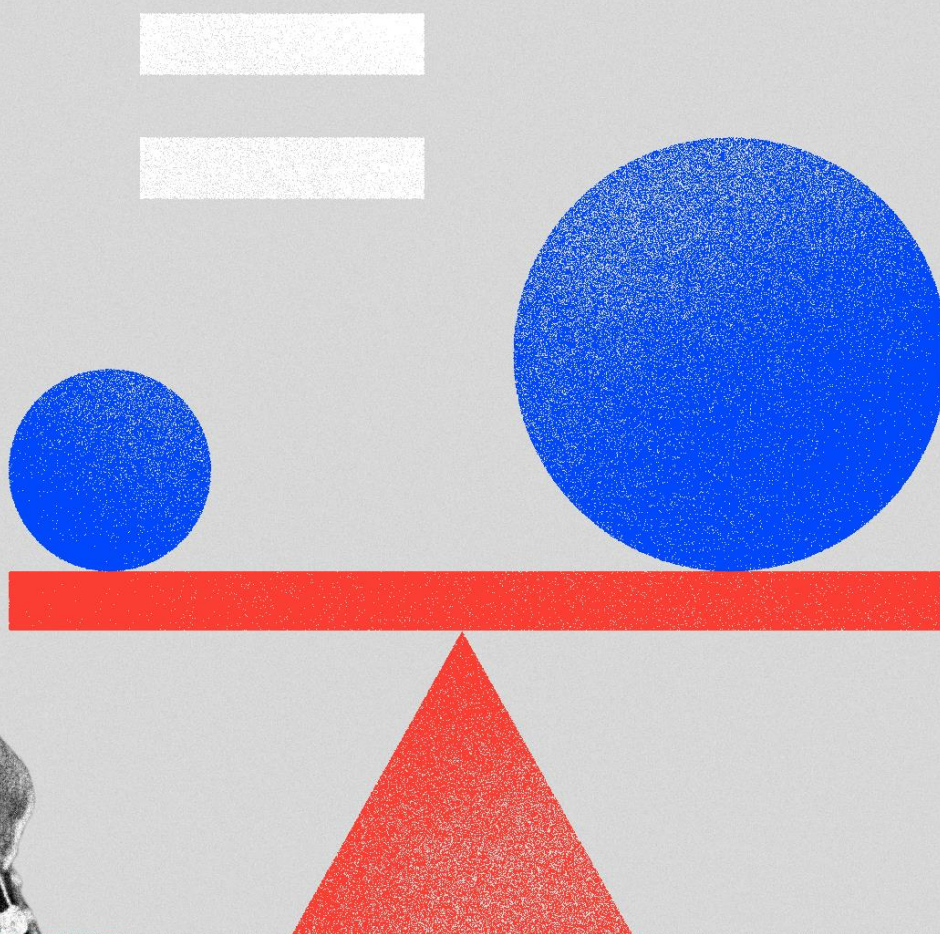


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THE CONTINUOUS PROGRESS TOWARD GOD – SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN A TRANSCENDENT THEOLOGY

HOW OTTOKÁR PROHÁSZKA SAW THE POSITION AND FUTURE OF HUNGARIAN CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM?

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The continuous progress toward God
*Social development in a transcendent
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Social development in a transcendent theology - How Ottokár Prohászka saw the position and future of Hungarian Christian socialism?

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This paper investigates Ottokár Prohászka's thoughts about Social Democracy and Christian Socialism. Although the seeds of the Catholic thinker's approach to modernism and the historical aim of Christian Socialism couldn't be found in his very early works (What is the Social question?), it isn't an exaggeration to claim that his perspective on modernism breaks up from the ground of Christian Socialism and its main sources, the social encyclicals relatively early. The social encyclicals, however, acknowledge the necessity for social interventions and criticize modern social mass movements, like the French Revolution, which disrupted the organic order of society and set back social progress. Prohászka even despite his harsh criticism of socialism, acknowledges its necessity. In his approach, social democracy serves to achieve a point in social progress that "excludes the phraseology of delusive emotions and disturbing social passions". In this way, the steps of social progress get an eschatological, prophetic role, where concrete socio-political processes possess a theological, transcendent meaning. In the end, all of these serve to ensure that history achieves its goal, which is nothing else than continuous progress toward God.

