

AT THE BORDER OF TWO WORLDS

Cultural Dimensions and Roles of the Churches and Religions in Central Europe

In this short paper I am dealing with two questions: 1. the meaning and the historically changable use of the concept Central Europe, 2. the role and cultural dimensions of the churches and religions in the region.

Central Europe, as well as Eastern Central Europe and Eastern Europe, are not unambivalent concepts. Their meaning needs to be defined more precisely, or it must be recognized that this meaning changes not only from one period and region to another but also from one discipline to another. Different concepts are used in historiography, geography, political sciences and ethnology. At the same time it was quite clear that in the years following the Second World War in Europe divided by the Iron Curtain we spoke in political sense of Western and Eastern Europe. Now, after the downfall of socialism and 1989/1990 we are witnessing a revival of the notion of Central Europe.

In an essay the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs speaks of “three Europes”: Western, Eastern and Eastern Central Europe. He uses the latter to designate the region, difficult to define precisely, inhabited mainly by Poles, Czechs and Hungarians. He stresses that this region differs from both the West and the East, although it is tied to them, especially to the West, by strong bonds. The reasons for this are largely to be found in ecclesiastical and religious history. It is these factors that I wish to consider briefly here.

In the historiography the concept of Central Europa is used for describing states which were existing under strong German influence. It means again the states of Czechs, Poles and Hungarians, the Baltic states partly and in the South Croatia and Slovenia. Often occurs newly the name of Europe in between. In this concept Central Europe, Europe in between means the buffer states between Russia, the Russian Empire/Soviet Union and Germany. From this point of view we can mention the states from Scandinavia till the Adriatic see: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republik, Slovak Republik, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and the South Slavic states. These states became after the World War II, with the exception of Austria, the so called socialist countries. After collapse of socialism they are the states in transition, transformation. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought the independence formally not only to the Baltic states but essentially to all of them.

From ethnographical point of view the frontiers of Central Europe can be drawn with cultural borders. And my presupposition is that culture is basically determined by religion(s) and churches.

The most important questions of the church history and culture of Central Europe are related to the emergence of the region's feudal states and its Christianization. One of the main characteristics of Central Europe is as a result of Christianization that it lies at the interface and zone of contact between Western and Eastern Christianity, the Latin and Greek rites, and at some stages in its history also with Islam. The history of the region in the Early Middle Ages (5th to 10th centuries) is marked by the dynamic advance eastwards of Western Christianity bringing its religious and secular culture.

The conversion of the Slav and non-Slav peoples living to the East of the Elbe and the Danube and to the North began from the German/Frank region in the 10th to 14th centuries and was concluded mainly with the participation of the German church. Together with the new religion and the church organization, the peoples converted to the Christian faith adopted the basic structure of contemporary Western civilization and many of its elements. One of these was the Western monastic orders, based on the Rule of Saint Benedict which must have served as a model for the regulated co-existence of small and large clerical communities. This Rule stressed the value of meaningful work and the personality (its motto is: *ora et labora*).

In this region Latin Christianity came into contact with the missionary efforts coming from Byzantium. Which rite was followed by the new Christian peoples and churches and which church authority they submitted themselves to was thus an important political question. The peoples establishing states in the region (the Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians) joined Western Christianity in the 10th to 14th centuries. By the 15th century our region formed part of Western Christendom and civilization.

The appearance of Protestantism brought the division of Central Europe and in the 16th to 17th centuries struggles between the denominations, although it did not change the cultural frame of the region. Nevertheless, relations between the two trends of Western Christianity were generally more balanced in Central Europe than in the countries of Western Europe. There were also numerous new Protestant denominations (such as the Anti-Trinitarians in Transylvania) and the Jewish religion. From the 16th century Central Europe presented a veritable mosaic of the Western Christian churches. Besides the non-Christian religions (Jewish, Islam), the Eastern Christians also appeared in the region. The 16th to 18th centuries brought a transitional setback for Western Christianity in the states of Central Europe (Hungary, Croatia). The presence and role of large numbers of Jews in these societies appears to be a Central European characteristic.

The subsequent efforts for Counter-Reformation and Catholic restoration finally led everywhere to the strengthening of Catholicism. This was achieved by

force in Bohemia but more peacefully in Hungary and especially in Poland and Lithuania. At the same time that Protestantism appeared in Hungary the central part of the country fell under Turkish occupation. This was the westernmost point of Islamic expansion. In this historical situation the idea arose and became widely held that the Hungarian and Polish peoples, like the Jews, were a chosen people and their task was *to defend Christianity from Islam*. Later, between the two world wars the states of Central Europe once again formulated their historical role as *bastions defending the West from the Bolshevism of the East*.

