

Interview

“Competition for Hearts and Minds”

An interview with Dr Sándor Boros, Deputy Head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party

Q. Do you regard the disappearance of religion as a precondition for the establishment of a full communist system?

A. I must say no, though there seems to be some confusion about terminology. Whereas you tend to call our system communist, this is neither historically nor theoretically correct. We tend to speak of our country as one which is building socialism. But the fact is that we have not yet built communism or even socialism. For precisely this reason it seems natural to us that there are millions of people with religious convictions in our state. It is also natural that there are churches to satisfy their spiritual needs; and in our society the churches occupy an esteemed place. Therefore it is not a precondition that a state trying to supersede capitalism should break with religion and the churches. Thus socialism and religion or socialism and church do not stand in contradiction to each other.

Q. Is it correct then to conclude that it is no longer the ultimate goal to establish communism in Hungary?

A. In our view there is no such thing as a communist state. But communism as an ultimate ideal is another question. Naturally this is to be found among our values. But it is clear to us that it involves a long historical process. It seems to me that the establishment of the capitalist order of society in Great Britain took a little bit longer than forty years. From the very beginning it took four or five hundred years.

Q. Do you see it as the role of the party in Hungary to struggle against religious ideas, and if so, what form should this struggle take?

Should it be a question of education or propaganda, or of introducing improvements in economic conditions?

A. Just now I answered a question about whether or not the church and religion have a place in a socialist society in an affirmative way. But you did not ask if non-religious citizens have a place in society. To this question I also answer in the affirmative. The Hungarian constitution guarantees freedom of conscience. Naturally as well as religious freedom this embraces the right not to be religious. As a result a significant element of the population lives without religious beliefs. They lead respectable, hard-working and moral lives. Among them there are a significant number of Marxists. There are also those who have neither Marxist nor religious convictions. We call them practical materialists. Furthermore, there are some people who don't make any effort to define their world view clearly. Some of them just don't deal with this issue, some of them because of a kind of inner emptiness. Such attitudes are intimately connected with strong scepticism and cynicism. This parasitic mentality sometimes manifests itself in anti-social behaviour. Sometimes it is simply the result of alienation from any kind of ideology, be it a religion or a Marxist world view. There is no doubt that the two world views with the broadest base of popular support are Marxism and religion. Must they carry on a struggle against each other, or can they live together on the basis of cooperation? We opt for the latter, and are now realising it. Undoubtedly we have inherited a bourgeois tradition, mainly from the French bourgeoisie, from the Enlightenment. That tradition includes anti-clericalism, the tradition of struggle against religion. We have been brought up in this tradition. But experience has taught us that one must overcome bourgeois atheism and its tendency towards struggle against religion. One must take into consideration the fact that both religious and non-religious people are cooperating in building socialism in Hungary. The people are not fighting against each other, but are collectively building a socialist Hungarian motherland. I don't want to mislead you, nor to bypass the question. Naturally there are numerous practical and ideological questions on which we can agree and on which we can proceed together within the framework of this cooperation. But there are also some so-called "ultimate" questions on which our starting points are entirely different. For instance, one is the question of the origin of those values which we in practice share in common. Today we carry on a dialogue regarding these questions. But there is no illusion that we agree on all questions. As you probably know Marxism defines its standpoint on two fundamental issues in a very clear way. First of all it stands on the basis of reality. Secondly it recognises that the

implementation of its programme will be carried out by human beings. This is a realistic and humanistic world view. We don't start with the question of transcendence. But we do discuss, even debate the question of transcendence with our friends, that is to say with honest Hungarian people, with the faithful citizens of the Hungarian People's Republic. I wouldn't call this a struggle, therefore: instead, I would call it competition; competition for hearts and minds. The capacity to convince will determine which side will have the most adherents. In this competition both sides make use of their own devices. For instance, the state provides most education. There are a few church schools, but even within the state schools there is the possibility of receiving religious instruction on an optional basis. The state has publishing houses, and the churches have publishing houses. State institutions have their own journals, and so do the churches. Both Marxists and representatives of religions may be heard on the radio. Marxists and theologians sit around the same table and discuss social and ethical questions. Moreover, I would dare to say that the representatives of the churches sometimes have one small advantage over the Marxists. They have a very good network of institutions all over Hungary, even in the smallest places, which are dedicated to propagating religious ideas. Neither the Party nor the state nor the trade unions have similar networks.

Q. Do you believe there are any particular reasons why individuals should be interested in religion, and why they should continue to be interested in religion in a society building socialism?

A. First of all there are many differences among us as individuals. We can see this in our education, in the traditions inherited from our parents, in the traditions in our social circle, in the influence of circumstance, in the peculiar spiritual make-up of individuals and so on. It is a clear fact that there are religious needs, and naturally I do not want to avoid saying that there are real sources of religious belief. If you are interested in my personal opinion, I can add this: in a world which is threatened by the Damocles sword of nuclear catastrophe a large part of the population may feel powerless — they don't feel that they can influence the course of events. But they want to live and to hope, so they hope in something else. This human reaction is worthy of respect. In my own view, it would be more effective to do something, but I understand those who try to influence the course of events in such a way.

