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RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA FAITH OR FASHION?[1]

Paul Wilson

Judging the state of religion in a communist country is difficult, because in addition to the visible factors—the size of church membership, the number of registered pastors and priests, enrollment in theological colleges, the number of congregations and parishes, the magazines and publications both official and *samizdat*, public events and so on—there are less tangible factors like the measures taken by the state to repress religion and the quality of the belief among the faithful that allows them to withstand those repressions.

Over it all hangs the larger question of how those factors are to be interpreted. In a country like Poland, where the Catholic church is virtually an established church, massive expressions of devotion may tell us less about what changes are brewing in the country than far smaller manifestations in countries like Czechoslovakia, where both the Protestant and the Catholic churches have, since 1948, existed on a see-saw of repression that at times has made mere church membership an act of civic courage. To take a third example, in the German Democratic Republic, where the Protestant churches have been providing a kind of sanctuary or shelter for dissenting activity, there is always the suspicion that the concessions which make such protection possible may benefit the state as much as they do the churches.

There are many places one could turn to for evidence of the depth and significance of religious ferment in Czechoslovakia. If I all but ignore the most obvious of them—the arrest and imprisonment of religious activists by the regime—this is not because such repression is not significant, but because it is only the most visible and extreme manifestation of how the regime treats independent expressions of religious feeling.

The kind of evidence I would like to look at will, I hope, provide some insight into the less visible processes that are going on in Czechoslovakia. The first is an event: a massive assembly of Catholics, many of them young people, at Velehrad in Czechoslovakia in June, 1985, to celebrate the eleven hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Methodius

The archbishop's palace in Prague, a residence of Cardinal Tomášek.

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and his part in bringing Christianity to Central Europe. The second piece of evidence is a report on religious feeling among young people in Czechoslovakia, prepared by Jiřina Šiklová, a former Czech sociologist (now non-practising of course) for a conference on Youth and Religion held last year.[2] The third is a different order of evidence altogether: the appearance of religious motifs in writing and music, the most striking of which in recent years has been a rock Easter Passion Play by a Czech underground band called The Plastic People of the Universe.

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First, however, we should look briefly at the state of relations between the Church and the State in Czechoslovakia.[3]

Here are some basic facts:

1) Although the right to freedom of individual belief is enshrined in the Czechoslovak constitution, the right to assemble and meet in congregations or other religious societies is not. This has given the authorities frequent occasion to claim that the churches have no legal right to exist.

2) All religious affairs are closely monitored by a government agency which has legal authority over the church and its activities. The agency has inspectors, called *církevní tajemnici* or "ecclesiastical secretaries," whose job it is to keep an eye on the priests and pastors and see that they do not do or say anything they are not entitled to.

3) Activities in individual churches are limited to Sunday service and perhaps Bible study. Anything beyond that, such as lectures, slide shows, meetings, concerts, cultural events, etc. held in a church must be approved through highly complex and time-consuming administrative procedures that often discourage congregations from trying to do anything at all.

4) The only thing congregations are allowed to publish are pastoral letters, which are heavily censored. Thus communication between congregations, or between the clergy and the congregations, is strictly limited and strictly controlled by the state. A pastor cannot move from one congregation to another without the approval of his "ecclesiastical secretaries."

5) All forms of ecumenical activity are curtailed and discouraged. Inter-denominational and inter-faith meetings or worship servides are suppressed; contact with foreigners is kept to a minimum; exit visas are denied those wishing to go to World Council of Churches assemblies; entry visas are denied to visiting clergy from abroad.

6) Pastors are paid low salaries, determined by the state, not the churches. Salaries start at about 900 crowns per month–less than half the average monthly wage, with increments of 60 crowns a month every three years, depending on good behavior. Reductions in this wage are used as

threats and sanctions. The more initiative a pastor shows, the more he puts his salary at risk.

