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Political Christianity in Orbán's Hungary

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As Hungary's nationalist government seeks a third term in power on 8 April, it is stressing Christian credentials. On a recent visit to Hungary, however, the *East-West Church Report* found signs that this "political Christianity" can run counter to Christian compassion, and thus poses a challenge to active local Christians.

"God's teachings have led us to see not a mere coincidence or whim of fate in the fact that, here and now, there is a Christian government of faith leading Hungary, but to see in this a manifestation of God's mercy." So Prime Minister Viktor Orbán proclaimed to thousands gathered at a Budapest sports arena in October 2017 to mark half a millennium since the Reformation.¹ Orbán identifies as a member of the Reformed Church; his closest colleague in government, Minister of Human Resources Zoltán Balog, is a Reformed pastor active in European ecumenical circles since the early 1980s.²

In both Orbán and Balog's telling, Hungary is an embattled Christian nation now pitched against an atheistic European Union, Jewish-dominated global capital, and aggressively spreading Islam. In a reference to periods of Ottoman and Communist rule, Orbán reminded international guests at an October 2017 event on Christian persecution that "a great many times over the course of our history we Hungarians have had to fight to remain Christian and Hungarian." Now once again, he claimed, Hungarians are "living our lives as members of a community under siege."³

Christian national culture?

In contrast, a wide-ranging survey on religious belief and national identity in Central and Eastern Europe conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015-16 does not attest to the staunchly Christian Hungary that Orbán projects. While some 78 percent of Hungarians identify as Christian, three-quarters

of the 56 percent majority who are Catholic acknowledge that their religious identity is largely a matter of national culture or family tradition. Only around one in ten attend obligatory weekly Mass.

Contempt for minorities

And although Orbán depicts Hungarian society as adhering to Christian values and opposed to the secular West, only around a third of Pew's respondents agreed completely or mostly that "there is a conflict between our country's traditional values and those of the West." Many Hungarians appear to hold views at odds with Christian teaching: 84 percent of those polled did not agree that divorce is morally wrong, and 70 percent said that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.⁴

If not high levels of Christian observance, competition from Orbán's nearest political rival, the self-proclaimed "patriotic Christian party" Jobbik,⁵ does appear to be a factor behind the government's patronage of Christianity. For the far-right Jobbik—polling around 20 percent to Orbán's 50 percent in early 2018—yearning for a Greater Hungary three times its present size, and contempt for Jews, Muslims, and the Roma (Gypsy) minority, are also part and parcel of Hungarian identity.

This unlikely combination of attitudes is on display in downtown Budapest, surreally close to Freedom Square's statue of Ronald Reagan. Less familiar to foreigners, Admiral Miklós Horthy's bronze bust dominates the entrance to a prominent Reformed church. Horthy led Hungary from 1920 to 1944, including into alliance with Nazi Germany. This enabled Hungary to restore territories—now in Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine—confiscated by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon after defeat in World War I. Following

(continued on page 2)



Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (G. FAGAN)

Political Christianity in Hungary (continued from page 1)

Horthy's own anti-Semitic policies, introduced as early as 1920, two-thirds of Hungary's Jews—some 600,000—were killed in the Holocaust.

Horthy's bust was commissioned by the church's pastor, Lóránt Hegedüs, Jr., whose wife Enikő is a Jobbik member of parliament. Another Jobbik parliamentarian, Márton Gyöngyösi, was guest speaker at the November 2013 church service to mark the bust's unveiling; the previous year, Gyöngyösi had called for the cataloguing of Jews in Hungary who pose a "national security risk."⁶

Soon after the bust was unveiled, Reformed Bishop István Szabó of Budapest expressed shock at this "provocative political action" held "to shame the Christian community." At subsequent ecclesiastical court hearings, the Church called for Rev. Hegedüs, Jr., to be defrocked.⁷ Yet he—and the bust—remain.

The Orbán government has similarly endorsed those with extreme nationalist views. In August 2016 it awarded prominent publicist Zsolt Bayer the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit,

a high state award. In recent years, Bayer has described Roma as "animals [who] shouldn't be tolerated or understood, but stamped out," and responded to a Jewish critic of Orbán's policies with regret that not all victims were killed in an early twentieth-century pogrom.⁸

Far-right sentiment also infused the 2017 government billboard campaign against émigré Hungarian Jewish tycoon George Soros—ironically,

sponsor to Orbán as a young scholar at Oxford University. Using imagery evocative of Nazi-era anti-Semitic propaganda, the campaign urged the public to vote against the so-called Soros Plan, a series of measures through which, the government alleged, Soros sought to undermine Hungary. András Aradszki, a member of the governing coalition partner KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party), described the Soros Plan as "satanic," and claimed opposing it was as important as the rosary. "The rosary is the greatest weapon against evil and is able to change history," he told parliament. "George Soros will experience this too."⁹

Humanitarian emergency

A central allegation of the Plan was that Soros wished to flood Hungary with migrants from the Middle East and Africa. Following Europe's recent refugee crisis, hostility towards migrants has also become a signifier of Christian identity in Hungary.

Over the summer of 2015, many thousands of people—most fleeing the conflict in Syria—entered Hungary seeking to travel on to Austria, Germany, or other more accommodating E.U. states to claim asylum. The numbers were overwhelming. That September, Austria and Germany introduced border controls, and Hungary closed its southern border with Serbia, leading to bottlenecks at points of transit. For some two weeks, more than 3,000 refugees camped out at Budapest's main Keleti Railway Station.¹⁰

Christians respond

Faced with a humanitarian emergency, Hungarian Christians were conflicted. In an op-ed for Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper, Viktor Orbán defended his closure of the southern border as a way to block incoming Muslims: "European Christianity is now barely able to keep Europe Christian."¹¹ Soon after, Pope Francis called upon every parish and monastic community in Europe to take in one refugee family—"the Gospel calls us to be close to the smallest and to those who have been abandoned"—but Hungarian Catholic Bishop László Kiss-Rigó sided with Orbán.

Those entering Hungary were not refugees, he maintained, but an "invasion" seeking "to take over," and therefore posed a threat to Europe's "Christian, universal values." Rev. Ódor Balázs of the Reformed Church rejected this view but admitted that the Churches had not been fast or vocal in giving a clear response to the crisis.¹²

Yet local Christians were still faced with the challenge of what to do. In the summer of 2015, Major Bernhard Wittwer and his wife Regina, Salvation Army officers from Switzerland, had just arrived in Budapest. Last October, the *East-West Church Report* found them supervising distribution of soup to 200 homeless, a line waiting patiently outside the Army's headquarters as a first sitting filled the cellar. As well as feeding programs, Hungary's 70 Army officers—mostly locals, including two Roma—focus on assisting "the very poorest," Major Wittwer explained. They include women and children in crisis and Roma families in Budapest, Debrecen, Gyöngyös, Miskolc, and the village of Sajókaza. In 2015 the Army instinctively went to help the thousands of refugees at Keleti Station, he said. "For the stranded people, we provided tents and clothes. At the beginning of September, it got colder, so we cooked around the clock and handed out meals in shifts."



Bust of Admiral Miklós Horthy (G. FAGAN)



Billboard against George Soros (G. FAGAN)

In downtown Budapest, staff and workers at Kalunba—a charity devoted to social integration of the small number of refugees granted asylum in Hungary—were preparing distribution of second-hand clothing when the *East-West Church Report* visited. A stack of Arabic children’s Bible storybooks reminded that some Syrian refugees are Christian. So are two of Kalunba’s three founders. One, Dóra Kaniszai, joined the Reformed Church’s Refugee Ministry in 2008, assisting with housing, schooling—particularly Hungarian language lessons—and how to navigate both government bureaucracy and the job market. While this work was not generally understood within the Church, says Kaniszai, then presiding Bishop Gusztáv Bölcsei was “very committed.” By 2014, however, growing “shyness” within the Reformed Church in Hungary—“This is not what the government is fond of,” Kaniszai explained—led the three colleagues to found Kalunba as a separate operation.

