why it is especially important to clarify what is relevant here and what is not. Over the years there have been cross-border contacts involving individuals, basis groups and parishes; the activities of church leaders in various international organisations; academic contacts between theological training institutions; foreign scholarships; bilateral contacts with those of the same confession; dialogue with other confessions; diaconal cooperation; financial help; Bible schools; the list goes on.

Contacts and activities of this kind were already happening in great variety before the Second World War; those involved were individually responsible. Hungarian Protestants already had a very strong interest in the outside world for the reason that bridge-building over the heads of the Catholic Habsburgs had often been essential for survival.

After 1948 (the year of the communist takeover and the banning of civic groups) these many different contacts and activities consistently came up against restrictions determined by the policy of the ruling party. Whatever did not fit in with this policy was soon stopped or brought into line. Many 'small' examples allow one to follow slight changes of course in this policy, for example changes in the number of scholarships abroad the churches were allowed to accept. Not everything could be controlled, of course. However, I would like to focus on areas which were particularly well supervised by the state, because for a whole variety of reasons the political, economic and ideological polarisation of Europe was an important element in the strategy of those who maintained these contacts. (The end of the totalitarian system has presented a particular challenge to these contacts both as far as their history over the past few decades and their possible transformation in the future are concerned.)

How did the above-mentioned restrictions manifest themselves in the totalitarian state? After the outbreak of the Cold War (which incidentally was in the very year the World Council of Churches was founded) there was a large-scale reassessment by western public opinion of the political leaderships in the eastern-bloc countries. For the one-party state this state of affairs provided a battlefield for propaganda. Here there was a role only for those who fulfilled a propaganda function. The players were

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chosen according to strict criteria. In 1988, I described the phenomenon: ‘To be selected meant that unconditional loyalty to the official position of the regime at home overrode every other criterion for selection. Loyalty meant never having said or done anything which might be unacceptable to the government.’

Within this framework many undertook serious theological and ecumenical work; but always strictly within this framework; and because our people thought they could sense precisely where these restrictions lay, the ecumenical achievements of these individuals were dismissed by our church folk as inauthentic. The restrictions on ecumenical work had been imposed from outside and this meant that representatives of churches of the eastern bloc were capable only of a dialogue which was subject to certain conditions. These conditions were an existential problem for anyone who was elected to church office or who was allowed to go to conferences abroad. I experienced this situation in a small way myself: the fear that one might have said something which could be misconstrued, which could then be interpreted back home as fouling one’s own nest, with the inevitable consequences. You had to be terribly careful in formulating your own ideas: they were not to provoke anyone – especially the other side, namely the West – but they should allow a critical viewpoint to become apparent. Many people did not have a critical viewpoint, however. Very soon permission to go abroad became one of the rarest privileges.

It is possible that this propaganda function had a greater effect internally than externally. It recoiled in accordance with the notion that ‘the people at home must hear all about the victories we have won abroad’.

For the churches’ leaders this propaganda function offered something else as well: if they were skilful in their tactics they could prove that they were indispensable both to the regime at home and to their western partners; and this also meant that their legitimisation was strengthened at parish level. The appearance of well-known western church figures in Hungary demonstrated the plausibility of the Hungarian church leaders – or at least it carried the message: ‘We don’t want to hear from you in the opposition: these are our friends.’

Individuals and groups in the churches who had been cut off from these contacts had for a long time accepted this situation, albeit with ever-increasing disillusionment. Their own aim was to search for allies in the West for the battle at home which they were unable to fight themselves. In the archives of the general secretary at the WCC there is a thick file entitled *Hungary 1954–56* containing a quantity of documents – mostly pseudonymous appeals and reports – which bear witness to the church leaders’ reign of terror. The people in Geneva were better informed than the average church minister in Hungary but they could do less with this information because they were the last link in the chain which brought it to them, whether from the official side or the opposition side. Appeals from the church opposition became however ever rarer. Why? More about that later.

It was not of course possible to control everything, even in a totalitarian state like Hungary. This was especially so when visitors came to Hungary, occasions which gave rise to the craziest conspiracy stories. Public information was of course under total control. The monopoly on information could not be breached. News which was not favourable to the state reached only a few people. Word-of-mouth propaganda, which it was not possible to control openly, soon, however, became the best means of manipulating opinion for those in power. News and legendary stories rapidly mingled into a bitter-sweet fog, which rendered an analysis of the actual situation completely impossible. Absence of freedom of the press increased the value of ecumenical contacts even more. (The situation was different in the churches of the

GDR, where there was (limited) freedom for the church press – what a privilege!)