7) Pastoral visits are carefully monitored, with worship in homes or other private places strictly forbidden. Pastors who have held such worship services have been charged with the crime of "thwarting the duty of the ecclesiastical secretary."

8) Social and political pressure of all kinds is brought to bear on churchgoers, particularly on families with children, who may be denied access to high school and university. In places of work, loyalty oaths may be exacted, particularly in professions like teaching or medicine, causing moral dilemmas for believers who wish to continue working in their chosen profession.

9) One of the most significant, though seldom mentioned, sanctions is that the state refuses to recognize the traditional democratic structure of the Evangelical Church, with its council of elders. The authority of this council is thus denied, as is the right of congregations to elect a pastor of their choice. Lay preachers, of course, are not allowed to function. Since 1971, dozens of pastors have been denied their "state permission" to lead a congregation. Many congregations have had to disband because they lacked an official pastor. Once a pastor has been "excommunicated," he is virtually denied any kind of contact with his former congregation or with the governing bodies (such as they are) of the church, again on pain of sanctions.

10) Theological faculties have had their quotas of students drastically cut back. Admission procedures to study theology are complex and admission to studies requires the approval of the civil authorities.

All of these restrictive measures, and more, are designed to curtail severely the activities and influence of organized religion in Czechoslovakia, if not to eliminate it altogether. And it should be remembered that nowadays, it is usually only when it fails to intimidate people that the regime resorts to judicial repression—the visible tip of a vast iceberg of restrictions that affect believers every day of their lives.

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When we look at the events that took place in Velehrad in June, 1985, it is well to keep this background in mind. One of the best treatments of the event is an essay called "Christianity and Politics Again: Where Do We Go from Velehrad?"[4] by Václav Benda, a 41-year-old Czech Catholic layman who was a student activist in 1968 and later a spokesman for the human rights initiative Charter 77 and a member of VONS, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, for which he spent four years in jail in the early 1980s.

Had one been watching the Velehrad gathering on television in the Federal Republic of Germany or in Austria, or even in Japan (each of these countries had television crews there) one would have seen an assembly of people, a large proportion of them young, with crowds of anywhere from 150,000 (the lower range of the estimate) to over a quarter of a million, listening sometimes with respect, sometimes with impatience, and at times with open disapproval and derision, to a series of speakers, some of them local politicians, church functionaries, but including the Czech Cardinal Tomasek and the papal delegate Cardinal Casaroli, who addressed the crowds in Czech and Slovak and served mass. What these television audiences would not have seen was how the authorities—in an instructive display of communist-style crisis management—did just about everything in their power short of direct intervention to minimize the impact of the event. For example, there was no information about dates in any of the mass media; not even the *Katolické noviny*—the official Catholic paper—was allowed to write about it. The event itself was preceded by a widespread campaign of arrests and house searches aimed at putting a stop to Catholic *samizdat* ventures. Shortly before it took place, the government set up a church-state commission that tried to take over the organization and transform the occasion into a "Peace Assembly," that is, to suppress its religious nature and turn it into a conventional, arranged event supporting the official political line. Local councils were given the task of inventing alternate events. Suddenly, Benda says, the surrounding district enjoyed an unprecedented "cultural boom": on the same weekend, in almost every town and village for miles around, there were dances, amateur theatre productions, field days and other sporting events, midways with rides for children, and a large number of organizations scheduled meetings, with compulsory attendance, of course. Immediately before the celebration, the travel agencies cancelled all the chartered buses to Velehrad. At least a thousand buses were taken out of service, stranding tens of thousands of people who wanted to attend and forcing them to make arrangements for other transportation at the last moment. Even some regular bus lines altered their routes unannounced to avoid Velehrad. There were police spot checks on all the major roads leading to the region, occupants of cars were asked to show identification and reveal their destination. According to some sources, ten thousand policemen, most of them in plain clothes, were assigned to Velehrad. They avoided open confrontation during the weekend, but were kept busy photographing the participants.

