HROMADKA: Theologian of the Resurrection

Charles C. West

Josef Hromadka was a man of controversy his whole life long. A quarter of a century ago, as the second world war was nearing its end, a refugee from his native land and a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in the U.S.A., he published a testament and a prophecy for Western bourgeois civilization under the title *Doom and Resurrection.* The world had reason to be cautiously optimistic in these last days of 1944. The first atomic bomb had not yet exploded. The wartime partnership between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies was in full emotional swing; "cold war" and "iron curtain" were still unknown concepts. D-Day was a fact; the Nazi armies were in retreat; the United Nations had been conceived, if not yet born. Against the terrible darkness of the previous years, the future gave promise of a new and better world.

But Hromadka was no optimist. From his earliest years he had been accustomed to seeing through the superficial harmonies of human life to the crises which lay underneath them. This began when, as a neo-orthodox theologian, he threw down the gauntlet to the liberal religion of the first world war in as powerful a way as did Karl Barth. It continued when he challenged the religion of Czechoslovakian nationalism in the 1920's and urged a rediscovery of the wealth of the Catholic tradition though he was by training and conviction a theologian of the Reformation. It expressed itself in his response to the Russian Revolution, whose cruelty he recognized and whose destruction of old and cherished values he regretted, but in which he saw the action of God in driving bourgeois civilization to repentance. Hromadka was therefore by temperament and faith in a position to draw the spiritual lessons from the rise of Hitler and from the betrayal of his country at Munich as few other persons were. This led him to ask "irrepressible and dismal questions" of Western liberal society as a whole, including that of the United States of America, where he made his home for eight years and which he loved so well. When one re-reads these questions today, one finds in them an all too accurate description of the spiritual direction which events have taken since the second world war. Hromadka rejected both liberalism, with its shallow view of the human crisis, and conservatism, with its allegiance to old structures which had lost their moral power. "We are living on the ruins of the old world, both morally and politically," he concluded. "No one single element and norm of our civilization can possibly be taken for granted."

In postwar years this theme of stark prophecy recurred many times in Hromadka's preaching and teaching. "We are confronted by naked history," he said to the Germans and to his own people in the years following 1948. The events of the preceding generation had created their own consequences, and through these consequences spoke the judgment of God. There was no way back to the securities and values of an earlier period. The effort to find such a way, the refusal to accept the revolution that had happened, could only make destruction worse. The humanism of Thomas Masaryk and the great liberal-democratic tradition was a wonderful thing, but it had to be transformed into profound pathos, a deep concern for man in the depths of his self-betrayal and brokenness, if it was to guide mankind in the future. Out of the broken pieces of a brittle confidence in man and a powerless cultural tradition, the future would be built. This, he proclaimed to his resentful countrymen and to the world, is the challenge which confronts bourgeois man in the rough vitality of the Soviet revolution. It is the challenge which confronts the whole industrial, white-skinned, European-North American society, East and West, in the awakening of Asia and Africa to their place and promise in history. It is the challenge which confronts the Christian Church throughout the world, "spiritually exhausted" as it is by its long association with a European-American culture which has been judged and found wanting.

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Whence comes the strength to face the world with such realism and yet not to despair or give way to utopian illusions and false hopes? Hromadka's faith and motives have been misread at this point by bourgeois and Marxist alike. To the bourgeois he seemed not only a prophet of doom, but far too

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often in league with the powers of darkness. To the Marxist he seemed an insufficiently emancipated man whose belief in a judge and savior over even socialist humanity was a fetter on human progress. Even to the bourgeois who learned to be grateful for his ministry, to trust him as a man, and to see the wisdom of his actions during long years of living in a socialist society, his faith remained a puzzle. Even to the Marxist who, troubled by the continuing intractable sinfulness of man, turned to him and his co-believers for dialogue, the source of his free witness remained veiled.

This was perhaps inevitable. The power of the risen Christ is not to be grasped in human plans and structures. To the world it remains a paradox of hope out of realism about human perversity, and of relevance out of freedom from the world's structures and utopias.

Hromadka was a theologian, a social analyst, and a political realist who moved between the poles of utter realism about human sin and overpowering hope for what God would accomplish in human affairs despite man. To illustrate this dialectic he drew especially on two figures out of the history of Christendom.

First, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the existentialist. No man has plumbed the depths of human degradation and despair more thoroughly. The misfits, the criminals, the outcasts of society are his favorite characters. The tragic self-destruction of man in a decadent society is made all the blacker in his writings, because it is projected against man's calling to be, with all his strength, a child of God and a source of love. It is man's own power, his creativity and his imagination, which destroys him in Dostoevsky's novels, because man recognizes no ultimate authority and finds no final sense of direction. The dilemma of the late twentieth-century cybernetic technologist and nuclear physicist, with boundless power in his hand yet powerless to prevent nuclear weaponry and human exploitation, was foreshadowed in the vision of this nineteenth-century writer. The nightmares of distorted humanity were more deeply expressed than modern existentialism has been able to do.

