Document

Catholicism and Politics in Czechoslovakia

Dr Václav Benda, a Roman Catholic, was born in 1946 and gained his doctorate in 1970. He was an assistant professor of philosophy until he was dismissed in 1971. He then studied computer programming, but lost his new job after signing Charter 77 in 1977. He was named as a new spokesman for Charter 77 on 8 February 1979. He is also a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), set up by members of the Charter 77 movement on 1 May 1978. On 29 May 1979 he and 9 other members of this committee were arrested, and on 23 October 1979 Dr Benda was sentenced to four years' imprisonment under Art. 98 of the Penal Code ("subversion of the Republic").

Dr Benda has written poetry, a novel, and articles on literature, philosophy, logic and mathematics. The following document, entitled Catholicism and Politics: the Origins of the Present Situation and How it May Develop, *is dated 5 January 1979, and is the last substantial article he wrote before his arrest. It appeared in Czech in* Křesťané a Charta 77, *Köln, 1980, pp. 265-79. The extracts which follow are translated into English for the first time.*

In this article, Dr Benda expresses the belief that the Christians in Czechoslovakia — and particularly the Catholics — are presented with a unique opportunity. As the only members of Czechoslovak society who retain positive beliefs and ideals they ought to take the initiative and involve themselves in practical activity for the improvement of society.

Since Dr Benda's arrest, extracts from letters written to his family from prison have begun to circulate in Czechoslovakia. Their tone is one of optimism and hope. He is sure that God is helping him and that he will be able to use his imprisonment to God's glory. "I do not doubt", he writes, "that I shall be able to endure everything that comes my way . . . Of course, these are wasted years in terms of any sort of creative activity, but then I am not sure that even this treasure is immune to rust; and in terms of varied experiences these years are, on the contrary, invaluable."

[. . .] Of course, there is no such thing as a healthy *polis** or dynamic political life either in Eastern Europe, or among the traditional democracies of the West: the signs of crisis in both East and West are all too obvious. Here, though, the similarity between them ends. In all other matters the problems of the two societies are completely different and cannot be compared at any theoretical or practical level: the best analogy which occurs to me here is

*The Greek term *polis* as used by Benda recalls the ancient Greek city states, where elected elders would meet to discuss politics in "a normal way" — that is, without reference to any specific ideological scheme for the future. *Ed.*

the difference between a normal body which is ailing and one which is developing abnormal growths. Members of the western left, in the broadest sense of that term, may be right a hundred times in their critical analyses of their country's political life, but until they can see the enormous gulf which separates totalitarianism and democracy (at present they are neither able nor willing to see it, for obvious reasons), I can have no faith either in them or in their proposals. This is one of many reasons — I will give several others later — why I believe that it is the peoples of Eastern Europe who are now being called on to formulate the principles of a radically new political system and to propose a way out of this world-wide political crisis.

I have already indicated that my optimistic and maximalist claims concerning both the revival in the Church and the regeneration of political life in our country are derived from the same source. Wherever in this article I refer to the future, therefore, I will be developing just one theme: the mission of Catholics and Christians in general to form this new type of *polis*. For I am convinced that we are all now faced with the same task: to fill the void which is prompting people to search for a new theology, a more meaningful faith, a new philosophy, a new science, or a new *polis*. In Eastern Europe, though, this task has a political aspect (something rather unusual in the history of Christianity) and even a certain urgency, because, in fact, any demonstration of faith is automatically considered to be political activity. (Unfortunately, in my country this generally means it is also a matter for the police.)

Shortly after writing the above lines, I heard that a representative of the Polish Church had been elected Pope: the Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, who is also an eminent theologian of the new type (new in the pastoral sense, which has little to do with the standard conservative-progressive polarization). This is a splendid assurance that the hopes I expressed earlier in this article are more than mere speculation, and after this election even those who do not share my faith in the direct manipulation of the cardinals by the Holy Spirit may object that I was too pessimistic when assessing the ability of the Church and the world to overcome the present crisis.

When an independent Czechoslovak republic was formed in 1918, the overwhelming majority of the population were, at least nominally, Catholics, whereas the official ideology of the government derived mainly from the anti-Catholic tradition of the Reformation. (Although this was a historical absurdity, it was nevertheless also just retribution for the spiritual, cultural and political sterility of the Czech Catholic Church at that time.) The Czech and Slovak Catholics reacted differently to this paradox. Slovak Catholicism, being more lively, more broadly based and more authentically national, managed to retain its strong political influence, albeit at the price of rejecting not only the Czechoslovak state, but also, sadly, the [Czech] democratic tradition.* Czech Catholicism, on the other hand, withdrew for the most part from politics and from all active participation in the life of society, and restricted itself to an ineffective and none too successful defence of its traditional rights and privileges. The only significant exception to this malaise was the revival of Catholic movements in the arts, and especially in literature: these were, of course, disapproved of, or at best regarded with suspicion, in official church circles.