As Kalunba works exclusively with refugees already granted asylum in Hungary, most of those arriving in 2015 could not have benefited from its services. But the charity soon became involved due to the active response of its main Reformed partner, St. Columba’s Church. Also known as the Scottish Mission in Budapest, St. Columba’s was founded in 1841 when a group of Scottish missionaries bound for Palestine turned back after one fell off a camel. During their stay in Budapest, Archduchess Maria Dorothea of Austria invited them to found a mission there. This belongs to the Church of Scotland as well as the Reformed Church in Hungary.¹³

Sanctuary night shelter

St. Columba’s is located close to Keleti Railway Station. During the summer of 2015, the congregation began to take humanitarian aid to the refugees there after Sunday worship, Kaniszai recalled. Then, as the weather turned colder, its Pastor Aaron C. Stevens learned that a baby had been born at the station one night. The presbytery decided to open up its sanctuary room as a night shelter, and asked Kalunba to assist. Aided by young refugees who had already learned Hungarian through Kalunba and could act as interpreters, “we collected families with children, provided bed, dinner, and breakfast,” said Kaniszai.

Public hostility towards the largely Muslim migrants was intensifying at this time, however, in response to a series of Islamist terrorist attacks in Western Europe. Days after bombings and a mass shooting in Paris in November, Dóra Kaniszai was among academic, church, and government experts on migration asked to speak at the annual National Forum of Christian Civil Organizations in Budapest. The gathering, held in Hungary’s parliament building and hosted by the KDNP, opened with the Lord’s Prayer. But “they couldn’t listen and give honor and

respect to the guests who spoke,” Kaniszai recalled. “They were shouting, ‘Traitor of the nation!’ to us. And then we closed with the Lord’s Prayer again!”

“To talk is also dangerous.”

In the southern city of Szeged, Sarolta Rozgonyi, who edits *Lydia* Christian women’s magazine, also became aware of the heated political discussions surrounding migration during 2015. But she was too busy to listen. By late summer thousands of refugees were also congregating around the local railway station—Szeged is a transit hub close to the border with Serbia and Romania—and Rozgonyi was coordinating donations of food, water, and essentials such as diapers with members of her Pentecostal congregation. “As a mother who raised three children, I was moved by their situation—that they had to leave their homes and don’t know where they can go,” she told the *East-West Church Report*. “I just knew that I had to do something for them.” Still, when she heard hostile views, Rozgonyi did question her motivations. “Biblical verses came to my mind: Jesus was always merciful to people and said, ‘Whatever you do with the least of these, you do to me.’ And if I do not act for them, I do not act for Him.”

Two years on, a visitor to Hungary might gain the impression that hostility towards refugees has cooled. In one Budapest storefront window, an English-language sign advertises products created by “a young group of refugees, designers, architects and European volunteers” to support “our work for the social inclusion of young refugees living in Hungary.” In another compassionate gesture, Orbán has set up the Deputy State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians, which has spent over seven million dollars helping embattled Christian communities, largely in Iraq. Under its scholarship program, 72 young Christians from the Middle East and Africa are studying at Hungarian universities. Several attending the Secretariat’s October 2017 International Consultation on Christian Persecution warmly thanked the Hungarian government for this work, as did hierarchs of the Chaldean Catholic, Syriac and Russian Orthodox Churches, and the E.U.’s special envoy for religious freedom, Ján Figel.

Yet while this Consultation focused on support for Christians outside Europe, Orbán’s introductory speech turned to his starting point for such assistance: the goal of keeping Europe a Christian continent. “Even though we may not be able to keep all of it Christian, at least we can do so for the segment that God has entrusted to the Hungarian people.”¹⁴ The hostility towards Muslim refugees accompanying this viewpoint in Hungary in fact appears undiminished, despite their waning numbers.

On the eve of the Consultation, Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish representatives spoke on a panel in Budapest’s historic

(continued on page 4)



Major Bernhard Wittwer and soup kitchen chefs (G. FAGAN)

Jewish quarter. “I won’t say if [refugees] are staying with us or not, because my tires would be slashed, or even things will be thrown,” Lutheran pastor Márta Bolba lamented. “We got to the point where it’s already dangerous. To talk is also dangerous.” Miklós Beer, Catholic Bishop of Vác, refused to differentiate between Christian and Muslim asylum-seekers: “There are some borders that cannot be crossed, and that is the border of humanity.”¹⁵

Less open society

An incident two weeks prior prompted their concern. On 25 September 2017 public discussion in the southwestern village of Ócsény of plans by local guesthouse owner Zoltán Fenyvesi to host small groups of refugee children for vacations dissolved into raw anger. “They are Muslim, they have no honor!” one villager shouted. Fenyvesi abandoned his plans after being physically threatened and having his tires slashed. The mayor resigned, but Prime Minister Orbán later backed the villagers: “It’s quite right that they express their opinion firmly, loudly and clearly.”¹⁶

The Salvation Army’s Major Wittwer acknowledges that it is now difficult even for refugees granted asylum to get established in Hungary: “There are many prejudices which do not correspond to the truth.” However, he also suggested that those living in long-open societies—such as Americans or his native Swiss—should try to understand “people who never had free choice, and who have at first a bit to learn about what it means to be able to live together with people of different opinions and faiths.” Yet Wittwer also observed that Hungarian society is today more closed than when he and his wife—both Hungarian speakers—first worked there from 1998-2003. “It’s much harder to get to know your neighbors, and there is less solidarity with other people than before.” This is borne out by the Pew survey, where only 16 percent of Hungarians polled agreed that most people can be trusted, while 72 percent thought that “you can’t be too careful with people.”

Despite having no recourse to public funds and acting as guarantor for its former refugee tenants, Kalunba now finds it extremely difficult to obtain rented accommodation in Budapest for refugees newly granted asylum. The charity no longer publicizes its positive stories of integration in the media, says Dóra Kaniszai, “because Hungary is a small country, and refugees can be found.” She believes the government-controlled media are responsible, as hostility is strong even in eastern areas where there are no refugees. There had been an expectation that, under a pro-Christian government, “we would have a pure, beautiful, balanced country finally leaving Communism behind,” Kaniszai recalls. It has turned out very differently. “We are learning to be afraid of politics again.” ♦

Notes:

¹ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the national event commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation,” 31 October 2017; <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-national-event->

commemorating-the-500th-anniversary-of-the-beginning-of-the-reformation.

² <http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-human-resources/the-minister>.

³ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the International Consultation on Christian Persecution,” 12 October 2017; <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-international-consultation-on-christian-persecution>.

⁴ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” 10 May 2017; <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁵ https://www.jobbik.com/manifesto_0.

⁶ Benjamin Novak, “Bust of Admiral Miklos Horthy to be unveiled on Sunday,” *The Budapest Beacon*, 31 October 2013; <https://budapestbeacon.com/bust-of-admiral-miklos-horthy-to-be-unveiled-on-sunday/>.

⁷ “Church Prosecutor Makes Request to Defrock Rev. Hegedűs Jr.,” 2 February 2014; <http://www.reformatus.hu/mutat/church-prosecutor-makes-request-to-defrock-rev-hegedus-jr/>.

⁸ “Zsolt Bayer, the purveyor of hate, in his own words,” *Hungarian Spectrum*, 19 August 2016; <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2016/08/19/zsolt-bayer-the-purveyor-of-hate-in-his-own-words/>.

⁹ “Hungarian Christian Democrat MP declares that Soros is Satan incarnate,” 9 October 2017, *Hungarian Free Press*; <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2017/10/09/hungarian-christian-democrat-mp-declares-that-soros-is-satan-incarnate/>.

¹⁰ Larry L. Winckles, “The Immigration Crisis in Europe and a Hungarian Case Study,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, 24 (Spring 2016), 1-4.

¹¹ Viktor Orbán, “Those who are overwhelmed cannot offer shelter to anyone,” 3 September 2015; <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/those-who-are-overwhelmed-cannot-offer-shelter-to-anyone>.

¹² Griff Witte, “Hungarian bishop says pope is wrong about refugees,” *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2015; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/hungarian-bishop-says-pope-is-wrong-about-refugees/2015/09/07/fcba72e6-558a-11e5-9f54-1ea23f6e02f3_story.html?utm_term=.42a0df6f3a7f.

¹³ <http://www.175.scottishmission.org/>.

¹⁴ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the International Consultation. . . , *ibid*.

¹⁵ Lili Bayer, “Religious leaders convene to discuss Hungary’s treatment of refugees,” *The Budapest Beacon*, 11 October 2017; <https://budapestbeacon.com/religious-leaders-convene-discuss-hungarys-treatment-refugees/>.

¹⁶ *You Tube*, 5 October 2017; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj1tmNiyAfs&feature=youtu.be>; Andrew Byrne, “Hungary’s anti-migrant campaign takes root as villagers vent fury,” *Financial Times*, 6 October 2017; <https://www.ft.com/content/4ae32ad0-a9cb-11e7-ab55-27219df83c97>.