But precisely here Hromadka finds in Dostoevsky a witness to the resurrection. The moment of despair, when all human self-confidence is broken, is the moment when "Christ challenges the power of death and sin by his real personal presence" (p. 40). This is the lesson he learned from the nineteenth-century writer. "Sometimes it seems to us," he said in addressing the Paris Working Committee of the Christian Peace Conference in 1968, "that what is happening has no meaning. The international situation is so terrible, so senseless, so hard to grasp, that we cannot understand it and we think—as believing Christians!—can this situation we are in really lie in the hands of the Lord of truth, justice, and mercy? We speak often of the sovereignty of love and of the mercy of God. But is this sovereign love and mercy of any help to us now?"

The question is searching. It is the question Dostoevsky asked. The answer does not lie in human hands. But the power to ask the question with such ruthless honesty comes, for Hromadka, from the Christ who is there to take the worst that man can do to himself and to others into the depths of his redemption.

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Second, Jan Hus, the proclaimer of the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ. Hromadka belongs to a tradition, after all. It is a tradition whose continuing vitality comes not only from the Czech culture in which it arose, but from the concrete sovereignty of the Lord whom it proclaims. "Our fathers [from Hus to Comenius] wanted to say," Hromadka wrote, "that the Gospel is not only a message of the forgiveness of sins and salvation from sin and evil, but just as much a message of the transforming power of Christ in the whole of earthly life" *(Von der Reformation zum Morgen).* The resurrection is not merely the rescue of a self-destroying world by its reference to a higher world. It does not mean only the saving of a few from a world which is preserved under the restraint of law until the day of judgment. It means rather that a new reality—the reality of the risen Lord in our midst—determines and guides the earthly destiny of men and nations and gives them hope. It is he who creates not only new hearts but also new structures of society. "This realization," he continues, "gives the believing witness and the whole church the strength and the courage not just to adjust to social upheavals but to explore the ways by which the riches of the Gospel, the integrity of responsibility, and self-sacrificing love for man can be brought into new social orders" (*op cit.,* p. 378).

This is controversial theology. Conformists of the right, and recently also of the left, denounce it as *Schwärmerei.* The comfortable and the fearful alike find it easier to confine the resurrection of Christ, and therefore the scope of his reign, to a religious realm, while they simply adjust to the conditions of this society, whether socialist or capitalist, open or closed, rich or poor. The partisans of one social order or another make things difficult and even dangerous for Christians when witness to the risen Lord descends

from generalities to particular judgments about what is human, just, and merciful (and what is the opposite) in the revolutions of our time. But a Biblical Christian who is a follower of Jan Hus cannot avoid these particular judgments. He cannot help but make them with joy and power as one announcing, with all repentance and recognition of his own unworthiness, the merciful decrees and decisions of the real king of the world over all—even democratic—Caesars. He cannot help but explore with all men, of whatever politics or belief, the liberation which this conquest brings to all that is truly human.

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With this faith which he continually translated into political judgments, Hromadka made the choice to return to Czechoslovakia in 1947, to accept the Communist coup d'état in 1948, and to work as a Christian within the framework of a Marxist-dominated socialist society. "I am in no sense a Communist," he wrote, "but I take part in this revolution from the point of view of my Christian faith which sees the work of the forgiving grace of God in the midst of changes that are coming about."

His actions during the period from 1948 to the Prague Spring of 1968 are the most controversial of his life. It will be years before the full story of his influence and activity is known. Meanwhile, Western writers in their relative safety will probably continue to pass judgment on him, mainly on the basis of what he wrote and said in public. Many resentful conservatives in his own country who dream of a return to the bourgeois past will share these judgments. Those who knew Hromadka best during this period, however, give us a different picture. His life during that time must be seen as a whole. What he said in public was coordinated with what he was trying to do in private. For the full picture one should have the private memoirs of the many Communist friends whom he had counseled in the despair which they felt at being caught in the inhumanity of their own system. One should have the witness of all the churchmen who were saved from prison or worse by his intervention, and of all the other Christians who learned to trust him as a wise brother who had learned how to overcome his longing for a past that would never return without falling into a dead conformity with the Marxist ideology and Communist practice. In fact, it was Hromadka's spirit and, in no small degree, the influence of his friends, both Communist and Christian, which helped bring about the new form of Marxist humanism in dialogue with the Christian faith which dominated the Czechoslovakia of Dubcek. During the spring of 1968, Hromadka underlined over and over again that this reformation was not a return to some bourgeois past. It was an effort to build upon the socialist foundation which had been laid, and which Christians and Marxists alike affirmed, and to open the future to a more flexible experimentation toward greater human freedom and welfare.