Yet despite the efforts of the authorities and what Benda calls the collaborating bishops (bishops whose first loyalty is to the regime and their own comfort) hundreds of thousands of people showed up (a crowd unprecedented in the last two decades) and spent most of the weekend singing, praying, taking communion, and listening to speeches and responding to them in ways that expressed their true feelings. When an official welcomed them to the "Peace gathering," the phrase was met with boos, catcalls and whistles, something that has probably never happened to a public official since 1968. The Czech Minister of Culture, Klusák, was greeted with shouts and whistles as well, but the Czechoslovak television crews filming him turned off the sound, got someone else to read the official version of the speech (from which he had departed) while sound technicians mixed in canned applause and other expressions of approval. What the viewers saw on their screens, Benda said, was a man delivering a speech with increasing confusion and sometimes anger, emotions that bore no relation to what was coming from the soundtrack.

Contrasting that with the way the crowd responded to genuine representatives of the church like Cardinal Archbishop Tomášek and the papal delegate Casaroli, and from the course of events during the weekend, Benda concludes that Velehrad was historically significant in that both "sides"–the authorities (and with them the "collaborating" church) on the one hand and the believers, citizens of the country on the other–were profoundly affected by the event and thus compelled to draw certain conclusions.

First, he says, it must have been obvious to everyone, including the authorities, a real event had taken place, despite all the efforts by the state to stop, contain, or appropriate it. Secondly, says Benda, the authorities stood face to face with an enormous number of people who were not afraid of them, and the shock of that confrontation, for both sides, will have serious consequences in the years to come, especially in the minds of those who were actually there.

Benda's third conclusion is an interesting and perhaps controversial one: he says that although the Church itself is a hierarchical institution that has lent itself to manipulation by the political powers of the world, right now all the "transmission belts" (*převodové páky*) by which the hierarchy passes that manipulation on are not working. Yet the Church evidently lives. The explanation, he says, is a simple one: right now, the Church is governed not by its hierarchy,[5] but by Christ, or rather the Holy Spirit, and since one cannot serve two masters, anyone in the hierarchy who serves "a lie" (that is, who bows to the power of the state) will at once lose his authority with people even–and here Benda is at his most radical–even if it be a bishop or the Pope himself. Velehrad was a "moment of truth" showing that the Church can indeed renew itself from below, and the next time that happens, the state will be on the defensive.

His fourth conclusion has to do with the Vatican's *ost-politik* in the '60s and '70s, which has come under severe criticism among Catholics in Czechoslovakia, since regardless of what accommodations were made with the state, the Church itself is still being subjected to systematic repressions, and the hierarchy is powerless to stop them. Yet despite these repressions, the Church has grown like the proverbial mustard seed. After Velehrad, it is obvious that the Church cannot be appropriated by the

State, nor will it die in a condition of disarray. The dice, says Benda, have been cast anew.

Given such conditions, the Church now has a responsibility to take part in a general revitalization of a society that, after decades of totalitarian power, has been atomized into an assembly of manipulable individuals, with all of the natural bonds between them systematically destroyed, bonds between the nations–i.e. the Czechs and the Slovaks–the generations, social groups, regions, etc. and even among friends and family members. To mend this schism, the Church must go beyond itself and move into "social" and "civic" spheres. This means that Christians will have to stop regarding the world as something to escape or overcome, and start seeing it as something to be lived in and dealt with. The Church, says Benda, is the only remaining "serious social force that is both organized and relatively independent of totalitarian power" and therefore any initiative aimed at remedying political affairs in society must eventually turn to the Church as a natural ally. This will get the Church into troubled waters, he says, but there is nothing to do but "drink the cup in which good wine is mixed with vinegar and bile, consummate the marriage of convenience (or need) and justify its fruits, which shall, in the end, be evidence of love."