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“If somebody has to defend Christian values, it must be the Church, and not the government”:

An Interview with Bishop Tamás Fabiny

Ordained into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary in 1982, Tamás Fabiny is now bishop of its Northern District, one of three dioceses. He has studied in Germany and the United States, and was a vice-president of the Lutheran World Federation from 2010-17. The East-West Church Report met Bishop Fabiny in his study in Budapest soon after both had heard Prime Minister Viktor Orbán address the government’s International Consultation on Christian Persecution on 12 October 2017.

The Orbán government is keen to project itself as Christian. Does this have a domestic audience?

Yes, definitely. It is a very popular theme nowadays; that we are the defenders of Christian values, not only in Hungary, but the whole of Europe. They try to build a bridge between the 16th century and the 21st century. Historically, it is true that at the time of the Turkish invasion in the 16th century, it was Hungary that tried to defend freedom and Christianity on this continent, and of course it is very tempting to say that we have the same situation now. They are saying that we, as a Christian government, are the defenders of Europe.

I’m not saying they are right, but in some respects I can understand their point, because it really is true that the Western part of Christianity has become very secular. It is cheap to speak about the forced removal of crucifixes—that is not generally the case—but it is basically true to say that secularism has been very strong, unfortunately, in Protestant countries like the Nordic states and the Netherlands. But this whole attitude that we are defending Christian values is not really friendly—and perhaps not even true. And if somebody has to defend Christian values, it must be the Church, and not the government.

Three weeks ago the annual meeting of KÉSZ [*Keresztény Értelmiségiek Szövetsége*, the Federation of Christian Intellectuals] took place in the upper house of parliament. Orbán also gave a speech there, in which he pointedly said that sometimes we even receive criticism from the churches. I wondered, perhaps he was thinking of me! Or some other bishops, like [Catholic Bishop of Vác, Miklós] Beer or [Catholic Bishop of Szombathely, János] Székely. Contemporary criticism, Orbán said, asks why is a political party dealing with Christianity, with Christian values? Why do we use Christian and biblical vocabulary? I criticize that very often, I say it is almost a heresy, a misuse of biblical terms. He explained that they are doing this because a political party has much wider influence than a church, and the churches should be grateful to us that their goals will be multiplied through the activities of the party! A very logical statement, but a very dangerous one.

Where does this come from? After the long experience of Communism, aren’t Hungarian Christians concerned about religion being used to this degree by politicians?



Bishop Tamás Fabiny (G. FAGAN)

That is in fact one reason why many church people—leaders as well as laypeople—are quite thankful and happy to hear that voice. Because for 40 years they never heard anything like that. Just the opposite: there was the official atheistic propaganda. It was very clear that the position of the Church was in the minority, and the position of the government was totally different. The Church had to have complexes or be shy because of state propaganda, and now it seems wonderful to hear them using the same vocabulary and helping us.

The other factor is perhaps theological—it might be the influence of Reformed theology. In Reformed theology, there is an opportunity to mix the Kingdom of God with the earthly kingdom. Orbán himself comes from a

Reformed background—although as a child he was not raised in a Christian tradition, he was later influenced by Reformed pastors, and I understand there was a very deep search in his personal spiritual life. Some people say he’s only a politician, that he tries to misuse religion, but in my understanding he was touched by religion somehow, touched by that very strong, simplified, Reformed idea of predestination. He feels he has been called, predestined, to speak about the message of God in society. Sometimes he says our duty is to realize the Kingdom of God, with a capital K. In Hungarian, the word is *ország*, which may also refer to a country. So he’s saying the Kingdom—*Ország* with a capital letter, which means the Kingdom of God—and the kingdom with a small letter, the earthly kingdom, can be identical, and we on Earth can work to realize the Kingdom of God. That is a nice responsibility for the Church, but not a politician. Do you remember how he finished his speech today? “*Soli Deo gloria!*” For the past five or six years, he almost always finishes his speeches—even in parliament—with “*Soli Deo gloria!*” I’m not against it if a church invites him to their event—a renovated church organ or new church building—and at the end, as a Reformed believer, he’s saying “*Soli Deo gloria!*” But as a politician in parliament, it is a misuse of religious language.

How does Hungarian society react? Are people glad to have a self-proclaimed Christian leader, or upset that millions of their tax Euros are going to support the major churches?

That is a complex issue, almost a contradiction in my understanding.

(continued on page 6)

Bishop Tamás Fabiny Interview *(continued from page 5)*

On the one hand, it is clear that the Hungarian government tries to support the churches. The official government point of view is that Christian values must be strengthened in society. That is why religious education was introduced into schools under Orbán some five years ago, as a choice between religion and ethics. It is about fifty-fifty: around 50 percent chose ethics, around 50 percent chose religion. But honestly speaking, the churches have not been ready for that challenge at all. We don't have enough experience, trained teachers, premises, schoolbooks, and so on. Yet the government tried to introduce it as quickly as possible. The general observation in society is that the churches are in an almost privileged position, including financially.

On the other hand—this is why I'm saying it is an almost contradictory issue—churches are losing members all the time. It's very clear that contemporary Hungarian society is becoming more and more secular. If you look at the census in 2011 and compare it with 2001, you will see that in ten years almost all the churches lost around 30 percent of their membership. Of course, for me that is not a happy situation, because I wish the influence of the church were stronger and the number of church members would increase. That is somehow not the case. Yet the official state propaganda says all the time what an important role the churches play.

Since it bucks the general trend, could this strongly pro-Christian political line nevertheless appeal to a certain crucial segment of the voting population?

I can imagine that some people understand this situation as being in the 24th hour. That after 40 years of Communism, after 20 plus years of secular Western influence and all the social problems, it is the very last moment for the churches to be somehow reorganized. But it is difficult to say if people in general are positive towards the churches having a bigger role in society.

How about the public attitude towards refugees? How typical a response was what happened in the village of Ócsény recently?

It's not exceptional, more a case study; that is my sad personal experience in the last two or three years. Hungarian society is becoming more and more intolerant, and sometimes even hostile, towards others. It is fortunately now clear to most people that it is not fair to speak against the Roma—which used to happen—or Jews, or homosexuals, but they are very happy to have a legal opportunity to blame somebody: the migrants. That is tragic. Even communities that have not met any migrants or refugees take such a hysterical approach. I hear it from congregation members. A year ago, I sent a new assistant pastor to a village in Nógrád region in the northern part of Hungary. He was brand new there, and he just went through the village in order to find the pastor and the church. And the gossip started in the village—there is a refugee, there is a migrant in the village! But he was the Lutheran assistant pastor! This was just because he was unknown there, and having an unknown person was considered a danger. That is very

painful. Ócsény became widely known because this sentiment was concentrated in dramatic action: the damage to the car of the guesthouse host. But on a verbal level, unfortunately, it is commonplace.

Do the media influence this?

Yes, and it is a very slow but successful brainwashing. We see it in the whole Soros campaign. A friend of mine, for example, a university student, regularly visits a woman who is almost blind. He reads the Bible to this old lady—a very pious Catholic woman. She told him that it is forbidden to hate anyone, but she has one exception. She discussed it with the good Lord, and He gave her permission to hate... George Soros!

So when people read their Bibles and come across the parable of the Good Samaritan, do they allow themselves an exception for migrants?

Yes. They are in the position of the priest and the Levite in the parable, and they are saying, "I have no reason to help."

Do people see any contradiction between the Gospel message and the government line? Or do they—especially older people—follow the politicians' message because they are used to following authority without thinking?

One reason might be that, for the first 20 years after the end of Communism, we had a new government after almost every election. First conservative, then socialist, then [Orbán's party] Fidesz, then socialist again. In Hungary, a socialist government actually means post-Communist. Many church members were not satisfied with these socialist or post-Communist governments, and they understood Fidesz to be the only alternative. That is why they try to follow Fidesz without any criticism. They are saying, "At least there is a party supporting us, we were suffering so much in the Communist times, we were suffering under Gyula Horn [socialist Prime Minister 1994-98], we were suffering under Ferenc Gyurcsány [Prime Minister 2004-09]," who was a liberal, post-Communist person and didn't care about the churches. "Now, finally, there is this Orbán, although he comes from a great distance, because his earlier behavior was also not so friendly, but finally he is supporting us." That is why, I think, many people, even in the churches, support him without criticism.

