

Hungarians and Koreans in the „Religious Cold War”

Political Instrumentalization
of the Reformed Church
in Hungary’s Ecumenical
Activity in the Early 1950s

Bearing in mind the atheistic nature of communism and the powerful role of Christianity in the people’s life on both sides of the Iron Curtain, it is obvious that religion had a noteworthy role in the Cold War.¹ Yet, in the 1980s and 1990s Western scholars, developing a kind of “scholastic blindness”², tended to neglect the religious aspects of the Cold War. However, from the 2000s, a distinctive group of historians³ started to pay growing attention to this mistreated aspect. This old-new approach of Cold War History is called “Religious Cold War”. Among many other things, it focuses on how the great powers tried to politically instrumentalize churches and religious organizations, especially those that acted on the international field like the World Council of Churches (WCC).

On 25 June 1950 the North Korean People’s Army drove into the Republic of Korea. The United Nations Security Council condemned the North Korean move as an invasion and authorized the dispatch of forces to repel it. Two weeks later, the Central Committee of the WCC in Toronto also condemned the North Korean aggression and welcomed the UN’s willingness to intervene.

Not everybody was happy about the Committee’s resolution. Bishop Albert Bereczky, president of the Convent and Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) protested against the “Toronto Statement” by writing an open letter to the general secretary of the WCC, Willem A. Visser ‘t Hooft. Bereczky stated that by the Toronto Statement the WCC lost its independence and became the political advocate of the West. Bereczky wanted them to accept the “Stockholm Appeal,”

the peace call of the World Peace Council. It was apparent that the World Peace Council functioned as a channel of Soviet Communist propaganda. By the RCH's submission to the state, the church acted as a political tool, attempting to win the WCC over to the peace movement. Where did that intention come from? What was Bereczky's motivation for sharing Communist interest?

This paper, applying the "Religious Cold War" research approach, demonstrates the detailed history of the discussion that erupted around the Toronto statement between July 1950 and the end of 1952. By the examination of formative documents and events, it aims to provide detailed examples for the instrumentalization of the RCH and the motivations of its proponents.

The Toronto Statement (13 July 1950)

The World Council of Churches Central Committee (WCC CC) meeting in Toronto began only nine days after North Korea had invaded South Korea. The Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) prepared a statement on the Korean situation and submitted it to the Central Committee (CC). For Visser 't Hooft: "the issue seemed to be quite clear,"⁴ since the United Nations (UN) Commission in Korea concluded that an act of aggression had been committed and the Security Council of the UN had already decided to meet this aggression with police action. According to Visser 't Hooft there was a general agreement within the WCC CC that they should also speak up and support the UN, that they considered to be the instrument of world order and peace.

Accordingly, the WCC CC's statement entitled "The Korean Situation and World Order", but mostly called the "Toronto statement", stated that "an act of aggression was committed." It condemned North Korea, stating that an "armed attack as an instrument of national policy was wrong", and applauded the UN for its prompt decision to meet this aggression and for authorizing a police action, which every member nation should support. Still, in the very next sentence the statement also emphasized that "at the same time, governments must press individually and through the United Nations for a just settlement [of the case] by negotiation and conciliation." It also stressed that any tendency to irresponsible fatalism should be resisted and the Korean situation did not need to be the beginning of a general war. It also condemned "post-war totalitarianism" in general for not

only relying on military pressures but also upon a policy of exploiting the distress of the poor, the resentments of subject peoples, discrimination on grounds of race, religion or national origin, the chaos of badly governed nations, and the general disunity between nations.

Thereafter, the statement explicitly referred to the “Stockholm Appeal” of the World Peace Council (WPC, 19 March 1950). While the Toronto Statement affirmed that the use of atomic and bacteriological weapons should be banned by international agreement, and that the WCC welcomed every sincere proposal for this end, the WCC CC regarded the Stockholm Appeal as a strategy of propaganda rather than a genuine peace proposal because it demanded the outlawing of atomic weapons, without effective international inspection and control.

At the CC meeting approving the Toronto Statement there were no Eastern European church representatives present, and only one delegate represented China. Only one aspect of the statement was challenged, namely whether the WCC should commend the use of armed force for the defense of world order. Consequently, the Statement was adopted unanimously with the exception of the second sentence of the third paragraph, which was carried by 45 votes for and 2 against. The two dissenting members conscientiously opposed the use of military force in principle, anywhere and for any reason.

Albert Berczky’s open letter (9 August 1950)

On 9 August 1950 Albert Berczky, chairman of the Ecumenical Committee of the Hungarian Churches, published an open letter to Visser ‘t Hooft criticizing the Toronto Statement, that in his opinion, had a biased political standpoint.⁵ In the very first sentence Berczky pronounced that the Statement threatened with rending the fellowship of the churches united in the World Council asunder. The letter was written in the typical emotional manner of Berczky’s preaching style, having sentences like: “the bitterness which might still remain in my letter will be less than what I shall be able to suppress.” or “I was out of breath.”⁶

After the harsh beginning Berczky expressed his thankfulness to Visser ‘t Hooft for his opening address at the Toronto meeting, declaring that the WCC should use all possible opportunities to remain in contact with Christians behind

the “Iron Curtain” and strengthen the fellowship with them. Additionally, Bereczky expressed his admiration to Visser ‘t Hooft for his “consummate art of balancing.” Meanwhile, the WCC was attacked by both fundamentalists and modernists and it was declared to be the tool of both capitalism and communism, and Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned with keeping the middle road. On the one hand, Visser ‘t Hooft tried to prevent the churches relapsing into passivity and impotent neutrality, while on the other hand he tried to restrain them from entering the “political arena” which would have been untrue to their very nature. At this point Bereczky made a delicate hint that Visser ‘t Hooft sometimes “did not succeed in keeping the equipoise.”⁷ In Bereczky’s understanding, Visser ‘t Hooft spoke a lot about the dangers of the “pagan” world, like atheism, totalitarianism, spiritual and moral confusion, while he forgot to warn against a more dangerous adversary, the “pharisaic” world. Bereczky did not explain in detail what the pharisaic attitude meant, however, he referred to President Truman’s statements, namely that the guiding principle of the US in secular affairs was the Sermon of the Mount. It is obvious that Bereczky identified the Christian features of American political life with hypocrisy and spiritual blindness.