Benda feels that the struggle against totalitarian power will eventually have to become international because the symptoms of the crisis are to be found all over the world. "Nation after nation," he says, "are putting forth their best efforts and all their intelligence and making the most difficult sacrifices to extricate themselves from the bonds of totalitarian power, to stop or at least slow down and outsmart the destructive process that affects not only politics but ultimately interferes in all human spheres and values: our world is becoming uninhabitable and life unlivable–and this is happening in a way that is incomparably more literal than the sense in which western thinkers use these fashionable metaphors." Benda warns, however, that there are difficult times ahead, because totalitarian power will instinctively try to destroy all efforts to "internationalize" the struggle against it. Nevertheless, the struggle is "a matter of life and death," and Christians, he says, are instinctively on the side of life.

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One of the biggest problems we face, living in a divided world, is the problem of misunderstanding, or to be more precise, the mistake of thinking that apparently similar events, apparently similar statements, apparently similar experiences, apparently similar bits of information, actually mean the same thing on both sides of the Iron Curtain. There is a tendency to see what we want to see. This is especially true of religious activity. Jiřina Šiklová reminds us of this in her essay on young people and religion. Western theologians see young people filling the churches in Prague, wearing crosses around their necks and declaring themselves Christian, and conclude that Christ's teachings have overcome attempts to stamp it out. Western leftists, on the other hand, see it as evidence of a deeply reactionary and conservative strain in Czech society, an impression which seems to be confirmed when they hear Czechs praising Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. What they see and hear is true; their eyes and ears are not playing tricks on them. But what has to be taken into account is that the behavior they observe is taking place in a different context, and therefore does not necessarily mean what they think it does.

Šiklová is a sociologist and unlike Benda, she is writing from a studied, objectivized point of view, although she warns that her evidence has been collected, necessarily, in a very personal manner, in private conversations with young people. Šiklová says that the majority of young people in Czechoslovakia are not deeply interested in religious or philosophical questions, and that their real concerns are just what concern young people in most of the developed world: sex, marriage, school, a good job, success, doing well, feeling good, and so on. While most of them complain about the regime and are highly critical of it, and toy with the idea of emigration, for the most part they stay home, and frequently end up supporting the regime they once maligned. It is like rebelling against their parents: they are trying to break free of the bonds that tie them down at the same time as they gain material benefits from them. The talented ones who wish to exercise their talent publicly often find themselves in the same double-bind as their parents: they want to be active, yet the price of doing so is toeing the political line, which essentially means being inactive.

Still, there is a visible revival of interest in religious faith, and Šiklova suggests a number of reasons for it. The regime and its discredited ideology can't satisfy the hunger of the young for meaning, for something that transcends what she calls the banality of consumerism. (The revival of religious feeling among young Westerners may well have similar roots.) All ideologies, left and right, seem corrupt and bankrupt, and they look to the past for beliefs to fill the vacuum. The fact that the Church was persecuted in the recent past, and is still under a state of seige today, only adds to its attractiveness.

Nevertheless, Šiklová finds an astonishing ignorance among many young Christians today about their faith, about the beliefs, dogmas and rituals that have been central in the Church. They do not understand the significance of baptism or the mass, for example, and frequently they don't know the difference between the Old and the New Testaments. Often they combine their Christianity with other forms of belief that are at present in vogue–astrology, animism, parapsychology. It is hardly their fault, of course, because religion and philosophy–including Marxism–have virtually disappeared from school curricula. Šiklová even finds it admirable that so many young people are drawn openly to religion: in her day, they would have been laughed out of class, and possibly worse.

She sees church-going as a protest against the faithless materialism of the official ideology, which has no answers to the questions young people are asking about meaning, about the differences between right and wrong. At the same time their behavior can be contradictory: they fail to draw conclusions from it that apply to their private lives; they frequently make little effort to live any differently from their peers, and see no problem in reconciling Christianity with sexual promiscuity, drug abuse and even the kind of staged suicide attempts that young people frequently use to get out of military service. She calls this kind of faith "profoundly infantile" and an example of "oral ethics." God is not a dominating father who demands certain standards of behavior from them, but is more like an indulgent mother, loving, permissive and all-forgiving. One feature that most of the young people she talked to have in common is that they want something for nothing, and religious faith is that little extra something, "the cream in their coffee."