Absence of press freedom meant that the 'double strategy' described by Laurens Hogebrink often had the effect of slandering church people or at least of producing only disappointment, because while the official side of the strategy received publicity – that's why it existed: to show that our party and church leadership was civilised enough for westerners and capable of partnership – the semi-legal contacts were insufficient as alternative evidence; the nods and winks were invisible from afar.

The language spoken in the ecumenical world at large quickly lost its capacity to address the people in our part of the world. The verbal affirmation of West European ecumenical priorities by the East's church leadership – Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation – sullied these words as far as our people were concerned. Everyone knew that they functioned as substitutes and that they were put in the shop window in place of our own concerns.

What would our own questions have been? How could we even have arrived at a situation where we could have confronted these problems? The discrediting of these subjects was a premeditated effect of propaganda. The double strategy again proved counterproductive. Why did our western European friends not understand our concerns? In 1988 I wrote as follows.

There is at present a feeling of unease in Eastern Europe which is hard to convey. One of the questions weighing on our minds is where we are to define our position between the First and the Third Worlds. Or do we even need a definition? Should we be trying to thematise our feelings in this way? Would it not be better to follow one of the maxims which westerners recommend for us too: 'Think globally, act locally'? This modest expectation of us assumes that the root of all problems everywhere is the same and that we must fight together for a common solution, although it is accepted that for the little brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe acting locally will be harder because of their situation, and so the more experienced and battle-hardened western siblings will be expecting less of them and will welcome even the smallest improvements. But why is it not possible for us in Eastern Europe to think globally in a wholehearted way and take up our share of responsibility for the world?

So we felt uneasy. Has anything changed? We were instrumentalised and rendered powerless at the very time when we wanted to make a conscious effort on the social level, when we wanted to understand the significance of our ecumenical relationships for the general problems of mankind.

Billy Graham did things differently. He came as ambassador for peace to Moscow and Budapest and was allowed to proclaim the 'non-political gospel' (which was therefore very political). Apart from the language of evangelicals, there was no sphere of communication between us Christians of East and West in which words had the same meaning for both: words like 'social justice', 'revolution', 'human rights'; even 'Christian freedom', 'Christian responsibility', 'faith and action'. There was, then, no sphere of communication which was free in respect of the bi-polarity in Europe and which at the same time did not obliterate this bi-polarity. The pressure to make choices among political alternatives and to interpret our activity primarily in the context of the East–West division made prisoners of us. There was no free speech any more. In one way or another the political division bogged us down in our language.

I do not want to make out that there were no meetings between free Christians

from East and West at that time. Visits and friendships were a way of surviving: We spoke liberating words to each other. But the churches, as churches within a divided Europe, did not find liberating words with which to address that division, or other painful issues in other parts of the world. The question of minorities, for example, was silenced outright. The institutions were powerless. Gestures, actions and messages were heard and publicised only insofar as they could be interpreted in the context of the East–West polarisation.

As Christians of Europe, we were not in a position to break through this bi-polarity with our message and make ourselves heard. An example of this is that the Basel Assembly produced no encouragement for the people of Eastern Europe. One positive exception as far as I am concerned was the Taizé movement, which established true fellowship between Christians of East and West at the level of the basis community.

Let me now look back at the period in question and try to identify its different stages. The first stage was the spontaneous time of the postwar ecumenical movement, when the concept of the ‘responsible society’ (Karl Barth) again and again provided the background for particular decisions, which often produced traumatic results. Two quotations regarding the revolutionary events in Hungary in 1956 will serve to characterise that time.

Helmut Gollwitzer spoke on the occasion of the day of national mourning in that year during the Hesse state government session in Wiesbaden which commemorated the Hungarian uprising: ‘It is our cause that they are fighting for over there: human freedom against tyranny. That is why I hope we are racking our brains over how we can stand by them without setting the world on fire.’ An anonymous appeal from Hungary written ‘against the slanderous statements of the Hungarian Reformed Church leadership about the events of 1956’ contains the following reminder:

The place where the church must stand is between East and West; and if the church in the East is at present forced to exist in full conformity and agreement with the world in which it finds itself, then the churches in the rest of the world should see this as a warning that they have a duty to defend and make use of the opportunity available to them to adopt a freely critical attitude towards their own political systems. While rejecting many points made in the controversial documents under discussion [the writer is referring to the position of the Hungarian church leadership – ZB] one should keep on asking oneself the question: Is the church outside the eastern world not also too closely linked to the prevailing social system, and has it not therefore become disloyal to its Lord? ... We need to make a distinction here. It is right that the church should stand between East and West, but equally from this neutral standpoint it should not lose sight of the relative difference between East and West when it takes its practical decisions. This relative difference is greater freedom in the West and the opportunity this provides for healthy development.¹

In the early 1960s the world ecumenical movement discovered the churches in the so-called Third World and their problems. At the same time the Russian Orthodox Church joined the WCC. The result was that the small ‘Eastern European’ churches and their problems were marginalised. This tendency was reinforced by the disappointment progressive Christians felt over the Prague Spring (1968). There was a perception that a humanising change of course in the East had no real chance, and the people in Geneva came increasingly to terms with the status quo. After 1968 Geneva

gradually orientated itself exclusively towards 'world politics' and followed the ground rules of the politicians when forming ecumenical relations with Eastern Europe.

