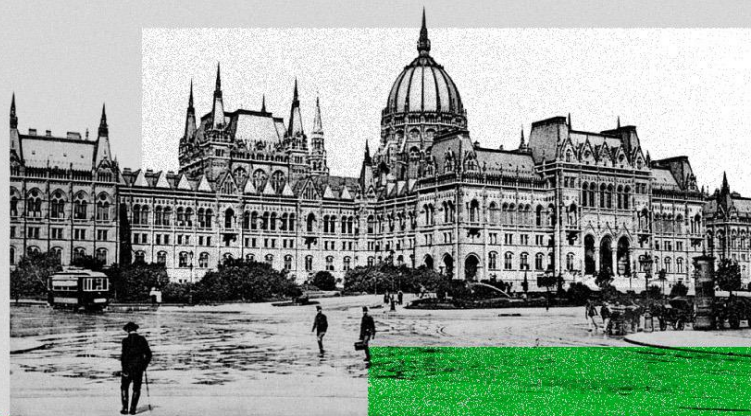


# DANUBE PAPERS DANUBE

AN "OUTLIER" HUNGARIAN CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST  
SÁNDOR GIESSWEIN'S PROGRAM IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGICAL CURRENTS  
HANNA ZOÉ DÓSA



An “outliner” Hungarian Christian Socialist - Sándor Giesswein's program in the light of contemporary ideological developments

*Hanna Zoé Dósa*

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# An “outliner” Hungarian Christian Socialist - Sándor Giesswein's program in the light of contemporary ideological developments

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*Sándor Giesswein with his distinctly modern thinking and democratic commitment may be distinguished as an “outlier” political and ecclesiastical thinker at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He operated at a distance from both conservative church circles and the Christian course of the Horthy system. He firmly believed that “the isolated individual is as little a reality as the abstract concept of humanity”, and he consistently struggled not only with the historical materialism and anti-ecclesiasticism of the socialist ideologies appearing in Hungary, but also with the liberal free-market concept and the far-reaching set of problems - which in Hungary included the problem of unresolved land issues, and the failure to address the evolution of the industrial proletariat. He states that “materialistic individualism cannot have any other consequence than materialistic socialism”, which he considered harmful to Hungarian social development. The paper summarizes Sándor Giesswein’s book titled *Social Problems and Christian Worldview*. By summarizing the book, the study intends to present the political theological canon of a neglected political thinker.*

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## Introduction

The Hungarian approach to history possesses a distinctive characteristic. It highlights past politicians, writers, and poets and discusses their political values by comparing them with the general political and social milieu of their time using the tools of comparative analysis. In fact, this is the true task of the science of history. In relation to Hungarian history, it can be said that in the context of determining political-ideological fault lines, there have always existed individuals representing unique ideas and values, who consistently stuck to their “outlier” views and political philosophies. In this context, Sándor Giesswein may be distinguished as an “outlier” political and ecclesiastical thinker at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with his distinctly modern thinking and democratic commitment, he operated at a distance from both conservative church circles and the Christian course of the Horthy system. He firmly believed that “the isolated individual is as little a reality as the abstract concept of humanity”, and he consistently struggled not only with the historical materialism and anti-ecclesiasticism of the socialist ideologies appearing in Hungary, but also with the liberal free-market concept and the far-reaching set of problems - which in Hungary included the problem of unresolved land issues, and the failure to address the evolution of the industrial proletariat. He states that “materialistic individualism cannot have any other consequence than materialistic socialism”, which he considered harmful to Hungarian social development. In the following, we summarize Sándor Giesswein’s book titled *Social Problems and Christian Worldview* and the political theological canon of a neglected political thinker.