The other factor—and here I have to express a little self-criticism—is the danger of the influence of Islamist radicals in Europe. I used to speak very casually in my statements and interviews about how the government is demonizing people. During 2014 and 2015 official propaganda said that the migration crisis would conclude with a terrorist danger in Europe. I said at that time, "Oh, that is ridiculous." Now, I'm not saying I'm worried, but I'm trying to see it in a balanced way. Unfortunately, it seems to be true that many people misuse the welcoming culture, and many people come to Europe without trying to integrate; they want their own isolated situation. The danger of parallel societies, which is present in some European cities, is in my understanding a real danger. ♦

Hungary and Religious Freedom: A Primer

GERALDINE FAGAN

Adopted in 2011, Hungary's religion law is not as draconian as those in much of the former Soviet Union. Yet it retroactively removes rights enjoyed under Hungary's pro-freedom religion law of 1990 and politicizes the process for acquiring "church" status by delegating it to the national parliament. This is alarming backsliding for a European Union member state.

When the law came into force on 1 January 2012, it stripped the legal status from more than 300 religious communities. Only 14 retained "church" status—including the Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and major Baptist churches, as well as some Jewish organizations. The remainder either had to register as civil associations or face liquidation.

Responding to a concerned bipartisan group of representatives of the U.S. Congress days after the law took effect, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán insisted that "freedom of religion in Hungary enjoys the highest degree of guarantee possible." He also promised that transitional measures would prevent "unpleasant consequences" for two months, by which time those found to meet the new law's criteria would be able to continue working as registered "churches."

A further 18 religious bodies were re-registered in that time, including the major Adventist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches, the Church of the Nazarene, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, and several Buddhist and Muslim organizations. A further 66 were denied re-registration without explanation, however, according to the Washington, D.C.-based International Religious Freedom Roundtable.

In March 2012 the Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law) called for the new religion law to be redrafted. That June, Hungary's ambassador to the United States acknowledged to the International Religious Freedom Roundtable that the law introduced unequal treatment and even discrimination, but pointed out that de-registered religions could still apply to be associations, and would have no problems as long as they were "real religions."

In February 2013 Hungary's Constitutional Court ruled that the de-registration of 66 "churches" had violated due process and was unconstitutional. It also noted that making "church" status dependent upon a two-thirds parliamentary vote was "a procedure leading to political decisions" unacceptable in cases affecting fundamental rights, and the lack of any written explanation for rejections meant that there was no possibility for appeal.

The Hungarian government responded by amending both the Constitution and the religion law to consolidate parliament's responsibility for identifying "established churches" (*bevett egyházak*). This status would be contingent upon the suitability of a religious community for cooperation with the state towards achieving "community goals," gauged by the community's size, charter, and activities. "These, however, are vague criteria," pointed out David Baer, an associate professor

of philosophy and theology at Texas Lutheran University, who spent 2013-14 in Hungary researching the impact of the 2011 law.

The 2013 amendments did allow a religious community to appeal denial of "church" status to the Constitutional Court. Yet as the Constitution and religion law allow parliament to use its discretion in deciding which religious communities should receive this status, the Court is unlikely ever to overturn such a decision. As Baer noted: "If Parliament has a constitutional right to enact arbitrary decisions, the Court cannot strike down Parliament's decision for being arbitrary."¹

While still able to function, non-established churches—legally termed "organizations conducting religious activity" (*vallási tevékenységet végző szervezetek*)—no longer enjoy certain rights held prior to the 2011 law. These include the ability to receive one percent personal income tax donations designated for a particular "church;" matching state subsidies for educational and charitable activities; the ability to offer religious instruction to public schools at students' request; and to provide hospital, military, and prison chaplaincy.



Hungarian Parliament Building (G. FAGAN)

Two U.S. missionaries told the *East-West Church Report* in Budapest that the 2011 religion law had not greatly affected their activity. Unable to meet its criteria, Larry Winckles' Free Methodist congregation registered as "Bread of Life" charitable foundation. Members may still refer to this as a church, he added, but without "established church" status, pastors are unable to be credentialed as official clergy for admission to hospitals and prisons.

Terry Lingenhoel of the interdenominational mission OM (Operation Mobilization) described how, once the main Hungarian Baptist and Pentecostal churches received "established church" status, they acted as umbrella organizations for numerous smaller denominations unable to obtain it. In this way, OM is now under the Baptist Church. "It didn't eliminate a lot of churches," he remarked. "It made them find another solution."

(continued on page 8)

Hungary and Religious Freedom *(continued from page 7)*

Lingenhoel thought there had been abuses of the 1990 law, with communities able to obtain “church” status despite not being genuinely religious. So did Laura Halmaghi of the Salvation Army. While the Army operated in Hungary for more than 20 years prior to the 1948 Communist take-over and was the very first to receive “church” status under the 1990 religion law, she said, it was initially de-registered under the 2011 law. The Army was among the 18 entities that were swiftly re-registered, however; Halmaghi thought due to its history in Hungary and extensive social work. Today, she said, the Army is sustained by the one percent personal income tax allocation—“a fair amount but it wouldn’t cover our social operations”—and a state subsidy calculated according to the number of people it assists. “Based on these numbers, we have serious funding.”



Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship headquarters (G. FAGAN)

All is not well, however. The Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship was stripped of its “church” status despite operating in Hungary for 20 years and conducting extensive social work; it continues to be the religious community most adversely impacted by the 2011 religion law. Alongside 15 similarly affected smaller religious communities—the majority Protestant and Buddhist—the Fellowship responded by complaining to the European Court of Human Rights, which in April 2014 judged that their rights to freedom of religion and association had been violated.²

Hungary’s Constitutional Court then urged the government and parliament to resolve the conflict between the religion law and international agreements by 15 October 2015. This has still not occurred, however; nor has the legal status of de-registered “churches” been restored. In June 2015 the Fellowship reached a settlement to receive government compensation for the one percent tax donations and matching state subsidies it would have received in 2012, 2013, and 2014 if it had still held “church” status. In October 2017 it similarly obtained compensation for 2015 and 2016. But the church’s legal fight to secure compensation covering 2017 and 2018 continues.

“It’s brought up to Orbán all the time, but he has no shame about not doing anything,” the Fellowship’s pastor,

Gábor Iványi, told the *East-West Church Report* in Budapest. Iványi’s vocal criticism of the Orbán regime appears key to the state’s treatment of the Fellowship; its pariah status also acts as a warning to major churches—eager to retain their tax donations and subsidy—not to voice similar opposition.

The government’s dislike of Iványi’s church is clear from a 2012 interview in which Minister of Human Resources Zoltán Balog—an ordained Reformed minister—was asked whether the state’s stripping of the Fellowship’s “church” status meant that Orbán’s children—two of whom were baptized by Iványi in the 1990s—were therefore baptized in a “sham church.” Instead of refuting the suggestion that the Fellowship was fake, Balog quipped that baptism could also be performed by a midwife and so remained valid for Orbán’s children. After complaining that Iványi was constantly telling the media that he had baptized the children (which Iványi denies), Balog defended the state’s treatment of him: “Why should someone who does not take the calling of a pastor seriously be surprised if the state does not take him seriously either?”

Balog further questioned why the Fellowship provides social and educational services out of all proportion to its size.³ “Jesus sent a dozen apostles and then several dozen (seventy) disciples out to pursue nationwide, comprehensive social, health, teaching and spiritual activity,” Iványi retorted in an open letter. “He told not even a dozen apostles on the occasion of His Ascension to “go out and make disciples of all nations.”

Iványi also saw no tension between preaching and extensive social work: “Those suffering in the world and in the afflicted areas of Hungary have need of the words of the Gospel *along with solidarity*.”⁴ But the Fellowship, which Iványi estimates to have 100 active groups nationwide, is now struggling to operate its social programs without its previous one percent personal income tax allocations and corresponding state subsidies. The church runs educational and charitable programs at 22 locations across the country, ranging from schools for over 3,000 young people, retirement homes, and hospital care to homeless shelters, including one toured by Queen Elizabeth II during her 1993 state visit to Hungary. A thousand people work for the Fellowship, not including volunteers, Iványi told the *East-West Church Report*. “It’s a miracle that we’re able to pay the bills every month.” ♦

Notes:

¹ <https://hdavidbaer.com/about/>; David Baer, “Continuing Problems with Hungary’s Law on Religion,” 21 November 2013; <http://www.uk.upf.org/leadership-conferences/625-continuing-problems-with-hungarys-law-on-religion>.

² Case of Magyar Keresztény Mennonita Egyház and Others v. Hungary, Application Nos. 70945/11, 23611/12, 26998/12, 41150/12, 41155/12, 41463/12, 41553/12, 54977/12 and 56581/12.

