

# ON BEING A CHRISTIAN IN SLOVAKIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Jan Carnogursky is the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, which is the smaller half of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. A lawyer and noted dissident before the 1989 Revolution, he was the repeated victim of State harassment, for two years having to drive a cab after being stripped of his practising certificate.

Today, he leads one of the most hopeful of Central Europe's young democracies. At the same time, he is one of the region's foremost intellectuals. I am sure that the fusion, described below, of economic liberalism with political conservatism will be found worthy of discussion by libertarians and conservatives throughout the world.

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**Economic and Political Adviser to the Slovak Republic**

I am a Christian. I am also a Slovak. I am also a politician. It is my intention in this article to show how these three facts may be reconciled into a single harmonious doctrine. I begin with my faith and my nationality.

For more than two thousand years, the Church has played a leading role in Slovak life. Following the incorporation of Slovakia into the Kingdom of Hungary in 906, it was the only institution to which we could give our willing, unambiguous loyalty: to the secular authorities we were always to some extent indifferent, where not actually hostile. Indeed, during the long battle between Habsburg and Ottoman, fought often on our soil, it became at times the main preserver of communal life. From the end of the eighteenth century, its clergy played a leading role in the revival of our nation.

Then, in 1948, the long night of Communism was imposed on us. Within a few days following the coup in Prague, the Gottwald regime moved in to liquidate all rival political parties and institutions and to impose a close censorship of the entire media. Though

committed Stalinists who had spent much of the previous decade in Moscow, our new masters never displayed the full criminal bestiality of their own master. There were arrests and show trials. Some people were executed, more subjected to slow death in the uranium mines, and many more sentenced to long terms of imprisonment under the most inhuman conditions. But the murderous frenzy that had gripped the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 40s was never extended into Central Europe. Even so, Bratislava by the 1950s had about it the same drabness on its surface, the same hopeless resignation to fate as Moscow or any other city of the Soviet Empire.

## THE CHURCH REMAINED

But, not far below the surface, the Church remained. All the other pillars of Western civilisation had been subverted or swept away - the liberal professions, the universities, the trade unions, commerce. But the Church remained. It alone was too strongly rooted in the consciousness of the Slovak nation to be destroyed by the Communists. They made all the usual attempts. Religious orders were suppressed. Priests were forbidden to engage in any activity, civil or religious, outside their own church. Those who objected were imprisoned or harassed. Church attendance was never formally prohibited. But attendance by anyone from the intellectual classes was discouraged under pain of dismissal or demotion at work. It was expected that the Church would first be subverted into a Communist puppet and would then slowly die.

Nevertheless, those who expected this were wrong. The real Church went underground and flourished as never before. In 1951, the first secret Bishops were consecrated. These were given the job of ensuring that, whatever the situation might be within the official hierarchy, the message of Christian redemption should still be spread in all its simple purity. A branch of the Church had been founded that was to continue and to grow for the next one and a half generations.

It was a branch that could not, without the longest and most ultra-Stalinist terror, be eradicated. Typically, a group of students and other young people - mostly known to each other - would come together in a private home for prayer and religious discussion. Sometimes a priest would attend and administer the Sacraments. These groups began to meet in Bratislava and the other large towns. But they eventually spread through the whole of Slovakia. As their leaders emerged men and women of the highest moral calibre, whose leadership could not have been confined, even had the effort been made, to purely religious matters. While these groups had no overtly political aims, their very existence was an affront to the Communist regime - and, by virtue of their independence, was perceived as a threat. An unrelenting persecution turned these groups,

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half unwillingly, into the sole focus of resistance. As in Poland, though in a less spectacular manner, the Church became the representative of an oppressed nation.

The commonest form that resistance took, of course, was the private but collective rejection of Marxist-Leninism. But there were public manifestations. The most important were the annual pilgrimages. The oldest of these, to Levoca in Eastern Slovakia, has continued without interruption for the past seven hundred years. Even during the grim tyranny of the 1950s, the authorities were unable to interfere. During the slightly less savage seventies and eighties, attendances grew, often to hundreds of thousands. On such occasions, the whole apparatus of a repressive police state ceased to function. In 1986, for example, a police patrol tried to harass a group of pilgrims at Sastin in western Slovakia. A few young people were selected at random and asked for their identity cards. At once, the patrol was surrounded by hundreds of other young people, all offering their cards for checking. Defeated by a demonstration of strength that even the most servile of Communist judges would have been hard put to construe a political crime, the police withdrew.