## Giesswein’s perspective in the cultural context of Western Europe

Giesswein's political thinking must be placed in the cultural context of Western Europe and Hungary in particular. If only because Giesswein himself - standing on the ground of Christian personalism and the Roman Catholic image of man and society - formulated his thoughts not as an abstract theorist, but as a political actor living in a discrete society who wants to influence it. His activity cannot be separated from the Christian-social movement emerging in France, Italy, and Germany in the late nineteenth century. While in France and Germany, the first ideas that could be called Christian Socialism appeared in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Hungary the trend first appears in the arsenal of political and public debates in the second half of the century. The reason for this was that the impact of the political and industrial revolution and growing urbanization – and the ideas it spawned – was first felt in the Western states of Europe. It is no coincidence that the author calls the expressions of French Catholic thinkers the first coherent systems of Christian social thought.<sup>1</sup> István Bibó also describes the French

Revolution, or more precisely its "derailment", as bringing about a fundamental change in European social and political development. Bibó writes, "this 80-year stagnation of European political development had extremely serious and far-reaching consequences". According to Bibó, after the first two years of the revolution, the abolition of noble privileges, the listing and codification of human rights, and the adoption of the new constitution, which brought about a change in the previous power structure, the derailment of the French revolution took place, which for 80 years threw back French public conditions to the pre-revolutionary level.<sup>2</sup> He identifies several important consequences of this process, two of which should be highlighted from the point of view of the birth of the Christian Democratic way of thinking. In his dissertation, Bibó shows that utopianism entered the system of European revolutionary thought as a consequence of the revolution's "running into a dead end". A further consequence of this was that "the utopian attitude, which was not at all included in the program of the original liberal democracy of the French Revolution, was incorporated into socialism".<sup>3</sup> This was significant. Indeed, the marked anti-technocratism - i.e. the complete rejection of the engineering of society - which is strong in socialist thought as a practical consequence of utopianism, appears as a reaction to this in the circle of thought of Christian democracy. According to Bibó, the consequence of the "derailment" is also the fetishizing of property. With the abolition of noble privileges and the question of property, "the real dogmatic handlers of the sanctity of property appeared", which led eventually to the idea that "property is sacred and inviolable" and entered the human rights catalogue.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the "association (...) of property with liberal democracy" appeared, as well as the distinctive feature of liberal democratic ideology that viewed a perceived or real attack on a property as the basis of legitimate resistance. This was another key moment that proved fundamental in the development of Christian democracy and Christian social thought, as it was a complex system of ideas born out of a reflection on these secular and progressive ideological currents.<sup>5</sup>

As Felicité Robert Lamennais, the 'father' of Christian socialism, wrote: "Catholicism, in order to be able to move further towards Christian-social thought and democracy, must express itself in a concrete form on the social question."<sup>6</sup> This thought sheds light on what were the basic initial aspirations in Christian socialism, which later led to the creation of a new political ideology or more accurately a new political theology. As István Bibó observes, the idea of Christian socialism and its protest against collectivist and communist features was fundamental, but its resistance to the laissez-fair capitalist-liberal way of thinking, which exalts the value of the individual was also significant. As Sándor Giesswein puts it: "The Christian understanding is far from both of these extremes, the

simplest expression of which surpasses all human wisdom is this commandment, as well as the basic teaching of Christian sociology: «Love your neighbour as yourself». This expresses with unsurpassed simplicity is the basic premise of the balance of the social order, namely, that neither the individual should place himself above society (absolute individualism), nor should society absorb and absorb individuality (absolute socialism)."<sup>7</sup>