Theological developments reflected this orientation in a disastrous way. The basic convictions of the ecumenical movement allowed for no 'special problems'; everything was seen in terms of a dualistic interpretation which Gerhard Sauter characterises in the following way:

World Christendom stands before one and the same ethical constellation. It believes that it can achieve unity only if it shares a common vision on creating the future, namely the task God has set it to build God's Kingdom, or at least to prepare for his coming by way of social justice, world peace and world preservation. Behind this concept lies the notion that history is a stage upon which the successes, failures and omissions of its subjects are played out, in connection with God acting in such a way that His will shines through in certain tasks, above all in the freedom granted to take these tasks on. God is thus seen as having laid the responsibility for human history in our hands. This responsibility demands choice, and this choice amounts to the same thing, as a choice between belief and unbelief, between hope and despair.²

All this leads inevitably to a reduction of political reality for the sake of Christian commitment. Possible political alternatives are forcibly reduced to the status of an 'either-or' on the question of standing before God. This is part of the reduction process which aims to eliminate ambiguity. It was hard to argue against this fundamental view in Geneva.

As an example let us take the Church–State Relations colloquium in August 1976. The correspondence reveals that it was difficult for the organisers, Lukas Vischer in particular, to obtain a credible contribution from Eastern Europe. At that time various department offices in Geneva were occupied by Eastern Europeans who were also employees of the state organs of their home countries, and who could therefore suppress any 'undesirable' contributions at an early stage. One young theologian subsequently did succeed in correcting his doctored contribution from Romania, but his name had to remain secret. 'Opposition' organisations like Glaube in der Zweiten Welt for example were kept at a distance. (There were some exceptions.)³

A Tentative Summing-Up

Throughout the Cold War period, it is true, efforts were made by individuals in Geneva who did not want to become entirely one-sided on East–West issues – who were not prepared uncritically to accept the official positions of state and church – but these attempts did not succeed in affecting those very people to whom they were directed. I find the perennial rivalry between Eastern European issues and commitment to the so-called Third World very symptomatic. These two areas are often confusedly played off against each other. Behind these problems (where and how should the WCC direct its activities?) lie not only a lack of clarity over the task of the WCC (is it a consultative forum or a body for action which must always act and speak with one voice?) but also a lack of clarity as to the tasks and limits of the theological reflection the member churches undertake together and the lack of a common understanding of the relationship between theological work and actual church practice.⁴ Meaning, transparency and credibility lose out. The deeply engrained 'diplo-

matic' ways of the Cold War are still a very strong determining factor as far as the activity of the WCC is concerned.

Looking at 'Eastern Europe' one can say that today a story which begins to approach reality about the churches of that region and their real problems can be told. This unmasked reality often means a shock for Christians in the West, who are of a different mind-set theologically, culturally and politically. The lack of trust resulting from decades of totalitarian control is still to be overcome. Church members at grass roots level sense that the world ecumenical movement is ignoring them. People have the feeling: this has nothing to do with me; so how can I be expected to involve myself in its concerns?

Notes and References

- ¹ Manuscript quoted with the approval of the author, Gyula Bárczay.
- ² Gerhard Sauter, 'Theologische Kriterien für kirchliches Handeln nach dem Ende des Ost-West-Konfliktes', *Evangelische Theologie*, vol. 55, no. 3, 1995, pp. 260–77, here p. 263 f.
- ³ Eugen Voss, Eckehart Lorenz, Lukas Vischer (eds), *Die Religionsfreiheit in Osteuropa* (Glaube in der Zweiten Welt, Zollikon, 1984).
- ⁴ Ottokar Basse (ed.), *Kirche im sozialistischen Gesellschaftssystem* (Glaube in der Zweiten Welt, Zollikon, 1986). See especially: the introduction (pp. 7–9); Heinz Joachim Held, 'Eingangsvotum für das Forum "Kirche im sozialistischen Gesellschaftssystem",' (pp. 16–21); Johannes Adrianus Hebly, 'Aspekte der westlichen ökumenischen Politik gegenüber Osteuropa' (pp. 22–44); Eugen Voss, 'Schwierigkeiten der Informationsarbeit und des Informierens der westlichen Öffentlichkeit' (pp. 172–82).

(Translated from the German by Edward Thomas)