This is a fact which neither his bourgeois critics in the West, nor the hard-line politicians in the Kremlin were able to grasp. One of the tragedies of our time is the way in which these two opposing groups of ideologists agreed on one thing: that Czechoslovakia, in making her Communist society more flexible and more open, was falling back into the capitalist camp dominated by the Western world. One could say, therefore, that Hromadka's life ended in tragedy. But he himself would not have agreed with this judgment. In the last months of his life, he was analyzing the new conditions into which his country and the world had fallen with his same faith and hope.

... the new form of Marxist humanism in dialogue with the Christian faith....

This is perhaps best illustrated by his relation to the Christian Peace Conference. In one sense, the history of the Christian Peace Conference reflects the events in the political world. It began in 1958 under Hromadka's leadership, and with the participation of other Christians of spiritual stature in both East and West, as a place of dialogue and of action for world peace with its center in Eastern Europe. Its location imposed certain limitations and a certain perspective on its actions. All who took part knew and accepted this. However, it slowly grew in credibility and influence throughout the world because it was clear that its heart was in its Christian orientation, and that its primary perspective was theological. Given this, it achieved such prophetic force as was

possible under the circumstances, recognizing that all Christian organizations in every country are limited and somewhat biased by the perspectives and pressures of the society in which they operate. Under Hromadka's leadership, the Christian Peace Conference gradually became a gathering place for Christians left of center in all parts of the world, for those concerned with peace and reconciliation and willing to take risks with national security for it, and those who were animated by a profound sense of fellowship with Christians in Eastern Europe in their witness.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia placed all of this in profound crisis, from which the Christian Peace Conference has not yet emerged. Hromadka died in the midst of this crisis, having resigned from the presidency in protest against direct political pressure which removed his friend, the General Secretary, Jaroslav Ondra, from his post. This, too, sounds like a tragedy; but Hromadka did not see it as such. For him, this was one more tactical problem in the on-going business of bearing an effective Christian witness in the midst of political pressures. It was, if you like, a lesson to his colleagues in the Christian Peace Conference about the way in which a Christian organization maintains both its transcendence and its effectiveness. We can only hope that those of us who continue this work will learn this lesson well.

ALIENATION AND REVOLUTION

Bernard Murchland

A recent letter to the editor of one of the newspapers I read suggested that our present era should go down as the Age of Apprehension rather than the Age of Aquarius. The writer went on to list thirty "crises"—ranging from Russia to a higher rate of V.D.—that depress the minds of the citizenry. He then concluded: "And just in case any reader refuses to get drowned by these, there's always the H-bomb hanging over our heads." The news, to be sure, is rarely good these days. But it is more than a question of bad news. A letter of this sort rather vividly and even pathetically expresses the widespread sense of malaise that characterizes these times. We seem indisputably to be living through one of those periods of cultural collapse that periodically overtakes history, a time when the human estate is at low ebb, only tenuously connected to the sources of its replenishment.

In social criticism this awareness of collapse is usually dealt with under the rubric of alienation. What this term broadly refers to is that condition of unfreedom that obtains when human activity is forced rather than chosen, when it is not (to use Marx's language) self-activity. Lacking this essential freedom, alienated man cannot establish any satisfying relationship between the self and the world. He becomes reified and increasingly takes on the characteristics of those thing-like agencies that control his life. How shall this intolerable state be overcome? Today, the answer is unequivocal: through revolutionary action. Thus it is no accident that an age of alienation is also one of unprecedented revolutionary fervor. Revolution answers to felt needs and promises to heal the gaps of experience. The revolutionary spirit today is perhaps the only force that can channel man's creative energies toward renewal and a new order of things. The thrust of this spirit is to fuse ideas and experience, to expand the sense of the self and create the kind of society in which the self might flourish. The aspiration is, as Trotsky put it, to infuse the forms of existence with dramatic dynamism.

I want to say more about revolution by commenting on three prevalent attitudes which I believe to be false precisely because they would deny revolution as an effective agent of de-alienation. The *first* and most obvious attitude is that revolution is *per se* undesirable and that everything must be done to prevent it. This attitude amounts to a defense of the status quo. In our culture the perspective common to the majority of the people is defined by the analytic, pragmatic values of a dominant and dominating technocratic order. It never occurs to large numbers of people to question this order. It is assumed that

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