Introduction

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Intorduction

Ottokár Prohászka (1858-1927) was one of the most influential Hungarian Christian writers at the turn of the 20th century. His influence on domestic public life before and after the First World War was unquestionable. However, he was also a controversial figure. Considering the public debates surrounding the bishop of Székesfehérvár in his era, it is no wonder, that opinions about his public role and public activity are still controversial, and while some consider him the father of Hungarian Christian Socialism¹, others claim that his philosophical heritage cannot be interpreted as the primary source of Hungarian Christian democratic politics because of his antisemitism.²

Thus, it is difficult to judge Prohászka's public activity. In this regard, it's important to emphasize that besides his public actions, the bishop's ecclesiastical activity was not the subject of public discourse. Although these roles are not completely separable, we will focus on his public comments. Another important aspect that is important to emphasize, although the bishop's writings and publications can be considered a well-researched field and many original Prohászka texts have already been analysed³, relying on the original texts can make it easier for the researcher to avoid making mistakes and become disoriented researching the subject, that may have also an additional scientific value. For this very reason, the basis of this analysis is the bishop's book *Culture and Terror*, which we compare with two earlier works. Considering that the bishop wrote *Culture and Terror* in 1918, we refer to his book *Victorious Worldview* (1903) and another early work *What is the Social Question?* (1894) in so far as they provide relevant information regarding our subject. At the same time, it must be noted that Prohászka himself revised his thoughts and political position during his career. This doesn't mean that Prohászka's oeuvre is completely fragmented and incoherent, only it is worth being careful about which period we attribute conclusions as far as the research outputs are concerned. As it already has been pointed out, in the first half of his public activity he can be characterized by his "ground-breaking social teachings" when he "advocated a controlled economy" where the control has been justified by the "truths of Christ".⁴ The historian also argues that in some of his writings, Prohászka is "arguing for the legitimacy of "class war" and declaring a "war" on big banks". The author adds: "No one on the right quoted Marx as often and gleefully as Prohászka, who often incorporated Marx's anti-Jewish remarks into his articles and speeches". Later more elements appear which can be identified as right-wing ideas and values. It is a fact that the short-lived Soviet Republic in Hungary from March to August 1919 significantly affected the bishop's attitude towards socialism.⁵ Several authors placed Prohászka in relation to the Christian-nationalist course followed after 1919, his

spiritual guidance and mobilization linked him to this new system.⁶ He became a member of the restored Upper House and participated in the founding of the Christian National Union Party⁷, what's more, Horthy once even offered him the position of prime minister.⁸ He refused the governor's nomination, however, in the light of these facts his connection with the Horthy regime seems undeniable.⁹ What makes the situation even more problematic is that during the Second World War, both the Arrow Cross (the Hungarian nationalist, and antisemitic party) and its supporters, as well as the conservative opposition referred to Prohászka. Veszprémy summarises it aptly: "Everyone could find a quote that fits his worldview, and another citation could then be found to counter the previous one".¹⁰ Although Prohászka died in 1927, the controversies surrounding him remained and are still with us.