After the long prologue Bereczky expressed his concrete critique about the Toronto Statement. As he said, by the Statement “You put your fingers on a burning and scorching wound”.⁸ Referring to the Statement’s observations about how the post-war totalitarianism relied on military pressure, exploitation of the distress of the poor, the discriminations on grounds of race, religion or national origin and the general disunity between nations Bereczky claimed: “I was out of breath again. Because, to my mind, the obvious sequel should have been a call of humble repentance upon the colonizing West where they speak of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. For what else would fulfil that pious desire that the exploitation of human misery, the bitterness of suppressed peoples should cease?”⁹ So, in Bereczky’s view, the Statement should have called the Western powers, churches and people for repentance because the real origins of the current crisis were the imperialism of those powers.

Then, Bereczky criticized the WCC CC for its acceptance of the witness of a political factor, namely the UN Commission and Security Council, for considering the North Korean invasion as an “act of aggression,” while Visser ‘t Hooft warned against entering the political arena. He also wondered how the Statement could commend the UN police action and consider the proclamation of a just

settlement by negotiation and reconciliation as a pious but vague wish, which would further aggravate the discredit of Christianity.¹⁰

Bereczky also raised the question of why the Statement did not consider the Stockholm Appeal a sincere proposal. As an alternative, Bereczky sincerely agreed with the Appeal and approved of the propaganda in its favour. He considered it specific and concrete, while the Toronto Statement’s message “excuse my words – but a wishful dream.”¹¹

At last, Bereczky acknowledged that the ending of the Toronto Statement was a truly Christian message, however: “You recognize, in the events of our days, the warning and judging hand of God. I should gladly agree with this, if only you would accept what I am repeating with wildly stubborn insistence: it is not only the matter of the Church’s faith, but that faith of the Church which rests in the hands of the justly judging and graciously pardoning God who has the habit of stressing his judgement until it awakens repentance. Real penitence is always the specific confession of our own sin, and involves the readiness to act otherwise than in the past.”¹²

Finally, Bereczky emphasized that he had written to Visser ‘t Hooft because he thought they owed each other openness and sincere communication, and he still hoped that they would continue the Christian conversation with each other. He did not think himself infallible, but he could only say what he saw: “Consider what I have said, in the sight of God, who always reveals himself in His Word. May He lead us on our ways that we may understand each other and understand, even better, the messages that He may send to us, through each other.”¹³

Aftermath of the open letter (August, 1950)

Direct link to Comrade Rákosi

Excitingly, on 14 August 1950 Bereczky sent a copy of his open letter to Mátyás Rákosi, the Communist leader of Hungary, whom he addressed as “My Dear Friend!”¹⁴ He remarked that the goal of the open letter was to “make our standpoint clear” prior to the conference of the Presbyterian World Alliance in Strasbourg (24-28 August 1950). He asked Rákosi for a short meeting before he left for Strasbourg because “the orientation that I can get from you means a lot

for me.” We do not have any further sources about their meeting, however, on account of Rákosi’s handwritten side note on the letter saying: “book a meeting,” we can assume that they met.

Bereczky also wrote that according to his assumption Rákosi already knew about his open letter since it had been published in the Hungarian Church Press. What Bereczky did not know about was that Rákosi had known about the open letter even before it was published. Chief Elder Roland Kiss, Bereczky’s co-manager over the Danubian Church District, a faithful communist and a political assignee was elected for his church position with the help of the communists. He reported to Rákosi directly about Bereczky without his being aware of it. Mostly, he tried to blacken Bereczky and highlight his own significance, but this time he reported on Bereczky’s plan as a prospective success. Kiss told Rákosi about the Toronto meeting, where “a reactionary resolution was born.”¹⁵ Then, he reported that Bereczky was planning to answer the resolution in an open letter that he had already read, and which was a “great, powerful and shocking manifesto of socialist endeavours”. He also mentioned that the letter might cause a clash within the WCC and it was also possible that the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) would have to terminate her relationships with the protestant world organizations, “in which the reactionary attitude seems to become stronger and stronger.” According to Kiss also Bereczky counted on this possibility but not as a necessity.

Bereczky’s personal meeting with Visser ‘t Hooft (2 September 1950)

Bereczky travelled to the Strasbourg conference of the Presbyterian World Alliance (PWA) with János Péter, bishop of the Transtibiscan Church District and his rival for supremacy over the RCH. There, according to Roland Kiss’s insider information, Marcel Pradervand, general secretary of the PWA, told the Hungarian delegates that also he opposed the Toronto Statement. He also handed them over Visser ‘t Hooft and Karl Barth’s invitation for a private meeting.¹⁶ A memo to Rákosi from József Darvas, the then-communist minister of religion and education, stated that the PWA was the “progressive” wing of the WCC. It had a strongly anti-Vatican sentiment and represented the “left” among the international Protestant organizations. Pradervand expressed his trust to the RCH in the world press on several occasion.¹⁷

Bereczky and Péter visited Karl Barth together. According to Kiss, Barth “condemned” the Toronto statement too and accepted the content of Bereczky’s open letter.¹⁸ He also advised the Hungarians how to deal with Visser ‘t Hooft. However, Kiss did not tell us details of the negotiation tactics recommended by Barth. In Zurich Bereczky and Péter met with Heinrich Hellstern, director of the Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz (HEKS). They talked with Visser ‘t Hooft together on the phone and asked him whether he wanted to meet both Hungarian bishops or Bereczky alone? Visser ‘t Hooft answered that he would be glad to meet both of them. In spite of this, Bereczky decided to face Visser ‘t Hooft alone and left the stunned Péter with Hellstern. We can assume that Bereczky wanted to monopolize his role and significance in the Toronto case. Péter’s presence, whose language and negotiation skills were clearly superior to his, would have questioned whether he was able to handle the situation. Kiss stated that Bereczky disclosed later that his average German skills made the negotiation with Visser ‘t Hooft about this difficult theoretical topic very hard. Kiss also remarked that it was highly suspicious that Bereczky wanted to meet with one of the “obvious enemies of the people’s democracy” alone.