After Hungary's liberation from the Turks (1686), the situation returned to what it had been in the Middle Ages: the country's Southern and Eastern border once again became the borderline between the Latin and Byzantine rites, and also Islam. The only difference was that while in the Middle Ages the population on the Hungarian side of the border had been Hungarian in language and culture, Roman Catholic in religion, in the 18th century this was only partly true. As a consequence of the settlement policy of the Habsburg court, mainly Catholic (and to a much lesser extent Protestant) Germans, Slovaks, as well as Orthodox Serbs, Romanians and many other ethnic groups found a new home here through settlement by the central authorities or by spontaneous immigration. In the background of the spontaneous immigration there was the escape from the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. This multiethnic situation became a historical and political question of vital importance in the 20th century. The status of political power also changed: while Hungary had been independent in the Middle Ages, it was now a relatively autonomous part of the large Habsburg Empire.

Another characteristic feature of the history of Central Europe in the Middle Ages and the modern age is a strong German cultural influence and the migration of large masses of Germans to the East. The settlers moving to the Baltic states, Poland and Hungary – and even further East – brought with them their everyday culture, religion, priests and in cases even devotional objects from their birthplace. In this way new cults were introduced into Central Europe and new places of pilgrimage arose. This cult filiation applied mainly to the Germans who also introduced a different culture of work and implements in this region.

The Greek Catholic Church, an Orthodox church which entered into union with Rome, is a typical Central European phenomenon in the zone of contact between the Latin and Eastern rites. This union was promoted by the Jesuits. As a result of their efforts, in the 16th century (1596) part of the Ukrainians and White Russians living in the eastern part of Poland joined the Catholic Church, followed in the 17th century by the Ruthenians in the North-eastern counties of Hungary (today's Subcarpathia, Ukraine) and in the late 17th century (1698) by Romanians in Northern Transylvania. These uniate churches retained their autonomous church government, Eastern rites and liturgical language. They became the channel for a strong Western influence. This Greek Catholic Church still exists; it was only in Poland on the occasion of the partition of 1772 that the Russian Orthodox Church

ended the autonomy of the Uniate Eastern rite believers who came under Russian rule, forcing them back into the Orthodox Church. The Soviet-Russian power did the same thing later when it occupied the territories concerned, as did Czechoslovakia and Romania as socialist satellite states. In many places this imposed measure did not result in a merging with Orthodoxy but as a counter-reaction led to the Latinization of the Greek rite believers. As a consequence of such measures, the 18th to 20th centuries were a period in which Western Christianity retreated and Eastern Christianity expanded in our region. After the revolutionary changes of the 1980s and 1990s the Greek Catholic churches are reorganizing in these states.

In the first half of the 20th century the advance of the East continued. After the First World War, after partitioning the Austro-Hungarian Empire Hungary lost its Eastern territories. It lost considerably more territory than the area left to it. In 1920 the counties of North Eastern Hungary (Subcarpathia) were annexed to Czechoslovakia; later in 1944 the Soviet Red Army occupied these areas and annexed them to the Soviet Union. The East gained ground here.

The same thing happened in Transylvania. After the First World War, with the occupation of Transylvania and the Eastern edge of the Hungarian Great Plain by Romania an Orthodox Eastern country pushed its borders westwards. At first it caused only a change of national and language dominance with the help of the political and military power it acquired, but after the Second World War the state authorities relentlessly persecuted and oppressed all the churches of Western Christianity forcing them to retreat. This was the fate not only of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Hungarian and German churches; at the stroke of a pen the Greek Catholic Church in Romania was dissolved. This despite the fact that it was educated priests of the Greek Catholic Church in the first half of the 19th century who formulated the theory and today national myth of Daco-Romanian continuity, accepted today as the official Romanian view of history. The restoration of the Greek Catholic Church and ensuring the conditions for its operation, together with the other Catholic and Protestant denominations is still a subject of political debate in Romania today. After 1920 the Trianon Peace Treaty it began a massive immigration of Romanians in Transylvania and the other occupied territories of Hungary. The same or similar has happened to the southern part of Hungary which was occupied by Serbia: here an other Orthodox state pushed its borders northwards. The final result of inside conflicts in the South Slavic state during the World War II. and in the 1990s is well known. But the consequence of the occupation was the radical transformation of the previous ethnic proportion: hundred thousands of Germans and Hungarians were persuaded from the regions where Serbs and Romanians were settled down in great number.

The borders of Poland also changed considerably after the Second World War and the East gained territory here too.

The differences between the territories of Western and Eastern Christianity can be seen clearly on the field of religious culture and "high" or "elite" culture.