The theoretical problem in terms of the Christian socialist, Christian democratic, and Christian nationalist ideas' categorization in Hungary

This is the case also today. While some perceive Prohászka's thoughts on Judaism and the Jewish community as racist but basically social, and economic ideas¹¹, whilst others find the bishop guilty of racism.¹² Anti-Semitism widely affected the Hungarian public discourse between the two world wars, creating a strange mixture of different ideas. This is the case, if someone looks at Prohászka's articles and books in the catholic press at that time. The tragic outcomes of the First World War, the territorial losses of the country, and a significantly impoverished society drew Prohászka and many others' attention to the social question. It is also worth considering, that the pre-war conditions in Hungary meant a capitalistic system and rapid embourgeoisement together with the consequences of this for an old feudal-type society.¹³ These social and economic conditions formed a fruitful ground for Hungarian Christian Socialism, which defined his position in opposition to the capitalist system, but also to the anti-religious character of socialist ideas. It is a sad fact of Hungarian political history, that between the two world wars criticism of liberalism and socialism were linked up with antisemitic arguments about Jewish wealth and their social, political, and economic influence. These factors show that the categorization of the Christian socialist, Christian democratic, and Christian nationalist ideas isn't obvious in this period. It gives a good indication of what are the main difficulties if someone intends to define Prohászka's political world of view. Having regard to all of these factors, we find the definition of the historian, Csaba Fazekas the most appropriate. According to Fazekas: "In Hungary the definition of Christian socialism derived from Ottokár Prohászka, who, similarly to the Austrian-German Christian social tradition, sought to define the movement not as a Christian version of socialism but as a social version of Christianity."¹⁴

Christian socialism in Prohászka's thinking

Our choice is also confirmed by the fact, that Prohászka interprets Christianity and Christian socialism in his book *Culture and terror* as a particular principle and philosophical basis, not as the Christian version of social democracy. He regards Christianity as a social ideal that gained dominant influence after its birth vertically, that is in the sense that it affected and reached all strata of society. On the other hand, through its impact on culture, it gained far more influence than mere individualism. In *Culture and terror*, some specific functions of ideologies are emphasized, while others receive less attention. Ideologies intend to influence politics and the whole society, they have an integrative role with specific expositions and the function of interest articulation. Furthermore, they have specific political demands for the whole society, not only for some part.¹⁵ However, Prohászka considers ideologies as phenomena that control the cultural- and spiritual direction of the era - which includes not just the public but also technical, economic, and social attitudes guided by these ideas - and social progress. He doesn't deny the abovementioned functions of ideologies. When he refers to ideologies, he always underlines their impact on culture. From this point of view, Christianity could become a paradigm capable of influencing and determining the direction of social progress. The problem is that Christianity has lost this role. The question for Prohászka is how Christianity can revive it. At the beginning of his book, he sensitively depicts the rotation of ideas and cultural goals, when he says, the loudly proclaimed cultural goals, just the signboards of village pubs, are replaced after a social upheaval, and in this way, new slogans are born. According to Prohászka, the Renaissance or 'freedom, brotherhood, equality' were slogans that new ones would inevitably replace after the First World War.¹⁶

He quotes Kálmán Méhely¹⁷, who says that "from freedom came moral libertinage that destroys true freedom, equality is a scientific absurdity, brotherhood is an utopia, which has to be aspired but cannot be achieved." A typical Christian socialist feature is the interesting mixture of realist and idealist perspectives, which can be observed throughout his oeuvre. It is vital that Prohászka does not reject the new direction of social progress and its new slogan completely, which he summarizes as follows: "What should be the ideal of our social and economic life and, consequently, the goal of all politics, is the better way of living in all social strata..."¹⁸ His idealism also prevails when he considers these social changes embedded in social progress and treats them as irreversible. In this way, he also goes against the Hegelian dialectic of Marxism. So, when Prohászka discusses social

development, he seeks an entirely different ideological and philosophical foundation. In his theory, the linear historical approach prevails, based on Judeo-Christian foundations. The rejection of Hegelianism unequivocally separates his theory and the Hungarian Christian socialism from the large family of socialist ideologies. This philosophical basis, on the one hand, counterposes Prohászka's approach with the gloomy perspective on the history of materialism. On the other hand, it paves the way for a kind of idealism since it suggests that history is moving towards its goal.