We have first-hand information about this meeting (which took place on the 2 September 1950) from Visser ‘t Hooft’s Memoirs¹⁹ and one of his confidential note.²⁰ Visser ‘t Hooft’s remembered that Bereczky, “in spite of his unimpressive physical appearance”, impressed him immediately as a very strong personality. It became clear that Bereczky was not an opportunist, who just adapted his outlook to Hungary’s new political environment. On the contrary, he was “almost fanatically” convinced that it was his “prophetic mission” to proclaim that through the communist revolution the believers should take a positive attitude to the new communist world order. Visser ‘t Hooft mentioned that Bereczky “held his conviction so stubbornly that it was practically impossible to make him aware of other no less important convictions held within the ecumenical family.”²¹ He also noted that little did Bereczky know about the Western European and the Anglo-Saxon world and saw the situation only from the perspective of the great change, which took place in his own country and his own life.

Visser ‘t Hooft described the meeting as an open and intimate one. Right at the start Bereczky explained that the one and only reason why he had written his letter was that he wanted the HRC to remain within the WCC family. He wanted to avoid an “Iron Curtain” descending between the member churches of the WCC.

The fact that the WCC took its stand on the Korean situation forced him to speak out publicly. Bereczky stressed that it was his own initiative and he wrote the letter without having consulted with any governmental or political circles. He wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to be in the World Council but take a different line in this matter from that taken at the Toronto conference.

According to Bereczky the WCC CC should be more aware of the fact that they were speaking for the WCC as a whole including member-churches, which could not possibly share the view of the HRC of the situation. Visser 't Hooft tried to explain that no resolution of the WCC body had ever been binding upon all member-churches.

Since Bereczky asserted in his open letter that the Constantinian Era was over, i.e. the churches should untie their dependency on the state,²² Visser 't Hooft wondered whether the attitude of many churches in Eastern Europe and particularly in Russia were not in practice even more Constantinian than anything else in the church life of the West. Additionally, reacting to Bereczky's call for repentance, he remarked that the repentance of past sins had to be concrete, and therefore the church did not commit the same sins in the new situation. He openly stressed "if the churches of Hungary had sinned by not protesting against feudalism, was there not a great danger that they were in fact repeating the same sin by not protesting against the great injustices of the present regime?"²³

Bereczky protested that in concrete cases he had more than once called the attention of the Government to specific injustices, and that this had not been without result. He continued to warn of two dangers the church was confronting, i.e. atheism and pharisaism,²⁴ the latter one being the greater danger. In his experience, in spite of the atheistic propaganda in Hungary, the church lived on, and in fact gained a new life.

Visser 't Hooft also disclosed Bereczky's recommendation not to answer his open letter publicly, however, he asked him to write a private letter to him, because he wanted to learn from their discussion. His main concern was that they should continue cooperating, even though they might not agree on a number of points. According to Visser 't Hooft Bereczky "was exceedingly eager to send representatives of his Church to ecumenical meetings."²⁵

Visser 't Hooft got the impression about Bereczky that he was utterly sincere in his Christian conviction. However, he was deeply and one-sidedly concerned with repentance for the past wrongdoing; consequently, he was to some extent

paralyzed in his dealings with the present. He also had too little political instinct to understand the political repercussions of some of his actions and utterances. For example, the inherent hypocrisy of the Stockholm Appeal did not become clear to him. Nevertheless, Visser ‘t Hooft closed with the following remark: “we must do everything we can to remain in conversation with him and his Church.”²⁶

Visser ‘t Hooft’s written answer to Berezky’s open letter
(19 September 1950)

For Berezky’s request Visser ‘t Hooft wrote a two-page-meeting summary.²⁷ In his short and straightforward manner Visser ‘t Hooft asserted that Berezky had two demands related to the Toronto Statement. Firstly, the churches should be called to repentance for their association with the secular powers; secondly the churches should understand that the “Constantinian Era” was over so they needed to take the courage to live their lives for Jesus Christ alone, independently from the state.

Visser ‘t Hooft admitted to have fully agreed with both demands, furthermore, he was even thankful to Berezky for stressing these ideas. However, he presumed that the Berezky church-government only repented the RCH’s close relations with the “powers of yesterday”, while it did not fight for real freedom with the “powers of today”. “We would like to see, whether the new inner freedom of the church can really be seen in statements against state totalitarianism (“Staatsomnipotenz”) and unlawfulness?”²⁸

Discussing the second demand, Visser ‘t Hooft put the question whether the RCH really left the “Constantinian Era behind. “It is the mark of the Constantinian Era when a church lets herself use for political causes. I – and many others also – think that in your, and other Eastern churches as well, it goes in a very Constantinian way.”²⁹ In addition, Visser ‘t Hooft stated clearly that “it is certain that the Stockholm Appeal is the instrument of political propaganda.”³⁰ How can anybody state that the churches that support the Appeal are free and ready for repentance, while those that do not support it are not free and are “warmongers?” Visser ‘t Hooft emphasized if somebody read the whole Toronto Statement impartially they would see that the WCC tried to address every side and did not want to be linked to any political power group. He stressed that in Toronto he had to talk against those who wanted to tie the WCC to a particular political side

as well as against those who wanted to ban any opinion. He concluded “I am convinced that the only way how the church can fulfil her task – and this is the future of the Ecumenism as well – if we practice this art of balancing and ask the Lord of the church to save us. We can only meet at this narrow road.”³¹

However, Bereczky asked Visser ‘t Hooft to answer him in writing just summarizing their meeting. Bereczky, in reply to Visser ‘t Hooft’s short letter (October 15, 1950), wrote a much longer, almost study like answer of seven pages.³² In an amicable tone, Bereczky expressed his joy over the fact that many questions had been answered in the course of their meeting, however, he felt obliged to discuss the issues of his first open letter that had not been touched at the meeting or in Visser ‘t Hooft’s recent letter.