³ András Stumpf, “Nem nyugszunk bele!”, 24 May 2012; <http://www.balogzoltan.hu/nem-nyugszunk-bele/>.

⁴ Open Letter of Pastor Gábor Iványi, Head of the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship, 20 July 2012; <http://www.iprotest.hu/archivum/for-the-freedom-of-religion/open-letter-of-pastor-gabor.html>.

Geraldine Fagan is editor of the *East-West Church Report*.

“When they say you should hate the refugees, this goes against what the Bible teaches”: An Interview with Rev. Gábor Iványi

Rev. Gábor Iványi leads the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (Magyarországi Evangéliumi Testvérközösség), an independent Methodist church founded in Hungary in the 1970s. Rev. Iványi is a familiar figure in official circles; in the 1990s he conducted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s church wedding and baptized two of his children. Today, however, he is a vocal critic of Orbán’s regime, and the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship has been seriously impacted by the 2011 religion law. The East-West Church Report met Rev. Iványi at his Budapest office in October 2017, and would like to thank Benjamin Novak of the Budapest Beacon for acting as interpreter.

Why was the 2011 religion law adopted?

On the one hand, it was adopted due to KDNP, the Christian Democratic People’s Party [coalition partner of Orbán’s party, Fidesz], which is very pro-Catholic, but there are also strong Reformed interests competing there. For a very long time they wanted to be the ones who decided who the “real” churches are. They still subscribe to this old notion that they are the ones who decide who enters the gates of heaven.

On the other hand, the Catholic and Reformed Churches are losing their base at an incredible pace. The importance of a church is mathematically determined by the number of one percent tax donations it receives. Our church used to be number seven on that list. Compared with the Catholic and Reformed Churches, annual donations to our church were on the rise, whereas theirs were declining. I suspect the historical churches were very worried that eventually they might be replaced in this ranking of importance, not by our church, but by aggressively growing Pentecostal churches.

There is another problem here to do with Hungary’s history. In 1895 the law placed the Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches in one category [“accepted”], while the smaller churches, such as Baptist and Methodist, were in another [“recognized”]. Through 1946, the Catholic Church was able to prevent this law from being enforced in such a way that these smaller churches would be properly recognized.

Then, under the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, Hungary was required to create a real environment for religious freedom, so that these smaller churches could all operate. But when the Communists took power in 1948 they found it advantageous to maintain the earlier situation. They continued to deal with the major churches while forcing the smaller ones to be part of the Council of Free Churches [*Szabadegyházak Tanácsa*]. This carried on all the way up until 1990.

In that year, just before the political changes [formal end to the Communist system], a new, liberal church law was adopted. As a member of parliament between 1990 and 1994, I was part of the working group that prepared it, working alongside now Cardinal Péter Erdő. But the Christian Democrats immediately started work to try to dismantle this new law. I was on the human rights committee back then, and such debates were frequent in meetings. In 2011 those same people succeeded in replacing the law. The 2011 law essentially



Rev. Gábor Iványi (right) and Benjamin Novak
(G. FAGAN)

restores the situation of 1895, where the larger churches are favored, but it’s the state that directs what they’re doing.

What encouraged you to adopt an independent position, not sanctioned by the state? What challenges did you face on this path?

We didn’t want to break away from the main Methodist Church. In 1973 the mandate of the Church’s superintendent ended after 16 years. Moves began on the state’s behalf to figure out who

would replace him. But a younger faction within the Church maintained that the state had no business appointing the superintendent, because the state had not entered with the Methodists into the same kind of relationship that it had with the Catholic or Reformed Church. Under a Stalin-era agreement, ranking positions within those churches had to be approved by the state, and nobody could be appointed who could not be trusted from a political perspective. No such agreement was ever made with the Methodist Church: it wasn’t that significant a church. Yet even without this agreement, the same practice was employed with the smaller Protestant denominations.

The debate within the Methodist Church got to the point where a faction was saying, “Why act as though the person who will lead the Church is going to be decided by a secret ballot according to church statutes, when in reality that is not what is going to happen?” The counterargument started to evolve on the other side, based upon Romans 13, that there is no power except from God. Although if you continue to read that passage, it says that God will punish the evil and reward the good. It has nothing to do with unlimited power.

So everybody knew that the authorities were going to influence the churches, and one side was arguing it was God’s plan and we must acquiesce. Our side said, “But if that’s true, shouldn’t it also have been the case under Hitler? Let’s not allow ourselves to get involved in any backroom dealings.”

Aside from the state agency dealing with the historical churches [the State Office for Church Affairs, *Allami Egyházügyi Hivatal*], there was the Council of Free Churches, responsible for managing small churches like the Methodists. They said they did not care if the superintendent whose mandate was ending wanted to go into retirement, he was the only one they would work with. They declared that they would not give their approval for the Church to convene a congress to elect a new

(continued on page 10)

Rev. Gábor Iványi Interview *(continued from page 9)*

superintendent, even though such approval was not needed! Our presiding bishop was in Switzerland, but the superintendent was actually in charge. They brought this Swiss bishop over, and the Council of Free Churches persuaded him to give his blessing for this superintendent to remain in power.

Once that happened, the Council initiated disciplinary proceedings against everyone who had been part of the opposition. They essentially told the Church to handle the problem, or else the state would ensure “the smooth operation of your church affairs.” What that meant was that the Council would essentially censor, kick people out, make police reports, file criminal complaints against ministers and church members. So our group believed that those who launched the subsequent attack against us were not doing so from a position of power within the Church.

That’s when they told me, as pastor, to hand over the keys to my parish in the Kispest neighborhood of Budapest. I answered that I would not give them the keys, because they were not in a position to take them. Then church leaders came and broke the locks on the church, installed new ones, and hung up a sign saying there would be no more services at this church. I went along to the church to hold a Tuesday evening Bible study and I saw that sign. The Spirit of the Lord raised me up—I was in much better physical health back then!—and I broke the lock. I told the people about the unlawful thing that had just happened, and they decided to get together and write a letter to the church authorities telling them not to do anything similar in future.

A few weeks later, at night, the church authorities installed a bigger lock. And then a debate started within our congregation: “Maybe we shouldn’t break this lock?” Someone very wisely asked, “Why not, is it because this is a bigger lock?” So I asked if anyone there had a saw that could cut through iron, and the congregation voted on a resolution to remove that lock too. The police were already watching what was going to happen, and so the way we agreed to cut this lock off was that everyone present in the congregation would get a turn pulling the saw. There was one very enthusiastic 80-year-old lady who wanted to pull the saw too, but she was too weak. She asked that we hold her hands on the saw so she could also cut at the lock! From that point on, for more than four years, I would preach on the street. By 1979 we decided to ask the state to recognize us as a separate church. This was unprecedented, but there was fatigue among people in the congregation; they were standing out on the street week after week. The state authorities—I don’t know why—just decided to grant us that status.

So it was never our intention to split from the Methodist Church. We gave our Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship the acronym *MET* in Hungarian, as a sign that we still belong to the *METH*odist community, like the Israelites who left stones when they crossed over the Jordan into Canaan to indicate that they were still part of the larger Jewish nation.

What do you think of the use of Christianity in recent Hungarian political discourse?

It’s disgusting. To say that George Soros is Satan and that you must fight against him with a rosary. . . I don’t believe in the use of the rosary, but it is incredibly disrespectful to those

who do believe in the power of the rosary to suggest that they would now start throwing it or whatever at George Soros. When they say you should hate the refugees, this goes against what the Bible teaches. All this is made even more stupid by the fact that the government tries to portray things as if we Christians are fighting against the Muslims in the Middle East, while at the same time we do business with them. And how ironic it is that this government would build or renovate a church in Syria while churches in Hungary are being treated as we are.

Blame can certainly be assigned to the government for what’s going on, but the average person who sees this happening is not blameless. There’s a passage in the Bible that says, “Resist Satan, and he will flee from you.” Those people who are quiet in the face of what the government is doing share the blame. There are even those who claim that if God didn’t want it this way, He wouldn’t have allowed for this to happen, for these guys to be in power. But God has left this for us to decide.

It sounds like people want to be Christian without any responsibility.

Jesus said that you have to take up your cross. You cannot be a Christian without carrying your cross. It reminds me of when I visited Israel, I saw them renting out a cross for tourists to carry. It had a wheel at the bottom of it!

There was no thorough lustration process [de-Communization, particularly disqualification of Communist officials from public office] in Hungary after the Communist period. If there had been a better examination of responsibility for what happened in the recent past, might attitudes be different now?