It is said that, now the Communist night is ended and is unlikely to descend again, the Church in Slovakia has served its main purpose, and can now be suffered to retreat to the margins of national life - just as it has in many Western countries. This is a wicked and, I am sure, a fatuous belief. So far from having become a political irrelevance, the teachings of Christianity are needed now more than ever if we are to complete the transformation of Slovakia from a Marxist-Leninist tyranny to a society based on economic freedom and the rule of law.

### **LIBERAL ECONOMICS AND LIBERAL MORALS**

There is a school of thought which explicitly denies this truth. According to the liberals, a free society and a Christian government are a contradiction. They take an absolute view of freedom. The individual, they claim, is to be allowed full sovereignty over his or her self in all that does not immediately compromise the equal rights of others. The classic expression of this claim is to be found in John Stuart Mill:

[T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection ... [T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others ... The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own mind and body, the individual is sovereign.

*On Liberty*, 1859, Introductory.

Now, this whole approach is ruined by logical vagueness. What is "harm to others"? In trying to answer this fundamental question, Mill raises a distinction between "self-regarding" and "other-regarding" acts which really ought to move the average schoolboy to tears of laughter. What is an "other-regarding" act? To be sure, knocking someone on the head is one. So is picking his pocket. But what about opening a branch of McDonald's just opposite his church? That may hurt him far more than either of the two other acts. Is it not an "other-regarding" act? If not, why not?

There have been other attempts than Mill's to arrive at a comprehensive statement of belief. None of them, so far as I can tell, has been more successful. Be it wider or narrower, they all involve arguing in a circle. In any argument with a liberal, the easiest and shortest logical checkmate is to ask for an exact definition of the freedom to which he claims so absolute a right.

But let us assume that a definition can be made, and that a society based on this definition can be brought into being. This is not a useless exercise, as it would be with socialism. For, unlike the socialists, the liberals have made a large addition to the stock of truths about human society. It was the liberal economists who first made, and then fully developed, the insight that economic activity is best

coordinated by the spontaneous self-regulating order of the market. Only by leaving economic choices in the hands of individuals can living standards be permanently raised. The socialist dream, of replacing the market with some other coordinating mechanism, wherever realised has rapidly turned into a nightmare.

For their loving development of economics, the liberals deserve our gratitude. But we must not allow their prestige in one area of study to intrude into another where they have nothing constructive to say. In price theory, in the economics of money and foreign trade, there can be no opposing them, except on the grounds of specific political expediency. But when they extend their methods to the ordering of society in general, they go too far. They cease to be the friends of humanity, and become its enemies. For the truth is that social liberalism will in the end destroy everything of value in society, including economic liberalism.

To operate effectively, the market needs a social order that is based on such virtues as thrift, honesty, obedience to lawful authority, and a desire for continuity in a future that one will almost certainly not personally know. Each of these virtues will be corroded by a market philosophy that is not confined within its proper sphere. For the more extreme varieties of social liberalism acknowledge no other entity than the individual and his or her preferences. It acknowledges no other morality than is conducive to the maximum gratification of these preferences, no matter how grossly materialistic or immoral they may be. Thus the moral consensus on which society rests is eroded, until nothing remains but the feeble threads of unlightened self-interest. Into the resulting spiritual vacuum flood drugs, pornography and other forms of personal debasement. These eventually are joined by a rejection of the very rationalism that has made such a state of affairs possible. It is no coincidence that those places where liberal moral relativism has been exalted most high are now becoming at once the most illiberal and the most superstitiously absolutist. For a market society in the grip of moral disintegration, we need look no further than whole areas of the United States, once one of the most moral and God-fearing of all nations, but now long since given up to the crassest liberal individualism.

### **CAPITALISM IS NOT ENOUGH**

Only a philosophy in which the need for social order and the proper degree of economic freedom are combined can provide a solid, permanent way forward for humanity. That philosophy is inherent in Christianity. Its surest and most recent expression can be found in the Pope's encyclical "Centesimus Annus".

Issued on the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum", this is no transitory expression of triumphalism at the death of Marxism-Leninism. It is a searching critique, much rather, of liberal triumphalism. We learn, for example, that

on the level of individual nations and of international relations, the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs.

(caput 34)

But, this being accepted, the question is then asked: is capitalism good? And the answer is given:

[I]f by "capitalism" is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.

(caput 42)

This marvellous encyclical, which repays the closest study, provides the true way ahead for humanity. It provides for the reconciliation of every legitimate interest, for the harmonising of economic progress with human dignity, for the creation of a truly moral and self-sustaining social and economic order.

And that is why as a Christian and a Slovak, I am also a politician. For I lead the Christian Democratic Movement, and our ends are nothing less than the creation here in Slovakia of a just society based on the precepts of Christian moral philosophy.