He still upheld his opinion that he could not agree with how the WCC CC based their opinion about the issue and the subsequent statement on the UN Commission’s report about the Korean situation. Bereczky still maintained his view that Visser ‘t Hooft and the WCC underestimated the danger of “pharisaism”, i.e. the West considered itself as the one and only “Christian world.” Bereczky stated that Hungary had just survived an era when Christianity was the official orientation of the state and the society, and this almost caused the extinction of the church.

He also had to refer to Visser ‘t Hooft’s remark about the Constantinian features of the then Hungarian church. Referring to László Ravasz’s saying, he stated that like the Catholic Church, also the Reformed Church in Hungary wanted to “get on the train” of the state before the war, but that time was over. It was not over because of the will and understanding of the church, but because of the shocking judgement of God, who also gave the church the chance of a graceful rebirth. Bereczky considered the 1948 Agreement between the RCH and the Communist state as a sign of that divine grace. In Bereczky’s opinion, the 1948 Agreement freed the church to do her spiritual work and gave the church the opportunity to make steps in order to reach her full self-sustainment and leave the tradition of accepting state subsidies behind.³³

Since Visser ‘t Hooft brought up in his letter that Bereczky’s loyalty to the Stockholm Appeal was also part of the Constantinian character of his church, Bereczky declared that it was his “strong conviction” that the intention of the Appeal and the whole world peace movement was an honest peace service. In his opinion, since the Soviet Union suffered the biggest losses during the last world

war, their honest intention could only be to avoid a next one. Consequently, he had to refuse Visser ‘t Hooft’s comment that the world peace movement was nothing else than an “instrument of political propaganda.”³⁴

After Bereczky had finished the discussion of Visser ‘t Hooft’s topics, he continued to talk about his personal and his church’s commitment to socialism: “We decided that we will say yes to the fight for the peace and the justice of socialism.”³⁵ Before that, the Reformed Church in Hungary acted as “a blind vassal of the bygone latifundium system and social injustice,”³⁶ but the “mercifully judgmental” God demolished that sinful past and through “the pains of labour” led Hungary to the road of socialism. For Bereczky this was the fruit of their true repentance for the sins of the past: obedience to God means obedience and service to the people among the new socialist circumstances.

The WCC Executive Committee letter from Bièvres (1 February 1951)

In his Memoirs, Visser ‘t Hooft admitted that there was an “element of truth” in Bereczky’s reaction to the WCC’s dealings with the Korean situation. Namely, the resolution failed to demonstrate the old intention of the WCC: “struggling against the easy conscience of the West.”³⁷

In order to deal with the worsening political situation worldwide and the new conflict within the WCC as well, George Bell, Anglican Bishop of Chichester and moderator of the WCC CC, convened a special consultation for church leaders prior to the meeting of the WCC Executive Committee (WCC EC) at Bièvres, in January 1951 (January 30 – February 1). For the meeting Visser ‘t Hooft sorted out the four possible positions held by WCC members.

Firstly, there were those who considered it imperative to support the UN in its effort to maintain international law and order against totalitarian aggressivity.

Secondly, there were those (mostly in Asia and Western Europe) who conceived the present conflict as that of power blocs which seek to use the UN for their own selfish ends and who believed that the church should in no way identify itself with one of these blocs.

Thirdly, there were members (in Eastern Europe and China) who believed in the essential rightness of the cause of the North Korean and Chinese governments

and considered the action of the UN as an attempt to oppose the liberation of the Asian people. This group also felt that the intentions of the communist powers were peaceful, and therefore they supported the World Peace Movement.

Finally, there were those who believed that the “police action” of the UN meant, in fact, war, and it was inappropriate for the church and the WCC to approve of war in any form.

Visser ‘t Hooft admitted that a substantial part of the WCC membership did not understand the recent utterances of the WCC CC as a pastoral and ecumenical word, but rather as a political one; thus creating the impression that the WCC identified itself with the position of the Western democracies. Visser ‘t Hooft also warned that while the WCC members in the communist countries desired to maintain the ecumenical fellowship, “that fellowship is, in fact, threatened.”³⁸ Visser ‘t Hooft emphasized that “the fraternal relations which we still have with churches in communist areas have an exceptional value.”³⁹ The churches in the West might share the renewal of life, which fell to the lot of the struggling churches in their conflict with the hostile environment. On the other part, the struggling churches might receive consolation and encouragement through belonging to a worldwide fellowship. In Visser ‘t Hooft’s opinion the disruption of inter-church relations across the Iron Curtain would be an “ecumenical disaster.” However, it was also essential that the WCC should continue to speak to the churches about the crucial issues of the world. The WCC, as much as it was possible, should continue to remain loyal to these two tasks: “we must seek to hold the churches together without sacrificing our right and duty to witness”⁴⁰

After a long discussion a letter to the WCC members was drafted, which the WCC Executive Committee later accepted. The preamble of the letter defined the state of affairs as a “grave situation caused by the international crisis”⁴¹. It also mentioned that two churchmen from Eastern Europe were also invited to the preliminary consultations but they were not able to attend.⁴² The letter referred to the worsening international situation since the Toronto Statement. The UN’s effort to resolve the conflict in Korea proved to be unsuccessful; however, they were grateful that, through the UN, the lines of negotiations had been kept open. Yet, the mankind was brought once more to the brink of a world war: “programs of rearmament have rapidly increased and the world is still more vividly divided into two armed camps.”⁴³