What then maybe called the intellectual foundations of Giesswein's thought? As in many other dimensions, the creation of Christian socialism in Hungary was greatly influenced by what happened in the German-speaking world. It is interesting that in Germany, the ideology of Christian socialism and socialism based on historical materialism took root in society at roughly the same time, so too in the writings of German Christian socialist thinkers, the proposal of social reform is extremely strong but less influenced by the need to oppose socialism. For example, Wilhelm Ketteler - one of the founders of German Christian Socialism - gave his famous series of sermons in Mainz in 1848 where he discussed the social issues also raised in a different and revolutionary context by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their *Communist Manifesto*. Ketteler formulated proposals such as providing social homes for those unable to work, strengthening the personality of employees by deepening their education, creating industrial and youth organizations, and establishing production communities. Ketteler believed in the state's obligation to help, and offer worker protection which could only be created as a result of legal regulations.<sup>8</sup> All these considerations were important because they can be found almost identically in the demands of the Hungarian Christian Social Movements.<sup>9</sup> Giesswein's public activity actually begins with the implementation of these suggestions. In 1905, one year after its foundation, the National Federation of Christian Social Associations, which was supposed to represent the interests of Hungarian workers, asked him to be its president, and he served as its leader until 1919.<sup>10</sup> He was a member of parliament from 1905 to 1923 and made his maiden speech regarding the strike law, he regularly stood up for agricultural workers in his parliamentary debates, and he was a committed supporter of land reform.<sup>11</sup> All of this brought him up against not only Hungarian conservative-liberal political forces but also - together with Prohászka - the Catholic church leadership, which for a long time distanced itself from Christian-social reform efforts. One of the most sensitive points of debate emerged around land reform since the Catholic leadership did not support the subdivision of church estates.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand Giesswein's Christian Socialist viewpoint, it is also necessary to be aware that at the end of his political career, he became politically isolated, and pushed to the periphery. In the renewed public debate after the brief Soviet republic, which already showed signs of the Horthy system that created political

stability, he did not join the Christian National Union Party, which was formed from the merger of the government party and the re-emerging Christian socialist forces, because "he was not willing to sacrifice his concrete social political principles related to Christian socialism and the Christian cause on the altar of a mass party turning to politics".<sup>13</sup> According to Zoltán K. Kovács, at this point, he even fell out with Prohászka, who saw the opportunity for Christian national renewal in the new situation. Ádám Darabos points out that with the marginalization of Giesswein, modern Christian-socialist, and Christian-democratic ideas were left without representation, which could not be compromised with the nationalist and the anti-Semitic character of political Catholicism.<sup>14</sup>

### **In opposition to materialistic laissez-faire liberalism and materialistic communism**

In the light of all this, what do we learn about Giesswein's Christian socialism through his work *Social Problems and Christian Worldview*? Giesswein reflects at length on the defining currents of thought of his time, both free-market liberalism and socialism. On the one hand, he explores some of the fundamental questions and basic assumptions of these ideologies, and as a counterpoint to them, he explains the position of Christianity through Biblical exegesis and the writings of ancient and medieval Christian authors. On the other hand - bearing witness to his extensive knowledge - he also summarizes works in the field of social and political sciences and presents concrete examples from Latin America through North America to Europe, to contrast historical experience with the ideas of socialism-collectivism that he considered divorced from reality. His work can be classified as scientific and apologetic writing. Although he cites many international and domestic scientific and literary works, he connects them to one line of thought with the intention of defending the position of Christianity and Catholicism. Although certain chapters of the book remind us of the systematizing nature of political science and of sociology that prioritizes etymological investigation, overall the book - even if it discusses the issues of feminism, work, and education in separate chapters - is more similar to a churchman's scientific awareness, as a work confirming the role of the church.

We must begin the presentation of the book by clarifying the similarities and differences between each conceptual framework and Giesswein's definition so that his criticism of socialism expressed through several chapters becomes understandable. As we alluded to above, the current Christian socialism arrived in Hungary relatively late, so it is no wonder that the theoretical discussions born in its spirit do not lack critical manifestations of socialism based on Marx. This is also the case in Giesswein's work, he devotes a significant part of his intellectual efforts

to refuting it. He distinguishes between socialism and the historical materialism intertwined with it. His criticism of socialism should therefore be interpreted in this broader perspective: if social development was completely *"a projection of economic development, then no one would be able to talk about freedom, equality, brotherhood, nor patriotism, loyalty to principles"*, then *"the only driving force is selfishness, whether it appears in an individual form or as a class interest serving the group's common goals"*. So, his thoughts on socialism are tied together by his arguments and insights for the discussion of materialism versus idealism. As he says, according to historical materialism, ideas are only the outer covering of what is done for the sake of survival and species preservation. Religion, law, customs, culture, social institutions, and government are all secondary phenomena of economic development and the struggle for existence and species preservation. Justice, on the other hand, as he writes, is *"not a mathematical or national economic principle"*, it stems from general ethics. Therefore, if someone talks about social justice - as the supporters of socialism do - then he must undoubtedly leave the conceptual framework of the national economy, which, in itself, makes such a perspective debatable. According to his argument, not only selfishness and necessity lie behind individual social arrangements as the determining force, since *"not only the stomach demands its rights"*, but also the moral sense and the ethical principle, which *"seeks self-reassurance"* and thus affects social functioning and development.