The continuous progress toward God

Standing on the ground of inexorable social progress, Prohászka views the supposed social transformation positively, and even despite his harsh criticism of socialism, he acknowledges its necessity. After all, social democracy serves to achieve a point in social progress that "excludes the phraseology of delusive emotions and disturbing social passions,"¹⁹ which is otherwise so contemptible. The way it operates is bloody. Nonetheless, he recognizes the positive asset therein, like purgatory, as if it were an unavoidable step. Christian socialist features such as the value of dispassion and the rejection of revolutionary fervor prevail in his criticism. He writes: "we really need to break free from the stifling hoops of spiritual enchantment, the compulsion of intoxication, passion, heated feelings, which we fall into through the reaction against oppression based on doctrinaire, one-sided principles."²⁰

He simply calls social democracy doctrinaire, which is incapable of grasping reality, but capable of inciting social desperation. He describes it as the gunpowder that drops into the lowest social layers in tiny grains to blow up "the beautiful and the ugly, the sinner and the innocent" just as a spark strikes. At the same time, it is worth noting that, despite his ruthless criticism, he considers social democracy to be a reaction to liberalism and the devastating laissez-faire capitalism emerging in the wake of the French Revolution. Although he condemns revolutionary social upheavals, he does not completely refuse the social effects they cause. Relatively, but in this regard, he even acknowledges the positive role of the French Revolution: "This is what the French Revolution did. It did a good service to humanity by giving free vent to the third order and bringing more freedom to man, but where it did fall away from the true freedom of life, and where it did fail, hindering humanity from ensuring the possibility of a proper human life?"²¹ All of this is embedded in the theoretical framework in which Prohászka thinks. It eventually leads to a moderate shift from the social encyclicals, which are the primary source of Christian socialism. He states: "The revolution was Arya, which wanted to clean the world, it was so dirty that only

dirty guys wanted to drift in it, but its water derived from the mountains of development and the dirty water was still water that irrigates and makes the soil fruitful and that living force was still force that moved the world forward.”²²

This brings us to the problem of modernism, and his ideas differ from the theoretical framework of classical Catholic Christian Socialist thinkers. While the social encyclicals acknowledge the necessity for social interventions, they criticize modern social mass movements. From this point of view, the French Revolution, by disrupting the organic order of society set back social progress rather than fostered it. By contrast, Prohászka takes on an eschatological, prophetic role when discussing the 'living force' in the revolution that moved the world forward. In his approach, concrete socio-political processes get a theological, transcendent meaning. In Prohászka's thinking, social democracy – despite his profound criticism – is embedded in the adequate, expedient, and foremost permanent process of social progress. Its actuality is given by embracing the workers and demanding productive and feasible work conditions.²³

At this point, it is necessary to refer to Prohászka's other works, since his understanding of modernism became, over time, the theory explaining social progress. It can be observed that in his early works, his approach to the problem of modernism is completely different. As he claims in his early book (1894): “Here's the atomized mass; everything in modern work points to the fact that large social classes are torn apart and scattered” and sensitively illustrates how the modern work disaggregated the organic order of the society²⁴. Almost ten years later, in 1903 the elements of a different perception can already be observed. He states in *The Victorious Worldview* that the historical eras change and a previous era does not return, and making efforts in the opposite direction is completely unnecessary and pointless. 15 years before *Culture and Terror* he addresses his Catholic brethren when he says: “For us Catholics, it is our old mistake that we grow too close to the historical development and the actual conditions and we give the authority of the divine order and the divine will to the current one; we stand guard over every institution that is lucky enough to exist, even though many other institutions would have more right to stand in their place.”²⁵ According to Prohászka, Catholics call everybody 'socialist' whose desire is a new social order and the new distribution of rights. He claims “progress can't be stopped, the society is developing and shifting in it creates new systems”.²⁶ He adds social transformations are not initiated by the elite but by class wars. He describes all of this as an entirely positive process, which is also shown by the hopeful ending of the last lines of his book: “...when the transformation has taken place and the disturbing impressions of the conflicts of interest have passed, we realize that

development is continuous, and even if it does not proceed in a straight line, but on a curvy, tortuous path, we still get closer to the emergence of the great thoughts of God, not only in eternity but also in our time.”²⁷ Even in 1903, it can be seen that there was a significant change in Prohászka's approach to modernism, and from the initial classical Christian social thinking (the decomposing of the organic order of society, the emergence of an atomized society) he gets to the unstoppable and irreversible thesis of progress. At the same time, it should also be mentioned that the publishing of *Victorious Worldview* took place more than a decade before the First World War. The positive, hopeful voice had worn out by the time he wrote *Culture and terror*.