Then, the letter noted the vast social changes throughout the globe: over

700 million people, formerly subjects, had recently attained independence. At the same time, other people were still seeking independence, and the demand for equality and for release from poverty remained unmet. The letter’s pivotal verdict was:

“everywhere the victim is man.”⁴⁴ Often he is treated as no better than an object, or at best a tool, rather than as a responsible person. He hears much about peace, but for the sake of peace, he is told either to hate or to rearm. He hears much about freedom, but in the name of freedom, he is in fact deprived of liberty sometimes even from his childhood. He hears much about human rights, but he lives in a world of exploitation, deportations, concentration camps, arbitrary barriers and total war. To bring the comfort and strength of the Gospels to confused and threatened man, whatever his station in life, is the great task of the Church.”⁴⁵

The letter continued that these aforementioned truths were the source and impulse of the WCC endeavour. In their light, the WCC tried to face baffling and almost intractable problems, like totalitarianism, the menace of peace and the denial of social justice.

Discussing totalitarianism in general– but undoubtedly it referred primarily to Communism – the letter represented an open and clearly critical viewpoint. It repeated the Chichester resolution of the WCC CC in 1949 which declared that the “totalitarian doctrine is a false doctrine.”⁴⁶ There was a fundamental conflict between the Christian conviction and the totalitarian ideology. Consequently, every effort should be made to meet the basic challenge of totalitarian Communism by any means other than war.

Discussing the current rearmament programs, the letter emphasized that the governments and the people of the West had come to fear that the Communist nations were ready to extend their area of influence by military force. On the other hand, there was a growing fear of a Western pre-emptive strike. Thus, „rearmament had become the main and general emphasis everywhere.”⁴⁷ Therefore, it should be the duty of the churches to champion the peace with justice. The letter asserted that the churches still had real opportunities to influence government policies. The letter accentuated the importance of the UN in the case of negotiations to prevent the expansion of conflicts: “every chance

for negotiations must be used."⁴⁸

Lastly, the letter discussed the challenge of social justice, it also pointed out the role of the UN and its specialized agencies in its development. It also called Christians to turn sympathetically towards the social demands of people in need. It even used a Marxist phrase - "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need"⁴⁹ – saying that it had its roots in the teaching of Christ. "The ends of true peace and social justice must be the constant concern of all Christian men and of all Churches."⁵⁰

Finally, they thought it was important to note that the WCC rejoiced with Christians under totalitarian regimes about the fact that the Word of God made its power felt among them. We can strongly assume that this is a direct reference to the Hungarian situation where many congregations experienced spiritual renewal in spite of the anti-Christian measures of the communist state.

According to Visser 't Hooft, "this letter was on the whole well received"⁵¹ and it received mostly positive reactions. "As usual" criticism came from the right, mostly because of the "Marxist-Leninist" phrasing. Visser 't Hooft did not mention it, but there was criticism from the left as well. Bereczky wrote an answer to this letter too.

Bereczky's answer to the letter from Bièvres (8 March 1951)

Andor Enyedy's critique

It is telling what Andor Enyedy (1888-1966), Bishop of the Cistibiscan Church District, wrote about the circumstances under which Bereczky's answer letter was written.

Bishop Enyedy, elected in 1942, did not identify himself with the ideological and practical adjustment of the church to the state. In 1952, the state managed to achieve a merger between the Cis- and Transtibiscan Church Districts under the rule of János Péter. Most probably, one of the reasons of the merger was to discharge Enyedy from his episcopal position.

In a confidential letter to Bereczky,⁵² Enyedy declared that he could not comment and approve the draft of the answer letter, since he had not seen the original letter from Bièvres. He also considered it weird that the draft was

classified, although it was meant to be the statement of the Hungarian churches as a whole. He advised that they should discuss the draft at least at the presidiums of the convent and the church districts: “Our church lives not under personal but public government.”⁵³ Seemingly, Enyedy’s comments were not taken into consideration.

The contents of the letter

The six-page-answer letter was published as a joint statement of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in Hungary.⁵⁴ Its motto was powerful: “For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household.” (1Pt 4,17a) The writers underlined that they took this Word of God as a gift of God for the renewal of their churches. They also emphasized that they deemed it their obligation to practise fellowship with the WCC member churches. They admitted the merits of the WCC, which was not a “super-church”, but a “Council”, i.e. it served as a forum for the different churches to share their views that they each received from the Word of God. This was what the Hungarian churches want to do: to seek the will of the Lord in the turmoil of the events of world history and act upon it. The basis of the fellowship was that all member churches acted likewise. They were thankful for the honesty of the Bièvres meeting, which openly admitted that the crisis in Korea had aggravated since the Toronto Statement. Nevertheless, they pointed out that one year after the Toronto Statement, the Bièvres meeting still did not express repentance for “misleading”⁵⁵ the WCC members. The letter bluntly declared that in the view of the Hungarian churches the WCC was under “atmospheric pressure” and without considering the opinion of a part of the member churches, issued a statement in Canada, which contributed to the worsening of the serious situation. They were also grateful to the WCC for acknowledging the ongoing vast social changes in the world; however, they were missing a concrete declaration on their part, namely that this social process was the “judgmental and merciful work of the world-governing God.”⁵⁶ This was the understanding of the Hungarian churches; therefore they supported and validated this process. Referring to the expression – “the victim is man” – in the Bièvres letter, the letter called for repentance again stating that in the last one hundred years we did not shed a drop of tear over the “victims” of colonialism in China and India.

According to the letter, the declaration made at the Bièvres meeting about

totalitarianism was hard and uncalled for. They put the question why the capitalism was the only ideal system for a church to be a true church? Discussing the topic of rearmament, they asked the question why the WCC EC evaded the problem of Germany's rearmament. They wanted to have more information about the hearsay, namely that Martin Niemöller's attempt to discuss this issue was put aside in the Bièvres meeting. They also criticized the WCC's undisputable support toward the UN, and that they did not say anything about the exclusion of the communist China from the UN Security Council. They asked the WCC for an active involvement in these two issues: the rearmament of Western Germany, and the UN Security Council membership of the communist China.