### **The concept of socialism in Giesswein's interpretation**

So how does he define the concept of socialism and what kind of attitude does he develop towards an anti-ecclesiastical left-wing ideology? As he writes: *"It's almost amazing how nowadays this word: socialism is one of the best sellers, not only in parliaments and national assemblies, but also in university chairs, scientific assemblies, workshops and factories alike; however, there are hardly any words whose meaning is so indeterminate and blurred that it is, so to speak, elastic, like this one, and perhaps that is precisely why this expression is so suitable to become a political slogan, in which everyone can wrap their own views and theories."* He also gives the answer to the question, separating socialism from the ideology of historical materialism, Giesswein creates the following definition: *"with the word socialism, we want to indicate the trend that opposes the dominance and excess of individualism and wants to enforce the principles of social justice against the arbitrariness of some."* He then continues: *"communism and collectivism, on the other hand, is an economic system based on common ownership and common production based on common ownership."* He sees the problem in the fact that communism and collectivism do not deal with human nature, and their materialistic view of history deprives them of giving space



to other disciplines besides economics, such as psychology. The churchman speaks of it when he includes human nature as an unavoidable driving force in his analysis. The doctrine of original sin created the wisdom of the real politician in the Christian statesman over the millennia. That's why he believes that *"a collectivist society can be founded, but a society that satisfies all human needs and serves the happiness of everyone equally cannot be imagined"*.

Giesswein wants to emphasize those aspect of human nature, which cannot be omitted from political-social philosophy, even when he considers various utopian ideals and past collectivist communities in order to compare different forms of collectivism. In his view, the essence of the histories of Plato, Thomas More or the South American Incas is one and the same: even if someone succeeds in creating a utopia that best meets the external, objective conditions of social justice, there will still be those who will not consider some of its elements to be just. He considers utopias and the collectivist imaginary in this way to be similar to artificial languages such as Esperanto. As soon as it starts to be used, it cannot be free from the characteristics of vernacular languages, i.e. from change. Thus, even the collectivist-social system created in such perfection *in studio* conditions cannot escape from the rule of change. And what is behind it? The change in human nature, expressed by Giesswein in Goethe's words: *"king, servant and people all agree that the greatest happiness of people lies in the free expression of personality"*. And without a doubt, the free expression of personality always carries within it the possibility of change.

Collectivism is therefore nothing more than a system leading to tyranny. At the same time, it must be emphasized again that Giesswein sharply separates the concepts of socialism and collectivism. In this way, he actually solves the problem of solving the anachronistic contradictions contained in the term Christian socialism with the cunning and noble simplicity of a diplomat. After that, he gives the definition of Christian socialism, according to which it is *"the name of the socio-political direction that wants to stand in the way of the social injustices caused by overpowering individualism through Christian ethics, and hopes to ensure healthy social development by implementing reforms of this nature"*. Put another way, it is *"the summary and system of a Christian social reform"*, *"the practical application of Christian justice in social and economic life"*. The use of the word reform in itself shows that the anti-establishment position of Giesswein and the Christian socialism based on the given definition sees the greatest social justice achievable within the framework of the existing order can be considered the *non plus ultra* of Christian socialism.