It is also worth interjecting a theoretical question, to which we also give the answer based on Prohászka. In the case of Christian thinkers, the question always arises: to what extent do social progress and technical development overlap? The distinction between the two can't be identified in the case of Prohászka. Moreover, the idea of progress is supplemented with a theological dimension (continuous progress towards God), which is not only visible at the theoretical level but in practice. At the convention of the Chamber of Industry in Székesfehérvár, Prohászka explained his thesis on human work, which is dependent on continuous progress. In this regard, the fear of mechanization is based on the emotional nature of human beings. Just as in the ancient and medieval ages hand tools, like scissors, needles, and planers appeared and used to be widespread, returning to the previous technological era is impossible. The problem, therefore, isn't with the big industries and mass production but with the immoral, profit-oriented attitude.²⁸

Conclusion

All of this point out that Prohászka's political way of thinking has developed considerably on certain issues. *Culture and terror* already contain his mature positions, in which the thesis of social progress does not change, it is only supplemented by the comprehensive criticism of social democracy. However, *Culture and Terror* is not only the criticism of social democracy, it sets the course for Christian socialism. He writes: “We must include soul, God and religion in all human programs.”²⁹ Christian socialism unites this external culture with the internal culture of the Christian person. Describing his age, he states the time hasn't come for Christian socialism to become a mass social movement. While social democracy took antireligious issues and the denial of the human soul in its program, Christian socialism does not throw itself into the struggle to raise the standard of workers' life with determination so that the workers don't feel that it wants good for them. Nevertheless, he notes: “Then when the great antagonism passes away and the inequality

is better balanced, then the need for spiritual life and for the intensive cultivation of culture will predominate more vividly again and it is possible that after the flagrant social-democratic anticlericalism people will become deeply and sincerely religious again and one day man will smile at the theses of historical materialism."³⁰

Although 100 years later, knowing the historical processes of the 20th century, we approach these words differently, Prohászka's work gives us an interesting impression of how the Christian Socialist authors saw the position, possibilities, and future of the Christian political movements. The work is an impressive example of how theological and social philosophical concepts overlapped during the early formation of Christian socialism in Hungary. It was undoubtedly a necessary and essential turning point in the shape of modern Christian democracy, when the Christian party leaders and their intellectuals announced their program on a secular basis, by the principle of the separation of state and church, but with unconditional respect for the Christian worldview and the Christian approach of human dignity.

Endnotes

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⁸ Béla Kovrig: Katolikus demokratikus és szociális reformmozgalmak Magyarországon, Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 2019. 216 p.

⁹ Prohászka reacts to Horthy's intention as follows: „Send gendarmes for me, otherwise I will not enter that office” in: Béla Kovrig: Katolikus demokratikus és szociális reformmozgalmak Magyarországon, Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 2019. 216 p.

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²⁰ Ottokár Prohászka: Kultúra és Terror, p.4.

²¹ Ottokár Prohászka: Kultúra és Terror, p.4.

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²⁶ OTTOKÁR PROHÁSZKA: Victorious Worldview 159 p.

²⁷ OTTOKÁR PROHÁSZKA: Victorious Worldview 165 p.

²⁸ Csaba Fazekas: Keresztény kultúra és közszereplés Prohászka Ottokár „hattyúdalaiban”

²⁹ Ottokár Prohászka: Kultúra és Terror, p.8.

³⁰ OTTOKÁR PROHÁSZKA: Victorious Worldview 21 p.