In the Western world I mention only the great number of religious orders, the appearance of national languages in liturgy, the establishment of universities based on the Medieval church culture. And which is very special the Western Christianity has created its own alienation: the secularization. All of these features were missing in the Eastern Christian culture.

But what is the situation on the level of folk religion(s)?

The popular religiosity of Central Europe arose on the borderline between Western and Eastern religiosity. I regard popular religiosity as being the official religious practice of the Christian churches, supplemented with elements of local cults. It is strongly syncretic, but its components supplement rather than exclude each other. Its presence must be taken into account right from the earliest times because the process of Christianization occurred in society from the top down. It was the ruling families and parallel with them the strata holding political, military and economic power who first adopted the new religion. An essentially similar process took place at the time of the Reformation/Counter Reformation or Catholic Reform too. The famous saying – *cuius regio, eius religio* – dates from this period. The religious practice of earlier periods did not cease overnight but continued to live for some time, was transformed, and opened the way for the teaching of higher church and secular powers.

This is why popular religiosity has no denomination. In popular religiosity, the religious, believing person responds in essentially the same or similar way to events and phenomena, communicates with his God or with the mediating saints. However, the concrete manifestations of these may be specific to particular periods and denominations. One of the most characteristic features of popular religiosity is the way it mingles religious and magical thinking.

However, the belatedness of the process compared to the Christianization of the Western and South-eastern peoples also means that among certain peoples in our region the ideology and practice of folk religiosity lived longer in historical time than elsewhere. This fact may have played a role even in participation in the Reformation. This was certainly the case in Hungary. Its influence right up to the present is that it is rather the Protestants (which in Hungary means mainly Calvinists) who represent the so-called national sentiment and their dominance is palpable. Neo-paganism, the search for the reconstruction of pre-Christian religious formations may also appear as a component strengthening national identity and arising from Calvinist circles. The intention is to create distinctive national symbols and use them as an expression of national interests. In Hungary this notion is principally anti-American, while in Poland and the Baltic states it is anti-Russian. In Hungary the reconstructed cult of the relics of archaic Hungarian shamanism, the costumes and occupations of Hungarians before their conversion to Christianity falls into this category. Neo-shamanism has appeared in the Scandinavian countries too. Neo-paganism also implies a critique of Europe. On the other hand neo-pagan movements can be interpreted as re-shaping of

(national) identities which show a new way in looking for identity-building. It is the way of isolation.

With the eastward spread of Christianity a new secular culture also appeared in the region. Its vehicle and representative was the church. This was an international culture which brought uniformity to the Christian countries through the use of Latin. Parish, chapter and monastery schools were established. For a long while the priests were the vehicles of this culture linked to the use of Latin and literacy. The monastic orders also appeared in the region. In the early stages of Christianization they represented learning and they recorded what they considered to be the most important events of the time in the monastic annals. They introduced many important agricultural implements and cultivation procedures into Central Europe and they also brought horticulture. Over the centuries of the modern age the monastic orders operated many spiritual movements which in part also prefigured later bourgeois associations and in part, especially in the 19th century, strengthened under the influence of such associations. It was in this culture that the idea of the university took shape and universities appeared, first in the West and then in the countries of Central Europe.

Eastern monasticism was less sophisticated. The functional articulation that took place in Western Christianity did not occur here. The only monastic form followed the rule of Saint Basil the Great (4th century). They too were representatives of the Christian way of life and learning, but over the centuries there was a decline in the standard both of life in the monasteries and the learning cultivated there. The monks took part in mission work and also performed pastoral tasks. In the first centuries the culture of the peoples following Orthodoxy was much more ecclesiastical: their liturgy that took shape by the 11th century was performed in the language of the people, with the active participation of the believers. It was through the Eastern liturgy that the organ spread as an instrument in the West too. After the century of the Iconoclast controversy (8th century), the place where the liturgy was performed, together with the iconostasis took shape, acquiring a distinctive form in different regions of Orthodoxy (e.g. Russia, the Balkans). The rules of Eastern church architecture were also formed: because of the strong preservation of traditions there was little change over the centuries in the domed basilica church. Veneration of Mary is very strong in Orthodoxy. The phenomenon of pilgrimage also exists but it was evoked by a different cause from that in Western Christianity. Here the cause was the respect of images based on Byzantine traditions, there it was the doctrine of indulgence that developed over the centuries. The major places of pilgrimage and pilgrim routes can be regarded as the skeleton of European Christian culture. In the places of pilgrimage of international significance, such as Aachen, Santiago de Compostela and Rome, pilgrims were able to experience the feeling of the oneness and belonging together of Christian Europe.