However, its negative perception of the French Revolution and liberal capitalism,

meant that Christian Socialism ultimately opposed all forms of extreme individualism in the same way it opposed the extreme collectivism of communist ideas based on common ownership. Based on the Catholic image of man and society, Giesswein sees extreme individualism as corrupting social life, just like socialism. He discusses the ideas of European philosophers and economists, whom he considers prophets of extreme individualism, such as Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche. Their doctrines do not express egoism or egocentrism, he writes. He sees the teachings of Nietzsche and Darwin transposed into economics when they discuss that "*complete freedom of competition knows no other limit than well-understood interest.*" According to him, Adam Smith completely separated the economy from morality, which opened up a space for individualism and human egoism. In the French Revolution, as he writes, these principles prevailed, the error of which can best be understood from its practical consequences.

What is the task of Christian political theology beyond these considerations? "*It is the spirit of Christianity that never allows the individual, as a free being, to be completely absorbed by society, and on the other hand - in the realm of individualism - its socializing power does not allow it to become a social atom, separated from society,*" says Giesswein. And he concludes: "*The new teaching did not create a social revolution, but it spread a changed social thinking, which made what before was only a hidden treasure of souls, into public property; to arouse the sense of justice, to ignite it and to bring it into action, this is the quintessence of the social task of Christianity.*" Giesswein effectively defined this movement in thought and the defining character of Christian socialism, and distinguishing them from the radicalism of the secular ideas subverting western European society.

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- 1 Zoltán K. Kovács: A keresztényszociális eszmék és mozgalmak története Nyugat-Európában és Magyarországon; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó ; BUDAPEST: Gondolat, 2017; p. 28.
  - 2 István Bibó: A kapitalista liberalizmus és a szocializmus-kommunizmus állítólagos kiegyenlíthetetlen ellentéte; in: Collected writings of István Bibó 1. BUDAPEST: Kalligram, 2016. p. 460.
  - 3 ib. p. 462.
  - 4 Reflecting on this, Giesswein says: "If private property is sacred, then everyone must have a share in it" in: Zoltán K. Kovács: A keresztényszociális eszmék és mozgalmak története Nyugat-Európában és Magyarországon; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó; BUDAPEST: Gondolat, 2017; p. 44.
  - 5 According to Mihály Bihari and Béla Pokol, the critical function of individual ideologies is fulfilled in two directions, on the one hand, in the direction of the existing social system, and on the other hand, in the direction of other ideologies. In the case of Christian socialism, the critical function manifests itself in both forms at this point, since it simultaneously criticizes the unequal social situation created by capitalist-wild capitalism (without questioning private property as a natural right!) and socialism's anti-private property. See: Mihály Bihari, Béla Pokol: A politikai ideológiák; in: Politológia, BUDAPEST: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2009. p. 162.
  - 6 Zoltán K. Kovács: A keresztényszociális eszmék és mozgalmak története Nyugat-Európában és Magyarországon; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó; BUDAPEST: Gondolat, 2017; p. 28.
  - 7 Sándor Giesswein: Társadalmi problémák és a keresztény világnézet, BUDAPEST: Szent István Társulat, 1907; p. 7-8.
  - 8 Zoltán K. Kovács: A keresztényszociális eszmék és mozgalmak története Nyugat-Európában és Magyarországon; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó; BUDAPEST: Gondolat, 2017; p. 44.
  - 9 Ádám Darabos: Historical roots of Hungarian Christian Democracy III. - Turbulences in the "happy times of peace" and the collapse  
Zoltán K. Kovács: Giesswein Sándor és a keresztényszocialista mozgalmak; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó; BUDAPEST: Gondolat, 2017; p. 71.
  - 10 ib. p. 69.
  - 11 ib. p. 74.
  - 12 Zoltán K. Kovács: A magyar katolikus egyház és a szociális kérdés; in: Egy élet a kereszténydemokráciáért – Kovács K. Zoltán válogatott írásai; editor: Miklós Gyorgyevics, Róbert Szabó; BUDAPEST: Gondolat Publishing House, 2017; p. 55.
  - 13 ib. p. 62.
  - 14 Darabos Ádám: Historical roots of Hungarian Christian Democracy III. - Turbulences in the „happy times of peace” and the collapse