The communists managed to exploit the historical handicap† of Slovak Catholicism and between 1945 and 1948, using a shrewd combination of political manoeuvring and police pressure, they com-

*The Slovak Catholic "People's Party" led by Andrej Hlinka voiced its dissatisfaction with the official ideology of the new republic which claimed that there is only one Czechoslovak nation even though some of the population speak Czech and some Slovak. The failure of the Czechoslovak government to grant autonomy to Slovakia led to the withdrawal of the "People's Party" from the Parliament. In 1939 Hlinka's successors founded an independent Slovakia which collaborated closely with the Nazis during the Second World War. *Ed.*

†Benda is here referring to the fact that the Church in Slovakia became identified with the pro-Nazi Slovak state during the War. After the execution of Mgr Tiso, the President of the short-lived Slovak Republic, the communists were able to brand all Catholics in Slovakia as fascists. *Ed.*

pletely excluded the Slovak Catholic Church from the political scene. The position of the Church in Slovakia was not strengthened even by the crushing election victory of the Democratic Party,* nor by the bewildered support [of this Party] by [Czech] democrats in the republic, nor even by the fact that certain Catholic politicians were "wooing" the communists.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church in the Czech lands† was, at the time of the communist takeover in 1948, the only influential and organized body which was not compromised or corrupted by a post-war policy of appeasement towards the communists or of defensive co-operation with them. At the same time, of course, it was politically inexperienced and unprepared for a political struggle. On the one hand, the Church did not actively attempt to influence the course of events, but on the other hand, it did firmly refuse to sanction the results of the takeover, to evaluate "realistically" the new political conditions or to respond to the initial wooing of the communists. Owing to this somewhat quixotic stand, the Catholic Church became the first victim of systematic repression: it was used as an example. First its organizational and intellectual potential was eliminated. All the bishops were interned in prisons or labour camps. The religious orders were abolished *de facto* in 1949, and out of 12,000 monks, 8,000 were sent to prisons and camps for an average of five years (the superiors of some orders were not released until the spring of 1968). Most of the secular priests were either imprisoned or barred from exercising their ministry. Tens of thousands of Catholic laymen also spent many years in prison, and of the leading intellectuals, in particular the writers, very few escaped imprisonment. Further tens of thousands of Catholics from all the above categories avoided a similar fate only by emigrating. From then on, everyone who dared to profess his faith publicly was subjected to harsh discrimination and administrative measures.

From God nothing is hidden: this great store of suffering can never be forgotten and will eventually bring forth fruit. Here, however, I must assess the consequences of the Church's stand from a limited, human point of view, even from a somewhat narrow political angle. The twenty years between 1948 and 1968 can be characterized quite simply: there was harsh repression, the "luke-warm" majority of the faithful fell away, and church life was restricted to the performance of a minimum number of religious rites. In my opinion all this was more than outweighed by the high moral credit which the Catholic Church built up at that time among the people as a whole. During this period the Protestant Churches were treading the path of compromise with the communist regime, which enabled them to retain a certain amount of limited freedom with regard to church life and protected them, relatively speaking, from systematic repression. Nevertheless, the experiences of this period testify to the primacy of Truth over pragmatism: the revival [today] of religious consciousness, especially among young people and intellectuals (and often motivated to start with by political dissatisfaction), is in the overwhelming majority of cases centred upon the oppressed and battered [Czech] Catholic Church. Developments since 1968, however, have made the situation considerably more complex. In Protestant circles, owing to more favourable circumstances — purchased, admittedly, by costly sacrifices offered at all manner of strange altars — the leaders of these Churches now react to pressure from the authorities with dignified restraint, and a number of ordinary believers and clergymen are in one way or another actively and courageously involved in the life of society. By contrast, the Catholic Church is paying a heavy toll for her past years of heroism and it seems that, afflicted by a sort of "hangover", it is frittering away its accumulated treasury of suffering and the moral credit which flows from it. Those who have survived long terms of imprisonment are old and, with certain honourable exceptions, they are weary and sceptical (though hardly any of them are actually broken). The church administration is composed partly of people of this sort and

*In the last free elections in Czechoslovakia the communists and socialists won an overwhelming victory in the Czech part of the Republic while in Slovakia an equally overwhelming victory was won by the Democratic Party (combining Protestants and Catholics against the communists). *Ed.*