Of the many places of pilgrimage in Central Europe, three also became internationally important. One is Mariazell in Austria which is still a common

place of pilgrimage of the Austrians, the Southern and Western Slavs (Slovenes, Croats, Czechs, Slovaks) and the Hungarians. Czestochowa in Poland became a Polish national place of pilgrimage from the 16th century. Its dominance has now become international. The biggest place of pilgrimage for the Greek Catholic world is Máriapócs (Eastern Hungary). It attracts the Greek Catholic Ruthenians and Romanians, as well as the Roman Catholic peoples of the area: Slovaks, Hungarians, Poles and Germans.

Many elements of mediaeval religiosity were revived in the Baroque age. This was reflected not only in the practice of pilgrimage, but also in the archaic prayers which were set down from oral tradition in a number of countries, including Finland and Hungary. These prayers are the relic of a religiosity of Franciscan spirit that was characteristic of the whole of Western Christendom, a reminder of a once uniform Christian Western Europe.

The Reformation put an end to this uniformity. One third of Europe became Protestant. From time to time religious disputes broke the peace and fractured societies. It is worth noting that the aggressiveness of these disputes was not as strong in Central Europe as in Western Europe. While in Northern Europe the Protestant churches became the established churches, in Central Europe a certain balance was achieved: the states were forced to recognize freedom of religion (Transylvania, 1568 – Torda religious peace; Pozsony/Pressburg/Bratislava, 1608; Vienna, Diploma Leopoldinum, etc.). In the Eastern region of Central Europe the Reformation and Counter-Reformation or Catholic reform led to a state of equilibrium among the denominations resulting in religious tolerance. The Reformation did not appear in the Orthodox churches.

The Reformation set off many changes in Europe with effects that are still felt today. The principle of free research grew out of the free interpretation of the Bible. This soon led to further divisions in the Protestant churches. Education in the vernacular rapidly expanded and was democratized with the help of printing invented around that time, making education widespread. The national Protestant churches (established churches) freed from the domination of Rome became representatives of the national ideal and nationalism. On the other hand Orthodox churches are also established churches, keepers of national(istic) way of thinking. The Roman Catholic church is also touched by the national movement of the 19th and 20th centuries but it still remained rather *Catholic* which means *general* in international sense.

The Catholic reform or Counter-Reformation appearing as a counteraction to the Reformation introduced innovations of similar significance in Catholicism. The Jesuits were the most important representatives of this change. Besides development of the Catholic schools, they urged church union, that is, a communion of Eastern Christians and those following the Latin Rite. In practice this meant that the Orthodox Christians recognized the Pope as head of the church and returned

to the Catholic church while retaining their own rites, liturgy and customs. However, the expansion of Western Christianity came to a halt in the 18th century and even gave way to the expansion of Orthodoxy.

This latter process continued under the special circumstances of the 20th century. In most of the so-called socialist countries (with the exception of Poland and Hungary), the functioning of the Roman rite and Protestant churches was largely restricted, while the Greek Catholic, that is, the Uniate Church (together with the monastic orders) was banned and the church was reunited with the Orthodox Church. As national churches the Orthodox churches even supported the atheist regimes in certain of their nationalist aspirations. Karelia, Galicia, Transylvania, the Banat and Backa all came under the rule of countries where Eastern Christianity was dominant and which gradually restricted the minority religious cultures. Ukrainian, Romanian and Serb Orthodoxy and their Balkan culture now seem to have irreversibly detached these areas from the religious and cultural body of the West. Orthodox churches are only marginally interested in and touched by Oecumenical movements. They partly preserve their former (monopolistic) power situation they are strongly connected to the national states. This is why Western Christian denominations are rather non-committal to them or distrustful of them.

To a certain extent the aspirations of the European Union today can be seen as the last efforts of Western (Latin rite, Christian) culture to stabilize its Eastern borders that emerged in the Middle Ages and were consolidated in the Baroque age. Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia belong in this border zone. If all this occurs according to the present plans, the Catholic or Protestant parts of the nations (I mean Fins, Poles, Hungarians, Croats) will be stranded on the other side of this border in Karelia, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania and Serbia and will be lost for Western Christianity and culture, and for the language-nation. We Hungarians in particular could be keenly affected by this since around one third of our nation came under the rule of other peoples as a result of the new borders drawn following the world wars of the 20th century.

Concluding this brief survey it can be said that in both church and religious affairs Central Europe is characterized by a time lag in organization of both the state and the church, by a religious and cultural peripheral situation, by a certain equilibrium reached between the Greek Catholic church and religiosity, the Catholic and Protestant churches, by a religious tolerance based on this, which also allowed the mass presence of Jews over a long historical period. I believe that Central Europe can enrich the whole of Europe with these experiences and characteristics.

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