Šiklová does not condemn these young people for their stance, and admits that what she observes may only be a passing phase, not in the sense that they will get over it, but that their faith may well deepen and become something more adult, more profoundly rooted, more genuine. "We have no idea," she says, "how they will respond to the system if it changes its approach, or to increased repression, crisis or war. Perhaps they would then behave as true Christians."

What are we to make of these two very different portraits of a revival of interest in religion in Czechoslovakia? Benda, a practising Catholic layman, having participated in a mass demonstration of faith, feels that a profound change has taken place in the membership of the Church which will have far-reaching political consequences that are in harmony with the political struggle for human rights represented by the existence of Charter 77 and VONS, to name only two of the best known instances. Siklova, having talked to young people in some detail about their faith, refrains, like a good political scientist, from drawing any conclusions about what it might lead to. Obviously the most an outsider can say—and it is not a small thing—is that the future is entirely open and that the attempt to make atheism the state religion seems to have backfired, probably because it ignores the fact that people recognize the existence of mystery in the universe and hunger after meaning. This recognition and this hunger, given the proper circumstances, can have a political impact that would seem to be in direct proportion to the efforts expended to supress it.

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In practically every country in Eastern Europe, large political and social events are usually presaged by apparently small and insignificant events in the arts—the unofficial arts, of course, not state-approved culture.

This is why it is also worth looking for evidence of religious "movement" in the independent writing, painting, music and drama of Czechoslovakia, although clearly we must treat such evidence differently than we would the evidence of Velehrad or the religious practices of young people.

I want to mention briefly three examples out of many in Czech writing in the last fifteen years in which something like a religious sensibility seems to seep through. almost unbidden at times, as though the writer had been caught by surprise, while he was at work. The first of these is a novella by Egon Bondy called *Mníšek*—The Little Monk—about a pilgrimage to Rome undertaken by an Irish monk in the Middle Ages. The monk is shocked and disillusioned by the corruption he sees, but is rescued from despair by a vision of the Virgin Mary. This conclusion is all the more remarkable given that Bondy is a former Maoist. Again, Václav Havel's *Letters to Olga*, written in prison in the early 1980s, ends with a series of sixteen letters that, although couched in the language of phenomenology, suggest a deeper structure of thought that is derived from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. More than one Czech commentator on the *Letters* has remarked, in effect, that Havel is a Christian *malgré lui*. Yet again, Ivan Jirous, originally an art critic and some-time artistic director of *The Plastic People of the Universe*, has written a cycle of poems called *Ochranný dohled*, which literally means "protective surveillance," a very tight form of parole sometimes tacked on at the end of prison sentences, but which Jirous intended to refer to the sensation, explored in the poems, that God is keeping a protective watch over him.

The final example is a rock Passion Play, with words by Vratislav Brabenec and music by *The Plastic People of the Universe*, a popular underground rock band that Brabenec played with from 1973 until 1982, when he left Czechoslovakia. Brabenec was brought up a Catholic but attended the protestant theological seminary in Prague in the 1960s, and had already written, directed and performed in a jazz Passion Play in 1968. In the Passion Play, Brabenec consciously tried to connect up with the much older folk Passion plays that had a long tradition in Bohemia. He lays great stress on the Old Testament antecedents, on the theme of betrayal and sacrifice, and on the notion of predestination. Judas is not a contemptible figure, but one who is merely doing what he has to, and is therefore to be pitied. The crowds who call for Christ's crucifixion are like football fans jeering a rival team, and Christ himself is presented as an ordinary man who lives his faith rather than preaching it, and who suffers for it.