There has never been any attempt at closure. Going back one hundred years, Hungarians have not been able to be reflective or have self-criticism. We joined World War I and the consequence was Trianon, but we didn’t learn from this, we only saw ourselves as victims. That’s how we entered World War II. The first anti-Jewish laws of the 20th century were introduced in Hungary, in 1920. First they curtailed the ability of Jews to take part in higher education, with the *numerus clausus* law. This developed further by restricting Jews in employment. All of this eventually resulted in Jews’ citizenship being questioned, their assets looted, and them being murdered.

The monument with the Archangel Gabriel marking the German invasion claims that it wasn’t the Hungarians who did this against the Jews, but the Germans. [Unveiled on Budapest’s Freedom Square in 2014, the monument is entitled “A Memorial to the Victims of the German Invasion.”] But the Germans weren’t in Hungary in 1941, when [Admiral Miklós] Horthy put some 20,000 Jews on trains and sent them to Kamianets-Podilskyi, an active war zone in Ukraine, where the Germans executed them all.

When [Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin] Netanyahu visited recently and met with Orbán, Orbán said it was a shame that we didn’t stand up for our Jewish people during World War II. It’s not that Hungarians didn’t stand up. It was Hungarians who looted these Jews, Hungarian law-enforcement officials who threw them into the wagons and accompanied them to Kamianets-Podilskyi. Hungarian soldiers were part of the brigade of soldiers who executed these people. If Hungary started to examine this past now, it would take at least a quarter century before we got to the point where Germany is today. ♦

Restrictions on Religious Freedom in Armenia

STEPAN DANIELYAN

Post-Soviet competition between the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) and other churches, while no longer openly aggressive, has intensified due to an increase in different religious groups.¹ The Armenian Apostolic Church regularly turns to state authorities appealing for additional restrictions on the activities of rival religious bodies.² For the purpose of giving the AAC exclusive rights, a number of legislative initiatives have been undertaken, some of which have become law. Others, to date, have failed in the Armenian parliament because of opposition voiced by local civil society and international organizations.³ Due to the active propaganda of the AAC and conservative political circles,⁴ other religious organizations are accused of “not being national” and “being a sect.” This frequently leads to the marginalization and isolation of those communities.⁵

The 1991 Religion Law

The 1991 religion law limits the activities and rights of religious organizations.⁶ Despite Armenia’s obligation to protect freedom of conscience under the terms of international agreements it has signed, attempts to pass legislation that provides for genuine religious freedom have been blocked by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Under the current 1991 law, the AAC enjoys numerous monopolies, including the exclusive right “to preach and disseminate its faith freely throughout the Republic of Armenia,” “to take practical measures which enhance the development of moral standards of the Armenian people,” and “to expand benevolent and charitable activities.”⁷ At the same time, the 1991 law states that “proselytism” is prohibited within Armenia, although no clear definition exists for the term in the law. The 1991 law’s formulations on the “Definition of a Religious Organization” appear to be taken from medieval theology: “A religious organization is one that is based on historically recognized Holy Scriptures,” “its doctrines form part of international contemporary religious-ecclesiastical communities,” and “it is free from materialism and is intended for purely spiritual goals.”

Attempts to Revise the 1991 Law

Three projects have attempted to revise the 1991 law, all of which contain very broad definitions of “proselytism.” The first project was drafted by four parliamentary factions in 2009,⁸ while the second and third attempts were drafted by the government in 2010 and 2011. The Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, non-AAC religious organizations, and Armenian civil society have criticized all three projects.⁹

Each of these three attempts at revision proved controversial. In particular, the second project attempted to exclude the recognition of religious groups that did not affirm the Trinity. Apparently, the purpose was to prevent the registration of Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). According to the third project, all religious organizations would be required to register with the state,

which would continue to have very broad powers in controlling religious organizations. In addition, registered groups would be obligated to submit detailed reports to the authorities, including personal information on their members. Criminal penalties, administrative fines, and loss of state registration would follow failure to provide the required information.¹⁰

Further Threats to Freedom of Conscience

Amendments to the Armenian Constitution proposed in 2015 and a legislative package proposed in 2017 by Armenia’s Ministry of Justice raise serious concerns regarding freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.¹¹ The proposals in effect merge the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian state, and discriminate against all religious groups other than the AAC. For example, laws dealing with the military, police, rescue, and national security services place religious restrictions on all personnel working in these agencies. They may only be members of the AAC, which contradicts United Nations and European human rights agreements to which Armenia is a signatory.

The leaders of the above-mentioned agencies take part in AAC religious ceremonies and publicly declare that they are members of the AAC. During the 20th anniversary of the Armed Forces Religious Service [Chaplaincy] celebration in December 2017, Minister of Defense Vigen Sargsyan emphasized that

The church cannot be separated from either the state or the army. It is in our Constitution, legislation, and most importantly, in the heart of every Armenian. (. . .) This Religious Service was established under Catholicos Garegin I [head of the AAC, 1994-99], and it is getting stronger under Catholicos Garegin II. It is the force which should make our army unique; it is the force that should become an important means of forming a national spirit and a new environment in our armed forces.¹²

Clearly, the purpose of the “reform projects” is to provide the AAC with special privileges and monopolies while limiting the functioning of all other religious organizations as much as possible. In June 2017 five Evangelical churches and denominations (“Unity” Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith of Armenia, the Evangelical Church of Yerevan, the “Word of Life” Church, the Union of Churches of Evangelical Faith of Armenia, and the Evangelical-Baptist Church of the Shirak Region) expressed profound concerns about the proposed legislation on religion.¹³

In June 2017 the Armenian government submitted its draft legislative package on religion for public discussion. After this “discussion,” a state press release claimed

there was a consensus on the major issue of separating the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) from [other] religious organizations, thus making it another legal category with a number of exemptions from limitations (such as preaching

(continued on page 12)

Religious Freedom in Armenia *(continued from page 11)*

at [*sic*] schools, reporting to [the] state revenue committee, oversight by the state, restriction on foreign financing and state financing, etc.) introduced by the draft law [legislation].¹⁴

Many religious communities and NGOs in fact withdrew from the “discussion” because of provisions in the draft that discriminate against non-AAC religious bodies. These include limitations on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, the rights of children, restrictions on charitable activity, burdensome reporting to state revenue bodies, and a limitation of one month placed upon public discussion of the draft legislation. Expressing their grave concerns, the Yerevan-based Collaboration for Democracy Center and the Eurasia Partnership Foundation compiled their objections to the draft law and sent them to the Armenian Ministry of Justice.¹⁵

At the same time, the AAC appears incapable of presenting to the public the church’s position on ethical and social issues facing the nation. In 2001 the AAC established a working group to prepare a “social concept” for the Church, which in 2013 was designated “The Office for Church Concepts.” This office’s first executive, Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan, stepped up efforts to draft an AAC “social concept” document. However, as far as the author could ascertain, the office’s activities are currently frozen.

The Historical Context

The many centuries of threats to Armenia’s survival as a people and the Apostolic Church’s role in preserving Armenia’s existence help to explain—but not justify—Armenia’s present failure to protect the freedom of conscience of non-AAC religious groups.

Confusion exists concerning proper definitions for the terms “nation” and “ethnos” in the Armenian language. After Armenia lost its statehood in late antiquity, it endured centuries of Islamic rule, in particular at the hands of the Ottoman Empire and Persia, which defined Armenians as part of a “religious community.” In traditional Islamic law such “religious communities” (“*millets*”) were considered identical to ethnic groups, therefore ethnic and religious identities were the same. Armenians were officially considered “Christian Armenians,” not just Armenians. Another important concept is “self-preservation.” As far back as the Middle Ages, the Armenian Church considered the primary objective of the public life of Christian Armenians to be the preservation of the nation, which consequently reduced the spiritual development of its adherents to a secondary concern. Even today, according to Armenian Apostolic Church representatives and the content of school textbooks:

- Armenia was the first nation in the world to adopt Christianity at the state level;
- The objective of the Armenian Church is “the preservation of the Armenian nation;”
- The primary mission of the nation is the preservation of its existence;
- The Armenian Apostolic Church is the national church;

- Anyone who is not part of the Armenian Apostolic Church cannot be Armenian; and
- The Armenian state and its people owe the preservation of the Armenian nation through the ages to the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁶

Official Statistics on Religious Adherents

Today the true religious landscape in Armenia is in fact far from such homogeneity. As of 2017, 65 religious organizations were officially registered in Armenia, the list of which can be found on the website of the Armenian government.¹⁷ According to the Armenian Constitution and the country’s international obligations, registration should not be compulsory in order to conduct religious activities. At present numerous religious organizations and communities operate legally in Armenia without being officially registered, precluding an accurate accounting of their numbers.