†Bohemia and Moravia. *Ed.*

partly of those who either voluntarily or under pressure have become puppets of, or collaborate directly with, the Security police. Consequently the hierarchy is totally servile. For decades the state authorities have used their power to grant and withdraw permits to perform priestly duties (at certain times more than half the priests in the country have been barred from exercising their ministry); they have systematically transferred the most active priests from one parish to another; they have deliberately — sometimes even resorting to psychological and sociological methods — removed the best students and teachers from the seminaries; and so on and so forth: and now we are seeing the effects of this policy even in the ranks of the priesthood. The priesthood is to a great extent politically and culturally isolated: a significant proportion of the ordinary clergy (though here the situation is incomparably better than among the hierarchy) are to some degree "entangled" with the State, and in most cases all effective solidarity between the parishioners and their priest is entirely lacking. It is precisely because they have just this solidarity that many Protestant communities have managed to fight against and even sometimes ward off various forms of repression. The diffident attempts made after the Second Vatican Council by the official leadership to give the laity wider responsibilities within the Church were completely stifled after 1968. At the same time any unofficial contact outside church services, whether between lay believers or between the clergy and the laity, is liable to result in civil prosecution, or even, under the current Czechoslovak legal code, in criminal proceedings. I will allow myself here one specific example, by no means the most striking, but interesting from the point of view of the Czechoslovak-Polish connection. At an Esperanto summer camp, held in August 1977 near [the village of] Herbortice, a Polish and a Czech priest (Fr Zielonek and Fr Srna) said a Mass in a tent before reveille, with the knowledge of the camp leader Josef Šváček and in the presence of several of those attending the summer camp. Shortly afterwards Fr Srna was deprived of his state permit [to exercise his ministry], and criminal proceedings are currently being brought against him and against J. Šváček for "obstructing state supervision of the Churches and religious associations" (Art. 178 of the Criminal Code): they face up to two years' imprisonment.

The whole situation I have outlined in the preceding paragraphs is the result of a general and thorough "thinning of the ranks" (though the word "thinning" is a euphemism in this context). There is, however, one particular psychological consequence of this long decade of terror which I consider to be the most important and politically the most dangerous. This is the fact that the overwhelming majority of Czech Catholics are convinced (and unfortunately this conviction often stems from their own painful experience) that they are showing sufficient courage and readiness to suffer for Christ merely by attending church services and professing their faith privately, and they feel that no one has the right to ask them for any further demonstrations of civil courage and social involvement. Of course, such an attitude contains an element of failure, suggesting that the Kingdom of God has been exchanged for a degree of worldly comfort, even though this means accepting the role of second-class citizen. It also contains an element of understandable mistrust towards their past persecutors,* who, deprived of their former high positions, are now loudly demanding support [from the Catholics], often without giving sufficient guarantee that when they talk about rights, they are not thinking rather about their own lost privileges. Whether we condemn or condone it, this attitude remains a political reality and we must take it into account when thinking of the future. Even if some believers, daily encountering the absurdities and injustices in our society, realize the moral inadequacy of such an attitude and try to break out of it (and it is inevitable that this will happen at some time or another to any honest believer who has eyes to see and ears to hear), there is still the danger that they will confine themselves, under the pressure of instinctive self-censorship, to some minimal gesture. To illustrate what I mean, let us take the example of a good, educated Catholic woman, who recently refused to

*Benda has in mind former communists who renounced their allegiance to the Party after 1968 and who only then began to protest about violations of human rights in their country. *Ed.*

sign a protest letter written by a group of believers because she felt it would only irritate the government. She pointed out that even [during the Terror] in the '50s, one was able to do something practical, such as sending occasional parcels of cakes to imprisoned priests. The perseverence and courageous sacrifice of this woman should not be underestimated, nor should this "cake Catholicism" be equated with "goulash socialism".* Many of those who, like her, performed such acts of charity were, and occasionally still are, rewarded with the same long terms of imprisonment as those they tried to help. Her activities, seen as part of her personal search for the Truth (i.e. salvation) and as an example to those around her, are in my opinion indispensable and highly laudable. Yet at a time when the very foundations of the *polis* (in the broadest sense of the word) and the community of the Universal Church are threatened, everyone, like it or not, has to choose between saving himself and preserving the life of this community, this body of Christ which has been so brutally tortured. Individual charity is not enough in this situation and could even dangerously mislead others. For just as the vast majority of people renounce any involvement in the life of society and escape into the private circle of their family and friends, so the person who confines himself to acts of personal charity, in voluntarily renouncing openness and common responsibility, escapes — albeit perhaps more honourably — into a ghetto.[. . .]