As for the topic of social justice, they admitted that it was courageous to use the Marxist thesis: "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need". They thought that if the WCC leadership admitted the justice of that thesis, they should also admit that the new world order – "which was born among through pain and suffering"⁵⁷ – was the act of God.

Finally, they declared that "The most crucial matter is now: peace,"⁵⁸ and the churches and the WCC would have to face a huge task in the fight for peace. They warned the WCC because they were afraid that the WCC would not recognize the signs of the times, and would tie itself to the past – judged by God –, instead of seeking the path of the future: "The future belongs to the man of peace".⁵⁹

Visser 't Hooft's answer (April 18, 1951)

Visser 't Hooft answered the joint letter of the Hungarian Reformed and Lutheran leaders in a very kind tone.⁶⁰ He underlined that his answer was not an official one; it was not formulated by a WCC committee but by him personally. He stated that their discussion justified the very existence of the ecumenical movement. He was grateful that even in this situation of division and separation they could have a fraternal conversation with each other. He was also grateful for the positive attitude in the Hungarian letter toward the letter from the Bièvres meeting of the WCC EC, as well as, for the critical questions, which they rose. This was why he gave wide publicity to this letter and sent it to all members of the WCC EC as well as published it in the Ecumenical Church Service.

There was only one point where Visser 't Hooft felt the need of some clarification. i.e. the omission of the questions of the German rearmament and China's place in

the UN Security Council from the letter. He wrote that it was “untrue” that Niemöller had been silenced in Bièvres. He stated that both Niemöller and Otto Dibelius could speak fully and frankly about their reservations concerning rearmament. The simple reason why they did not make any particular pronouncement either on this issue or on China was, that they found it impossible to find a common ground concerning these subjects. He hoped that this explanation might help to understand the situation. He emphasized again that Berczky should not think that the participants of the Bièvres meeting represented any solid political block: “All of them are Christians who seek the will of God in the present situation, who arrive at various points at different conclusions but who at the same time seek to express together the conviction in which they agree.”⁶¹

Berczky must have been proud of Visser ‘t Hooft’s humble and moderate answer because he sent a copy of it to Mátyás Rákosi,⁶² with the words: “the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, whom I addressed my open letter last year, sent the attached letter to me. Let me share it with you for your information.” This act of Berczky exemplified very well how he strived to please Rákosi by his dealings with the WCC.

After the Bièvres meeting (May-August, 1951)

The visit of Robert Mackie (May, 1951)

In late May, 1951, Robert Mackie, the associate general secretary of the WCC and chairman of the Inter-Church Aid spent 8 days in Hungary.⁶³ He visited the Hungarian seminaries, charity and church government organs, congregations, as well as the head of the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH), István Kossa. However, the reason of his visit was to survey the utilization of donations made by the Inter-Church Aid for the reconstruction of church buildings damaged in the course of the war. However, the Hungarian Reformed media tried to stir up emotions professing that the real reason of the visit was the recent critical encounter between the WCC and Berczky:

“The change of letters after the Toronto and Bièvres statements of the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches are well known.

The Hungarian churches express their firm conviction that the churches cannot be either open or silent supporters of the war effort, but they must stand on the side of the peace instead. Their viewpoint was acclaimed by many other churches as well. Subsequently, associate general secretary Robert Mackie visited the Hungarian Churches. We need to evaluate his ascertainment from this aspect."⁶⁴

Despite expectations, Mackie did not make any substantial statements about Toronto or Biévres during his stay in Hungary. His official statements were very positive and well mannered. He marvelled the success of the church reconstruction programme, he respected the the seminary professors and students' preparedness, he liked the commitment of the Hungarian churches to ecumenism, and most importantly he gladly admired the revival of the congregational life: "I am leaving Hungary knowing that the great power of the Holy Spirit shows itself here in the life of the church."⁶⁵

Bereczky's speech at the Budapest Seminary (13 June, 1951)

Bereczky was still under the influence of Mackie's visit when he addressed the professors and students of the Budapest Seminary by his commencement address on 13 June, 1951.⁶⁶ After repeating how highly Mackie esteemed the involvement of the Hungarian church in the ecumenical movement, Bereczky dedicated his eleven-page-speech to the discussion of the responsibility of his church for the future of WCC.

He claimed, "There is no secret about the fact that the route our church stepped on several years ago, differs significantly from the general understandings of the Western churches."⁶⁷ Then, he sorted out three main differences between the understanding of the Hungarian and Western churches. The first one was that the sense of community had become very strong within the RCH. This was the reason why the Hungarian church stressed the importance not only of the individual but also of the collective responsibility and of the need for collective repentance.

The second difference was that the RCH sought a deeper and wider understanding of Jesus Christ's reign, consequently, – and this was the third difference – the RCH sought to understand the relationship between the history

of the world, the church and the salvation. According to Bereczky two concrete decisions of the church could be derived from a deeper understanding of Christ’s reign and the strong connection between the history of the world, the church and the salvation. The first one was that the RCH accepted socialism as the will of God: “Long story short, we decided to say with the courage of the faith that these are, here and now, the will of God. The first of these two is the case of the socialism.”⁶⁸ God, who “sometimes governs the events of world history by his bloody hands”⁶⁹, condemned and terminated the social, economic and political system of the past. It was replaced by a new and revolutionary new system, the socialism. “We say yes to this new.”⁷⁰ –Bereczky concluded.

The other concrete decision was made about the issue of war and peace. “Our church was the first among the churches, which said yes to the political peace movement saying: We stand by it and support it.”⁷¹ He evaluated his handling the Toronto Statement as an absolute success. In his opinion when he put these two concrete decisions of the RCH approving socialism and the political peace movement forward, it did not weaken the relationship with the WCC, on the contrary, it made it more respectful and meaningful. He even cited the well-mannered words of Visser ‘t Hooft’s last letter, about the importance of sharing opinions within the WCC.

