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Bischof Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927)

Krieg, christliche Kultur und Antisemitismus in Ungarn, Paderborn 2015.

(Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Reihe B: Forschungen, Bd. 127)

Ottokár Prohászka was the Bishop of Székesfehérvár (German: Stuhlweißenburg) in Hungary from 1905 to 1927. As an exponent and initiator of political Catholicism, he was one of the intellectual pioneers of the »Catholic renaissance,« a renewal movement within Hungarian Catholicism at the end of the 19th century. He played a leading role in the development and propagation of Christian Social thought. Yet Prohászka was also one of those public figures who advocated and promoted conservative anti-Semitic sentiment in Hungary during the period between the world wars.

This study explores the question of which links between theological thought, nationalist attitude, and political action can be identified in Prohászka's case, and where in the context of Catholic reformism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism these links should be properly situated. It contends that, for Prohászka, the experience and interpretation of the First World War functioned as a catalyst that effected a fundamentally new interconnection between Christian nationalism, confessionalism (e. g. emphasis on the separateness of one's own denomination), and anti-Semitism.

In view of the increasing trend toward secularization in the politics and society of Hungary, Prohászka had developed a program for creating a »Christian culture« even before World War I. Having experienced nation building in the late 19th century, Prohászka believed that Christianity was the only viable foundation of the Hungarian nation; »Christian culture« was to define the »national genius.« When hostilities broke out in 1914, he hoped that the war – as an »instrument of God« – would make his own vision a reality and, in the process, lead to renewal for Hungary.

It was not the traditional religious criteria of a »just war,« however, that the Bishop of Székesfehérvár utilized to make sense of wartime events. Rather, Prohászka interpreted the war as unjust, driven by the »desire for economic power,« and divinely ordained as the violent demise of a society shaped by decline in faith and laicism. He could infer meaning in the war only by conceiving it as a purposeful part of God's plan for the world: in his view, it was mankind's burden of sin that had caused the war. It was the whole of humanity and the modern phenomena of liberalism, capitalism, and social democracy that were at fault. Prohászka's vision for the future called for the buildup of a »peaceful realm,« intended to be an earthly reflection of God's eternal kingdom, and a renewal of state and society under Christian auspices.

When Hungary transmogrified into an »ethnically pure« and religiously nearly homogenous nation state toward the end of the war, Prohászka called for unity between Christian and nationalist elements in the political sphere. »Christian culture« was to serve as the basis for the state. Even before World War I, Prohászka had been convinced that »Jewry,« driven by a »base greed for money,« possessed »no ethical conscience.« Under the changed political conditions, and amplified by the political turmoil of the immediate postwar period, such

anti-Semitism became a fixture of the alliance between Christian faith and culture that he envisioned. Henceforth, Christian nationalism would be based on the notion of the »Hungarian genius« as a »racial genius.« Jewishness as a different »racial genius« was incompatible with this »Christian nationalist« program.

Ottokár Prohászka did not play a leading role in the persecution and annihilation of the Jews of Hungary; he died in 1927. Nevertheless, his assessment and defamation of »Jewry« set the course both intellectually and politically for the general conduct vis-à-vis Jews during the period when Hungary moved closer to Nazi Germany and, ultimately, the persecution and murder of Hungarian Jews during World War II.