Q. You speak as if hope and action were mutually exclusive. Religious believers can surely act. Are there any specific areas in Hungarian society in which religious believers have a specific

contribution to make?

A. Of course. First of all, the love of peace has deep roots in the teachings of various religions. Therefore a single sermon can move believers to action. I believe that we Hungarian Marxists rightly appreciate all the statements in the interest of peace issued by the Hungarian churches. That is to say the statements of the official Hungarian church leaders, because they are the spiritual leaders of Hungarian believers. There are also peace groups made up of Hungarian churches and Hungarian believers. I assume that you know about these movements, and if you want you can introduce them to your readers in an objective way.

Q. Apart from peace activity, are there any other social activities in which religious believers could become specifically involved?

A. Yes, I hope that many of these also are well known. Cooperation between the churches and the state is realised in many other areas and has been strengthened in recent years. Take, for example, the area of social work. The churches are giving a lot of attention to problems in society, such as alcoholism, suicide and the increase in psychiatric cases. The churches also care for the mentally ill and the physically disabled. The churches maintain institutions for these socially beneficial purposes, and the state provides material assistance. We welcome these actions and initiatives. But at the same time we are sure that the churches cannot provide the solution of social problems. Moreover they cannot be equal partners in the solution of these problems. Other social organisations also have their role to play alongside the state. It is not cooperation only between the church and state. But of course the state supports the well-intentioned readiness of the church to participate in such activities. One sign of this was the agreement signed in December 1986 by the Hungarian government and the Catholic bishops for the establishment of a new order of nuns named after Our Lady of Hungary.

Q. To what extent does cultural pluralism in Hungary apply to the expression and development of a religious view in the arts?

A. There are well known Hungarian artists whose work has been inspired by religion. They comprise an organic part of Hungarian culture. I will mention just one, the late János Pilinsky, but there are many others. In the Hungarian theatre and cinema there are artists who express their religious convictions. There are notable scholars among the members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences who have religious beliefs and who occupy high posts. Of course I will not name these people because it is their task to talk about their faith, not mine.

You are no doubt familiar with the Hungarian journals *Vigilia* (Catholic) and *Confessio* (Reformed), which I myself enjoy reading and which are an organic part of Hungarian cultural life. There are also scholarly sociological and literary works which express religious values and which the lay intelligentsia and the reading public generally gladly read. You may have already seen the special issue of the periodical *Confessio* dealing with Hungarian nationality and minorities. There are many religious painters and sculptors who exhibit religious works. We don't hide or conceal the fact that there are large numbers of religious people here in Hungary, who wish to see their views expressed by religious articles and intellectuals. And of course there are also religious monuments, which are maintained and restored together by the church and the state because they represent common values in Hungarian history and art history.

Q. Are there any types of religious belief which are unacceptable, or areas in which the views of religious believers would not be acceptable and would not be published?

A. Yes, there are views which are not acceptable. You must have seen the issue of *Új ember* which included letters from Cardinal Ratzinger and Archbishop Paskai regarding the case of Fr Bulányi. There are people within the Hungarian Catholic Church whose views deviate from those of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and from the official teachings of the church. The letter of Cardinal Ratzinger calls these deviations "erroneous, dangerous and misleading". That is the problem. The Catholic authorities know their teaching, and they must keep abreast with Marxism. We know what is Marxist and what is not, and also what according to them is Catholic and what is not.

Q. Surely, as a Marxist, you do not accept the religious views of Cardinal Ratzinger any more than those of Fr Bulányi. Why is it then that Fr Bulányi's are particularly unacceptable?

A. It was not unintentionally that I mentioned this name, because this name is now on the agenda. Our starting point is reality and is based on facts. We are interested in how the great mass of religious people, among them Catholics, live out their faith in relation to the leaders of their respective churches. From the point of view of the stability of the country we cannot be indifferent to the possibility that the Catholic Church might disintegrate into dozens of different sects rather than continue as an institution uniting individuals who are loyal to the Vatican as they have been for 1,000 years. Therefore we understand and completely accept the fact that the Vatican and the Hungarian Bishops' Conference do not wish to see the destruction of

the unity of the Hungarian Catholic Church. But it would be false to say that we are not interested in a positive solution to this problem. We find the realism of the Vatican in this question very hopeful. I should say, however, that your question is somewhat misdirected. It was the Hungarian Catholic leadership which in 1982 condemned Fr Bulányi's teachings in an official statement. Therefore this is not a problem between the Hungarian state and Fr Bulányi but between the Hungarian Catholic Church leadership and Fr Bulányi.