The Passion Play was not intended as an allegory or a commentary on the political situation, and it cannot even be said to reflect the religious feelings of everyone in the band. But the intensity of the performance, and the resonance that it evoked inside Czechoslovakia, where it was circulated in *magnetizdat*, (a neologism meaning "taped samizdat") point to the fact that this version of the story of Christ's betrayal, arrest and trial by the priests and people of an occupied outpost of the Roman empire spoke directly to something fundamental in the culture and experience of Central Europe. And the themes in the Plastic People's Passion Play are in a sense typically Czech—the victory of truth over hypocrisy, of genuineness over deceit and subterfuge, the imperatives of personal honesty over those of empire—but it is presented without the slightest trace of triumph or moral superiority. There is no suggestion of a final victory over the empires of this earth, only that the rule of those empires, their long arm, so to speak, has a limited range and duration. One feels in the music, and emanating from it, a spirit that is already beyond that reach, a spirit that exists and creates within the world without partaking of its totalizing qualities. It is a reality that is already there, and because it exists, it represents a victory of sorts. It is not a substitute for political victory, or for social change, but knowing that it exists, one's perspective on the meaning of totalitarian regimes changes forever.

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A postscript:

Recent events seem to be bearing out Václav Benda's predictions. On March 6, about eight thousand Catholics gathered in Prague's St. Vitus Cathedral to celebrate a mass in honour of The Blessed Agnes, a thirteen century Czech princess who is to be canonized this year. After the mass, about a thousand people gathered outside Cardinal Tomášek's nearby residence shouting "We want bishops" (a reference to the 10 empty bishoprics in Czechoslovakia), "We want the Pope," and "We want religious freedom." These same slogans were shouted at the Velehrad gathering almost three years before. The regime, for its part, preventatively arrested 16 dissidents and religious activists over the two days preceding the mass. And a petition has been circulating, with Cardinal Tomášek's explicit approval, demanding more bishops and priests, more separation of church and state authorities, as well as the right to question Marxist dogma and petition the authorities without fear of reprisals. So far, more than 300,000 people have signed it, making it the largest action of its kind anywhere in the Soviet bloc since the end of the Second World War.

NOTES

1. In Czech, there are two words that are usually translated as "movement," but they each imply something quite different. The word *hnutí* describes movement in the political or organized sense, such as a trade union or a political movement. *Pohyb,*

which can also mean simply "motion," is often used, in conjunction with a modifier such as "social" or "cultural," to mean a shift or a change in the attitudes or behavior of enough people to make it visible. The English word closest to it in spirit is "groundswell," a word that originally meant an excitement in the surface of the sea caused by a distant earthquake or storm. For the landlocked Czechs, however, the feeling would be a simpler one, that something is changing. It is in this sense that I mean the word "movement" in the title.

2. Published in English as "Young People and Religion in Czechoslovakia," translated by A. G. Brain, in *East European Reporter*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (London: 1987), pp. 9-12.

3. My remarks here are based on a document called "On the Position of the Church and Believers," issued by a group of Protestants (mostly members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethern, the second largest protestant denomination in Czechoslovakia) within the context of Charter 77. Much of what they say applies to all the churches. Published in *Křestané a Charta 77,* Index, Koln, 1980, pp. 120-140.

4. For Benda's first treatment of the theme, see his "Catholicism and Politics," in Vaclav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless*, Hutchinson, London, 1985, pp. 110-124.

5. As of this year (1988), there are 10 vacant bishopric posts in Czechoslovakia. No new bishops have been named since 1973. The Vatican has consistently rejected the names of appointees suggested by the Czechoslovakian government because they belong to the state-sponsored Pacem in Terris organization, which the Vatican does not recognize.

6. See, for example, an essay by "Sidonius" in *Václav Havel, Výzva k transcendenci,* Edice Rozmluvy, London, 1984, pp. 55-76.