The Armenian census of 2011¹⁸ recorded 2,796,519 adherents of the AAC; 29,280 Evangelical Christians; 25,204 followers of the Sharfadin faith practiced by the Yazidi minority; 13,843 Catholics; 8,695 Jehovah’s Witnesses; 7,532 Orthodox Christians [the AAC is not in communion with Russian and other Eastern Orthodox due to fifth-century disagreement over the nature of Christ]; 5,434 pagans; 2,872 Molokans; and 7,888 “others.” Those who did not identify themselves as followers of any faith numbered 34,373 people, while 87,214 either did not state a religious belief or refused to answer.¹⁹

It should be noted, however, that a certain distrust exists among the population toward the census process, compromising the credibility of census data in the minds of a considerable part of the public. As the 2011 census did not require citizens to answer questions regarding religious affiliation, this author believes many non-AAC Armenians avoided giving an answer to such a politically sensitive question. The census taker who visited the author’s family did not carry out any survey of religious beliefs or affiliation.

Unofficial Estimates of Religious Adherents

The following alternative figures for religious affiliation are based on the author’s personal estimates and meetings with representatives of various religious organizations. Despite the fact that 96 percent of the Armenian people identify themselves with the Armenian Apostolic Church according to census data, this figure is highly questionable since the population is very secular. Church attendance appears low, even though the AAC has a strong focus on liturgical performance. Another difficulty with Armenian Apostolic totals is that atheists and agnostics often identify themselves as followers of the AAC because they conflate religious and ethnic affiliations.

Followers of the Armenian Catholic Church, which follows the same worship rite as the AAC but acknowledges papal primacy, are estimated to number approximately 120,000. It is worth mentioning that these believers are Catholic primarily in regard to their background. Their affiliation with the Catholic Church is often displayed symbolically, and, if they move to non-Catholic neighborhoods, they most frequently regard themselves as followers of the AAC. Regular attendance in this church is approximately 20 to 25 thousand.²⁰

Actual Protestant church membership is an estimated 100 to 150 thousand, with believers frequently moving from one Protestant community to another. One of the oldest Protestant churches in Armenia, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, once had two to three thousand members. Today, however, its membership is reduced to about 300, mainly because of emigration and a lack of emphasis upon missionary activity.

Jehovah's Witnesses, according to the 2011 census, number 8,695. Armenian Witnesses themselves report nearly 10,000 adherents, while the Brooklyn, New York, international headquarters places its Armenian membership at nearly 25,000.²¹ Similarly, while the 2011 census documented 773 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the church itself reported a figure to the government in 2013 of approximately 3,200. The large disparities between state census and non-governmental figures for Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons raise further doubts as to the reliability of official census data. The remaining smaller religious groups together have a membership of approximately three to five thousand.

Ethnic minorities should also be taken into consideration, as they also represent religious communities. The census data for 2011 registered 35,308 Yazidis, 11,911 Russians, 2,769 Assyrians, 2,162 Kurds, 1,176 Ukrainians, 900 Greeks, and 617 Georgians. Armenia is also temporarily home to thousands of citizens of Iran and other countries in the Middle East whose presence should further be taken into account to give a clear picture of the country's religious mosaic. This lack of exact and credible statistical data is not the only factor posing difficulties in presenting an accurate religious picture for Armenia; the extremely high level of emigration also alters the statistical picture almost daily.

The Status of Protestant Churches

As noted, the AAC believes it has historic rights to perform an exclusive role in the religious life of the Armenian people. It also believes that all other churches that function in Armenia should be regarded as "sects." Bishop Mikayel Ajapahyan, who heads the Shirak Diocese, defends AAC's privileged status as follows:

We see our identity, our ethnic self-consciousness in the Armenian Apostolic Church. So if we split into 50 different parts, we will become 50 different nations. That is blatantly clear. And in this case others will reap the benefits, not us. That is why they wish to tear our homogeneous country apart. That is why they want to tear our homogeneous spiritual territory into pieces (. . .). The Armenian people is the field of the Armenian Apostolic Church's activity. Our Church belongs to our people, and our people belong to our Church. Any infringement of our centuries-old rights and duties goes beyond any kind of moral law. It is a breach of morality to consider our nation as a field for missionary activity and proselytism. Our nation has a leader, a mother, a parent (. . .). We don't want even one fragment to break off and join something else. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the foundation of our unity. Churches that do not have such a sense of ethnic belonging can never understand our stance or mentality.²²

Bishop Ajapahyan's words clearly represent the AAC's attitude towards other religious organizations. As a result, relations between the Armenian and Evangelical churches have always been and still are very tense. However, these tense relations relate to the domestic context and do not apply to relations between the AAC and non-Armenian Evangelical churches outside Armenia. With the latter, the AAC generally has good neighborly relations. Yet historically, the AAC has always tried to hinder the charitable activities of Evangelical churches in Armenia, including Evangelical summer camps for children, seeing them as attempts at proselytizing. But unlike the period 1991-95, when the AAC and Evangelicals displayed their mutual hostility in public, today the AAC does not go beyond attempts at hindering Evangelical charitable programs, and occasionally the AAC and Armenian Evangelicals actually engage in dialogue.

Recommended Reforms

How could the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church improve the religious freedom climate in Armenia, as well as its own standing in society? From the author's perspective, the AAC would do well to take the following steps:

- Disavow its obsolete teaching that the nation and the church are synonymous, interchangeable entities;
- Develop its social concept, clearly expressing its support for social justice, property rights for all religious groups, and legislative protection for the rights of families and single mothers;
- Commit itself to financial transparency by making available detailed church budget reports, records of annual expenditures, and an accounting of Church property, possessions, managed structures, bank accounts, and donations, in order to restore public confidence in the church. (Some AAC church hierarchs have been reported in the press as leading a luxurious life shameful for monastics.)
- Declare its support for the right to religious freedom for all Armenian citizens, in accordance with the Armenian Constitution and international human rights accords to which Armenia is a party; and
- Initiate a dialogue with non-AAC religious communities locally to establish an atmosphere of domestic solidarity and mutual support. ♦

Notes:

¹ "Freedom of Religion in Armenia" (Yerevan: Helsinki Committee of Armenia, 2010), 188-91.

² Ditor #1 (70): *Human Rights in Armenia Report* (2015), 22; <http://armhels.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Ditor2016-01English.pdf>.

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(continued on page 14)

Religious Freedom in Armenia *(continued from page 13)*

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¹⁹ “Population (urban, rural) by Ethnicity, Sex and Religious Belief;” <http://www.armstat.am/file/doc/99486278.pdf>.

²⁰ Representatives of the Catholic Church provided this estimate to the author during private discussion.

²¹ A representative of the Jehovah’s Witnesses provided this figure in 2011 at the plenary session of the “Human Dimension Implementation Meeting” of OSCE ODIHR.

²² Danielyan *et al.*, “Religious Tolerance,” 34.

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A Quarter Century Reflecting on Soviet and Post-Soviet Christianity

MARK R. ELLIOTT

This reflection is offered by the founding editor of the East-West Church and Ministry Report (1993-), who is editor emeritus as of January 2018.

In my college classes, I often shared with my students that certain generalizations on Russian history have held true over centuries. For one, Russia, straddling Europe and Asia, has perpetually struggled to define its place under the sun. To the point, is it occidental or oriental? In unpacking this longstanding identity crisis, I stressed in class that Russia has consistently chosen to define itself in relation to the West, not the East. China, for example, has never been Russia’s point of reference, whereas Europe for centuries, and the U.S. more recently, have been. This westward orientation has been the case even in the face of Russia’s frequent, frightful conflicts with powers to the West: Poland, Sweden, Austria, France, Germany, and the United States.

In psychological terms Russia has long exhibited a love-hate relationship with the West. Radical, sometimes abrupt, and often violent swings between emulating and vilifying all things Western have been the pattern for centuries. Admiring and loathing the West has sometimes even occurred simultaneously. Peter the Great, for example, fought Sweden for 21 years, even as he was adopting elements of its bureaucratic system. Likewise, and just as paradoxical, Soviet Russia sought to vanquish the West relying upon the prophecies and prescriptions of Karl Marx, the West’s most famous revolutionary.

In Russia’s recent past, as regards questions of faith, we observe the same confounding course changes and contradictions.