Q. There is indeed a conflict between the Hungarian Bishops and Fr Bulányi, but what we are trying to ascertain is whether there are religious views and activities that cause problems for the Party in other areas of public life.

A. If we are talking about religious views, I would say: no. But if they are really political views dressed in the guise of religion, then the answer is yes. I must say that sometimes misleading information circulates about these questions. Sometimes we hear from the Western media that actions contrary to Hungarian law are manifestations of religion. There are those who in a partisan spirit make out that to uphold the law is to persecute religion and the church. One such issue is that of conscientious objection to military service. We read much about this in the Western press.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you welcome the concern for peace shown by religious people. Would you explain why conscientious objection to military service is unacceptable? Surely conscientious objection may be a genuine manifestation of a religious person's desire for peace?

A. The Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic defines the defence of the motherland as a sacred obligation of every citizen. The Defence Law, which is based on the Constitution, prescribes 18 months of military service for every male Hungarian citizen. There is the possibility of doing armed service or construction service. Yes, problems do arise in this area as you suggest. The real question is: is the refusal of Roman Catholic youth to perform military service a question of faith? I have no specialist knowledge of church documents, but I read with great interest last October's statement of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference, which is based on the statements of Vatican II and the thousand-year-old tradition of the Hungarian Catholic Church.¹ The Hungarian bishops declared that the Roman Catholic faith does not prohibit military service. This is not a religious, nor a theological question, but a question of personal

¹For the statement of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference see "Hungarian Catholics and Conscientious Objection", *RCL*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 96-98.

decision. In this document there is a principled approach. The bishops judge conscientious objection to be wrong and damaging. Therefore one must not first approach the problem from the angle of personal conscience, but from the teaching of the church. And the church does not teach people to forego military service. Catholics must follow the teaching of the church. This is the position of the Vatican.

Q. Let us take a hypothetical case. Suppose the Catholic bishops in Hungary were to say that they wished to debate the question of conscientious objection, would you permit such a debate?

A. One must not give ideas to the Hungarian bishops, but it is good to examine questions they have raised in the past. When the Hungarian Bishops' Conference expressed the wish to expand possibilities for religious instruction beyond schools to the churches then the Hungarian state was ready to discuss it. When they raised this question, they brought to us the problem of the shortage of priests due to a lack of interest on the part of young men in entering seminary, and we looked for a way to solve the problem. One of the possibilities was for the laity to be allowed to provide some pastoral functions. Special training is necessary for this. We were prepared to discuss the possibility of having lay corresponding members of the seminary. We have also discussed with other churches the possibility of greater involvement of women in church work. These are the kind of issues which have been raised by the Bishops' Conference, and which have already been discussed. It is possible to solve all questions by means of negotiation.

Q. Is it correct to say, then, that you are in principle prepared to discuss any questions with the churches as long as they are raised and presented through their leaders?

A. On the basis of past experience I would say yes.

Q. In recent months there have been major changes in the leadership of the Hungarian churches. New leaders may have new ideas. How do you see the possible consequences of these changes?

A. I think it is too early for us to say.

Q. Yes, but the Chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs, Imre Miklos, has been repeatedly saying that there will be no significant or rapid changes.

A. We must wait and see how the new bishops will act.

Q. Reform seems to be the keyword in Hungarian political life. One of the tendencies of the present reform is decentralisation, the

reduction of state interference in the running of enterprises, and the break-up of large enterprises in favour of smaller ones. The concept of institutional autonomy also features heavily in the thinking of reformers. In Hungary the churches have developed into great monolithic structures. But while the church institutions have become monolithic there are signs that their structural foundations are crumbling from below for sociological reasons. One of the symptoms of this is the growth of the basis community movement. In the light of this how do you think the spirit of reform will affect the churches?

A. I don't see a direct connection between the reforms in Hungary and the activity of the Hungarian churches. At least I don't see it today. Only time will tell. One of the main features of the separation of church and state was the determination of the state not to interfere in the inner affairs of the churches. Thus the state gave up its century-old rights of patronage. As a result we don't know how the framework and the inner organisation of the churches will develop. We have no say in this. It is a purely internal matter for the churches. However my own personal view is that the present structures of the Hungarian churches have very deep historical roots, especially those of the Catholic, the Reformed, and Lutheran Churches, as well as of the Jewish community. I don't think it probable that these structures, which have great significance for people, will change. However, speaking of the development of church government, the signs of this were striking at the time of the most recent elections in the Reformed Church. You may have heard that there were two candidates for the post of Bishop of the Transtabiscan District. Both of them were good for us. We trust them. They are our friends.

Interviewers: John Eibner, Philip Walters

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See also "*A New Primate: A New Policy?*" on pp. 164-68 and "*The Religious Policy of the Hungarian Government*" on pp. 179-86.