Most Czech Catholics regard communism as being identical with Satan or Antichrist, and I gladly agree with them. Communism has however been through two historical phases: in the '50s it resembled Lucifer (=light-bearer), the most majestic of all God's angels, the spirit of deception, lies and eternal restlessness. This period was basically one of manichaean struggle between Good and Evil in which the lie, being more loud-mouthed, was conquering truth; illusion, by reason of its logical self-consistency, was conquering real life; and the easy road to perdition was concealing the difficult path to salvation. At a time when many were falling away and others were being annihilated as a warning to the rest, the only survivors were those who looked to their own souls and remained in the Truth. The communism of the last decade, however, has been more like Nietzsche's "spirit of gravity"† — inert, grim and all-devouring. Power has set itself up against truth, nothingness against reality, and the monotony of the endless cycle of anniversaries against history. In these times, which are marked more by heaviness than cruelty, no one will stand the test who looks only to his own soul and thinks that Truth — the Truth which at a definite place and time became flesh and dwelt among men, which consented to suffer for their sake — is no more than a *place* where he can rest.

In the past, Evil used to attack and argue with its opponents (though, of course, it always had brute force to fall back on when the arguments failed) and it was possible to withdraw into one's own integrity and fight against Evil from this stronghold, either by actively engaging in polemics or by passively suffering. The political Evil of today, however, is primarily an all-enveloping heaviness, which every citizen carries on his shoulders and *within himself*, and the only way to overcome it is to throw it off, wrench oneself free from its power and set out on the road to truth. In these circumstances every genuine struggle for one's own soul is decidedly political activity, even a creatively political activity, because one is not just shutting oneself away from something (there is nothing to shut oneself away from): rather one is throwing off a heavy blanket and exposing oneself to something new and unknown. Thus it is paradoxical that in a society where most people escape into the private sphere and are totally indifferent to official pseudo-politics, one can talk of latent political possibilities and of [an actual] emergence of political activity. Christians could and should become one of the channels for this potential, enabling it to take on a visible shape. My earlier evaluation of the present situation was pessimistic because it seemed

*The phenomenon whereby the population in a communist country acquiesces in the regime if it provides them with enough material goods. *Ed.*

†This concept receives development in Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: it is the spirit against which Zarathustra struggles. *Ed.*

humanly impossible that anyone would seize this opportunity with both hands and be willing to stake everything on it: future historical development is hopelessly blocked, the regime is more solid and powerful, and the reign of fear more universal than ever. My present optimism springs from the conviction that all this is only temporary and that even the slightest stirring in our society — it only needs a few courageous people to stake everything on this opportunity — can bring to life processes whose development and consequences are impossible to predict. Fear is for the most part imaginary and is perpetuated purely by its own momentum. A [political] system which has deliberately abandoned its fanatical adherents and leans instead on a mass of submissive opportunists has secured for itself an easily commanded allegiance, but not blind obedience, because any personal responsibility is too risky for its agents, and as a result even the regime's terrorist schemes are stifled and come to nothing in the dense jungle of bureaucracy. Even solidity and power are illusory, for they are maintained not by the functioning of a living organism, but by the mechanical action of a machine so worn out that the removal of even the tiniest part could put it out of operation completely. The Christian in particular ought to know something of the hopeless historical prospects and instability of earthly "Thousand Year Reichs". For me this is a primary source of hope, especially with regard to the future task of Catholic politics, and if we also take into account the election of the new Pope, then this hope seems to me to be wholly realistic and its fulfilment a thing of the near future; for this election has meant that the traditional Catholic respect for authority — which has hitherto had such disastrous consequences, especially since the installation of the callaborationist hierarchy [in Czechoslovakia] — can now acquire completely new dimensions.[. . .]

In the remaining six pages of his essay, Benda analyses the crisis in Czechoslovak society. The population collaborates with the totalitarian system but has no hope for the future. Even the communist leaders no longer believe that "socialism" is going to undergo further development. Consequently, while maintaining the status quo, *everyone is trying to exploit the system to his own material advantage, and a vast amount of hatred is being stored up. When the system begins to disintegrate, this hatred will explode in violence. The Catholics, writes Benda, understand this situation better than the Protestants because, unlike the latter, they harbour no illusions about the possibility of any future socialist "paradise on earth": they are greater "realists". Benda proposes a new "radically conservative" approach to politics. Such an approach would owe no allegiance to ideology, but would be marked by a down-to-earth pragmatism which would promote human rights, democracy and social justice. Benda believes that it is the Catholics who are in the best position to put this type of approach into effect in Czechoslovak society.* Ed.