After seven decades of state hostility toward religion, Gorbachev's *glasnost* ushered in fulsome support for religious freedom. This uncharacteristic state tolerance was enshrined in 1990 in Soviet and then Russian Federation statutes that granted unprecedented protections for minority as well as majority faiths. Then under Yeltsin (in 1997) and Putin (in 2016) the Duma gutted legislative safeguards for freedom of conscience as thoroughly as it had championed them in 1990.

As for contradictions, Russia's generous constitutional affirmations of human rights and its adherence to a host of international human rights treaties have no bearing on its frequent violations of its citizens' civil liberties. Also, in the post-Soviet era, the Kremlin—so far—has chosen not to confer upon the Russian Orthodox Church the status of an established religion, even as it has granted it wholesale concessions and privileges that amount to a *de facto* state church status.

In recent personal correspondence, respected church historian and missiologist Walter Sawatsky has called to my attention “the odd word majoritarianism,” which he has borrowed from Indian Muslim historian Mukul Kesavan and German scholar Astrid von Schlachta. Sawatsky sees a tyranny of the majority on the rise worldwide, fed by a bacillus of undemocratic, racially charged nationalism. The consequence has been a growing political force hostile to religious and ethnic minorities not only in Putin's Russia and other post-Soviet authoritarian republics, but in Eastern Europe (especially Hungary, Poland, and Serbia), in nativist parties in Western Europe, among Hindus in India and Buddhists in Myanmar, and in Trump's America.

In the case of Putin's Russia, was it missionary activity that fueled this bellicose, majority-driven chauvinism? In the past 25 years the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* devoted a great deal of attention to Western and Korean missionary efforts in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, particularly suspect now in a climate of supercharged, jingoistic patriotism. Following the collapse of Soviet bloc regimes, the scale of the mostly Protestant outpouring of personnel and resources across the region was unprecedented. Some have argued that the cultural miscues and off-putting triumphalist mentality of many missionaries triggered the region's political backlash and the resulting restrictive legislation. But is that the best explanation?

“In the case of Putin's Russia, was it missionary activity that fueled this bellicose, majority-driven chauvinism?”

Mission missteps and arrogant attitudes—painfully parsed repeatedly in the pages of the *EWCM Report*—no doubt contributed to post-Soviet laws limiting freedom of conscience. But I myself also witnessed many other missionaries who worked hard to respect the customs and traditions of the people to whom they witnessed. Peter Deyneka, Jr., a leading Slavic mission activist of the 1990s, heavily influenced my thinking on this subject. I have come to believe, as he did, that those hostile to the foreign missionary presence in post-Soviet states were actually more alarmed by what Christians from abroad were doing right than by what they were doing wrong. This perspective helps explain why Protestant missionaries were seen to be a threat to the region's traditional confessions. Representatives of historic

majority faiths, be they Polish Catholic or Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic, do not want to concede their centuries-old status as bulwarks of national survival and preservers of their nations' cultural heritage. In this light most post-Soviet states find themselves in lockstep with proponents of resurgent nativist ideologies. Their conviction is that Western championing of pluralism and religious and ethnic minority rights is a threat to social order, political cohesiveness, and national unity.

The Russian Orthodox Church has reacted to the religious pluralism of the 1990s in two ways. It has made common cause with growing nationalist sentiment, some of it harmless, but some of it dangerously xenophobic and anti-Semitic. Orthodoxy has also tied its fortunes to those of the state, and to Putin in particular. Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Putin both feel embattled and seek the support of the other. By way of illustration, in 2012 Kirill praised Putin's then 12 years in power as a “miracle of God” and dismissed anti-Putin protests as the “ear-piercing shrieks” of a minority. In answer to the Patriarch's fawning before power, female punk rockers co-opted Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior for a raucous concert, singing protests against cozy church-state collusion. Putin's response was to have the women tried, convicted, and sent to prison.

“Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Putin both feel embattled and seek the support of the other.”

The yoking of Russian Orthodoxy to Putin's nationalistic authoritarianism poses two dangers for the Church. First, a church dependent upon the state for support against its religious “competitors” invites spiritual complacency as it becomes less dependent upon its own faithful for its temporal existence. For this reason I have long contended that Russian Protestants and Catholics render Orthodoxy a great service to the extent that the state tolerates their existence. This is so because the ministrations of other Christian confessions can awaken the Russian Orthodox Church from the comfortable but deadening stupor of a near-monopoly status, motivating it to try harder to serve its flock.

Second, a church dependent upon the state jeopardizes its future at whatever point citizens conclude that their rulers do not deserve their allegiance. One of the main reasons Orthodox suffered drastic persecution at the hands of the Bolsheviks was because their church had become so closely identified with the ousted Romanov regime. The frequent press photos of Patriarch Kirill with President Putin serve as visual props illustrating an ever-deepening alignment of church and state. Should Putin lose his grip on power, the church of his choice could once again suffer a precipitous fall from grace through guilt by association.

In the meantime, Russian Protestants are tarred with the popular perception that they are adherents of a Western faith. As a consequence, churches of Reformation heritage are struggling to find their way in an increasingly hostile environment. To their credit, state-sanctioned press attacks and ever-increasing legislative restrictions on non-Orthodox minority faiths do not seem to bother Russian Protestants nearly as much as they bother their Western co-religionists who sympathize with their plight. The explanation is simple enough. In the past under tsars and commissars Russian Protestants had to deal with much worse.

(continued on page 16)

In the past quarter century, what has been far more crippling than domestic opposition has been Russian Protestant hemorrhaging in the form of migration to the West. In the former Soviet Union substantial numbers of non-believers and nominal believers came to faith through the witness and preaching of indigenous Protestants and foreign missionaries. But total Protestant numbers have not increased appreciably because of large-scale departures to the West.

“Total Protestant numbers have not increased appreciably because of large-scale departures to the West.”

Over the past 25 years, despite negative press, a hostile majority faith and state, and demographic losses, Russian Protestants have still managed to develop a remarkable range of initiatives that have made a positive impact out of all proportion to their size. Russian Evangelicals have made significant strides forward in church planting, theological education, Sunday school instruction of youth, Christian journalism, and Christian publishing. Especially impressive, given their modest numbers, has been the growth of Russian Evangelical compassionate ministries, in particular work with children at risk (street children, orphans, youth who have aged out of orphanages, and teenage single mothers), prisoners, ex-offenders, alcoholics, and drug abusers.

Unfortunately, space does not permit the treatment of many other issues related to post-Soviet church life that deserve attention: the diminishing strength of the Catholic Church in Poland; the travails and successes of Catholicism in the Russian Republic and elsewhere; the remarkable vitality of all churches in Ukraine (Eastern Rite Catholic, Protestant, and—despite its divisions—Orthodox); the persistence of secularization, especially in Estonia, Latvia, and the Czech Republic; the religious dimensions of the fallout from the Yugoslav Civil War; and the impact on churches from the Islamic resurgence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In closing this all-too-brief reflection on 25 years of post-Soviet Christianity, a comparative perspective may prove instructive. We are all bound to some degree by the blinders of our particular time and place. I, for example, in my professional life have sought to shed light on the promise and peril of Christian life and practice in Soviet and post-Soviet space. But my efforts to call attention to violations of the free exercise of faith in the region have been from the vantage point of one living in the comfort of a country that historically has respected freedom of religion—often imperfectly to be sure, but with a better than average track record. Given my time and place, I have tended to view the waxing and waning of state and societal strictures on freedom of conscience in the East through the prism of Western, democratic norms of respect for civil liberties—in theory, if not always in practice.

“I have sought to shed light on the promise and peril of Christian life and practice in Soviet and post-Soviet space.”

What is needed is the placement of infringements upon the free exercise of faith within a broader global and historical context. And in that light, sadly, we have to conclude that in most countries and in most centuries up to the present, the right to freely believe and practice that belief has frequently been violated. It has not been, and it is not now, out of the ordinary for states and majority faiths to disregard the religious preferences of minorities. Throughout history and to the present, religious intolerance has been—and is—far more prevalent than tolerance.

Heaven forbid that this pattern of religious discrimination and persecution across the globe and across the centuries be taken as an excuse for the precarious state of religious rights. Rather, it should be a reminder to all believers who cherish religious liberty for all that protecting freedom of conscience requires, in addition to human effort, a call upon the Almighty for His blessing in this uphill battle. ♦

The quarterly *East-West Church Report* explores Christian life in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. We focus on:

- church-state, interfaith, and interchurch relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
- innovative Christian charitable projects and mission
- latest academic research into Christian history and culture in the region

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