The RCH’s involvement into the world peace movement

That time also many other manifestations of the RCH emphasized the church’s commitment to the peace movement. Bishop János Péter, member of the World Peace Council, released an article about the new task in the peace service of the church.⁷² He referred to the brutality of the war in Korea and Vietnam, he expressed his admiration for the Soviet Union for its taking the lead in the peace movement and called the church members to support the new peace appeal of Berlin with their signature. He stressed that the peace service should be represented on every church forum. He thought that to waken the awareness of peace-loving people in the “imperialist” countries was the great task of the Hungarian Protestantism.

Roland Kiss’s opening speech at the annual meeting of the Convent General (18 May, 1951), then the highest executive body of the Reformed Church in Hungary, expressed similar sentiments: “The Reformed Church in Hungary

does not cease to guard the peace. Your church bells, your organ, your pulpit must serve the issue of peace. You preach to the man of goodwill, the glory and triumph of peace.”⁷³

The peace movement and the supposed leading role of the RCH in it were highlighted in the press releases of the church. They usually reported about the peace-fight of foreign Protestant churches as well, but only to refer to the supposed importance of the RCH in this field, for example, when they reported on the peace activity of the American Quakers and Robert Wieskotten’s Church Peace Mission.⁷⁴ The following sentence summarizes the official view of the RCH on the international events at the time:

“It is well known that the WCC’s Toronto and Bièvres Statements on the Korean issue did not serve the cause of peace, but rather justified the aggressive moves of war interests. The Hungarian and Czech churches turned harshly against these statements, and the Chinese, Indian, Australian, and even the Japanese Christians joined this standpoint. Many Western churchmen and church organizations expressed their disapproval of the inappropriate policy of the World Council. Therefore, some of the leaders of the World Council relaxed their rigid behaviour and showed more understanding for the statements of the Eastern churches.”⁷⁵

The article exemplified this with the case of the Norwegian Bishop Eivind Berggrav, one of the presidents of the WCC, who used to give “unfriendly” statements in the past, however, now he accepted the Hungarian opinion.

On Mackie’s visit, the leader of the Press Department of the Convent, Imre Kádár, wrote a lengthy article on the relationship between the RCH and the Western Churches. It was characterised by a thankful tone for the financial help the Western Christians provided for the reconstruction of Hungarian church buildings after the war. He outlined the future of the relationship as follows: “Now we must use this relationship to join the forces of World Christianity and the men of goodwill for the defence of the threatened peace.”⁷⁶

In the 30-minute-religious broadcast of the state radio (Petőfi-rádió) Imre Kádár outlined the task of the peace-service of the church, using the usual phraseology of the political addresses of the era:

“The press of American churches publishes shocking details of how the disgusting methods of the warmongers poison the public opinion, and how they have already earned fortunes by war-propaganda. /.../ The united and resolute witness of Hungarian Protestantism can do a lot to help the Western churches to boldly deny the community of the Pharisees hiding behind their religious mask and to stand up for the cause of peace.”⁷⁷

Also the pulpits became the fields of the political peace movement. The journal *Egyházi Tudósító* listed the different Budapest congregations where the topic of the Sunday sermon the responsibility of the church and her role in the fight for peace was.⁷⁸

At Easter 1951, all four bishops of the RCH dedicated their sermons to the service of peace.⁷⁹ Amusingly enough, the Bishop of the Transdanubian Church District, Elemér Győry, fulfilled the task only by attaching an extra closing section about peace to his sermon.⁸⁰

At Easter, Albert Bereczky even sent the Christians in Germany a radio message on the topic of German rearmament⁸¹, while János Péter sent the whole world Christianity a radio message, starting with the words of the resurrected Christ – “Peace be with you” – and mostly advocating the World Peace Council’s Berlin Appeal.⁸²

Meanwhile, the church joined the fundraising of the state for helping Korean orphans.⁸³ We do not know how much money was collected, but the church press usually reported success and called for further contributions in articles like: “The wives’ of reformed pastors must join the fundraising for Korean children.”⁸⁴ They also released graphic accounts about the brutality of the Western “police actions” in Korea.⁸⁵

The contribution of the church to the peace movement was rewarding. At the 6th anniversary of the “liberation” of Hungary from “Hitler’s reign of terror” by the Soviet Union the Presidential Council of the Peoples Republic of Hungary decorated Bereczky, János Péter, and the Dean Sándor Fekete for their active participation in the “peace-fight”.

The resignation of Tzu-ch'en Chao (May, 1951)

Despite the apparent reconciliation between the Hungarian church leadership and the WCC, the crisis of the ecumenical movement about the Toronto Statement was not over.

In May, 1951, Visser 't Hooft received a letter from Tzu-ch'en Chao, a Chinese Protestant Bishop and also one of the six presidents of the WCC, in which he informed Visser 't Hooft, about the requirement towards him, that he as a patriotic Chinese had to protest against the Toronto Statement "which sounds so much like the voice of Wall Street" and that he decided to resign from his office of president.⁸⁶ In his Memoirs, Visser 't Hooft tried to take the edge of this unanticipated turn, however, there was no doubt about it that the WCC leadership must have experienced great confusion by the resignation of one of its presidents.

After the mantra-like repetition of Bereczky's initiative role in the debate about the Toronto Statement, the journal *Egyházi Tudósító* evaluated the resignation as follows: "Dr. Chao's resignation has a great significance for the upcoming meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches."⁸⁷

Meeting of the WCC Central Committte in Rolle (August, 1951)

Bereczky resigns (6 August 1951)

The WCC CC met in August (between 4 and 11) 1951 in Rolle at the shores of Lake Geneva. The main theme of discussion, i.e. "The Role of the World Council of Churches in Time of Tension," reflected the last sequence of events very well. Bishop Eivind Berggrav of Norway was the main speaker on the subject. According to Visser 't Hooft, Bereczky arrived with the clear intention to continue challenging the action, which the WCC had taken with regard to the Korean crisis and indeed the general policy of the Council concerning international affairs.⁸⁸

However, the Hungarian delegates declared that their principle was to maintain the fellowship with the WCC. Their visit resulted in Bereczky's resignation from his positions in the CCIA, the Sub-Committee on the Missionary and Ecumenical

Calling of the Church and most importantly he did not want to be listed as a member of the Central Committee anymore, instead as an observer (6 August, 1951).

In his written declaration of resignation, Bereczky emphasized that he was sad because the WCC CC had announced Chao’s resignation without reporting details and reasons. He called it into question whether Chao’s letter of resignation had been read in the plenary session of the CC, or only some excerpts of it had been published by the official WCC media: “Perhaps I am the only one here who is interested in the letter and can be taught by it. I feel that many people think, what happened is self-evident.”⁸⁹ Not knowing the details, he could only assume that the reasons of Chao’s resignation stemmed from the incomprehension of the Western churches towards their Eastern counterparts. The Toronto Statement exemplified this incomprehension, the alienation from the vast social changes of the world, and the lack of repentance for colonialism very well.

Then, he touched the Toronto Statement again, that he still considered as a “one sided political statement.”⁹⁰ He thought that the main problem of all humanity and Christendom was the problem of peace, and he added that they should focus on this question more fully during their sessions. Accordingly, the last report of the CCIA disappointed him. In his opinion, the report repeated the Toronto Statement in spite of its critical reception, namely it did not even mention the two proposals of the Hungarian Reformed and Lutheran churches about the remilitarization of Germany and the admission of the Communist China into the UN Security Council. He also complained about the fact that his name was put at the end of the CCIA report. Though that was formally correct, but he would have considered it more polite to skip his name, unless he was allowed to express his opinion.

Interestingly, Visser ‘t Hooft did not mention Bereczky’s resignation in his Memoirs.⁹¹ However, he was happy to recognise that Bereczky cooperated positively during the meetings in Rolle. Nevertheless, he was strongly challenged by the inadequate reaction of Hungarian churches to acts of injustice committed in Hungary, and he came back with his radical questions about Western policies. And yet, as a final point, there was no breach of fellowship.

Bereczky's letters to his family

During his stay in Rolle, Bereczky wrote a letter to his family almost every day. The Hungarian State Security intercepted and copied the hand written personal letters. Reading them, one could have a very unusual insight into the events. The letters testified that Bereczky was almost always in a bad mood in Rolle. He usually complained about exhaustion. He really missed his family, especially because his birthday coincided with his stay. He liked the venue of the conference, but he noted that the Lake Balaton is nicer than the Lake Geneva.⁹² He referred to his resignation speech as a "great battle" which "stirred up a storm." He was surprised that many people seemed to be happy for the "rude simplicity" of his speech that he had written for two days with "many misery". After his resignation, as an observer, he found the ongoing debates about the different topics boring and useless.⁹³ But once, surprisingly enough, even Visser't Hooft lost his temper.⁹⁴ He had the impression that his speech earned him the respect of the other members. He was honoured when once Visser 't Hooft translated his German into English.⁹⁵

After the conference Bereczky travelled to Geneva with Olivier Beguin and stayed at the place of Beguin's parents. Here, he encountered a "Chinese friend, whom once I met in Hungary"⁹⁶ and wanted to send a letter with him to give to Bishop Chao. The name of this Chinese friend and the content of this letter remained unknown. He reported about his busy schedule and that he "became dumb because of the exhaustion." Since his accommodation was next to the Lake Geneva, that night they watched a firework from the balcony. "Believe me, this west is pathetic – its church as well" – commented Bereczky sarcastically. He confessed that he would have "escaped" home, but he did not want to leave the "valiant" Pradervand alone with the many "dark Americans," whose "hypocrisy was almost unbearable."

It is important to consider that Bereczky might have suspected that the State Security monitored his personal correspondence, so he omitted harmful details from his letters or used such tone which was favoured by the state officials. For example, Roland Kiss reported to the State Security that he had information about Bereczky meeting with many Hungarian immigrants, mostly the dissident relatives of Hungarian church persons, during his stay in Switzerland.⁹⁷ Of course, he did not mention these illegal meetings in his personal letters.

Barth’s critique on Berezcky (Sept 16, 1951)

In my opinion, Berezcky’s resignation drama in Rolle contributed mostly to Karl Barth’s highly critical letter of the collaboration of the RCH with the Communist state and her openness for socialism (16 Sept 1951). In the letter – which “comes from a moved heart”⁹⁸ – Barth compared Berezcky’s theological and practical ways to the dealings of the German Christians (Deutsche Christen) in the Nazi Germany. Namely, they propagated a similarly false doctrine on the special revelation of God in the course of the events of world history: “You are about to turn your affirmation of communism into a part of the Christian message, an article of faith, which with the introduction of a foreign teaching, begins to overshadow all others, on the basis of which you wish to interpret the whole Creed and the whole Bible.”⁹⁹ For Barth, the result of this theological presupposition was that “the affairs of the Reformed Church in Hungary run parallel with the dominant government, party and press, in a way which is becoming more and more opaque to me.”¹⁰⁰

Barth said about Berezcky’s role in Rolle that he agreed with him that the treatment of Chao’s resignation and the non-mention of the protests against the Toronto Statement in Rolle were improper. Nor was he pleased with how the WCC leadership sometimes kept disturbances secret for the sake of peace. However, in his opinion, Berezcky gave weight to those two events and attached to them a tendency, which they certainly did not have. Barth admitted too that “Toronto was a clear error.”¹⁰¹ Though, neither Toronto, nor Chao’s resignation and the non-mention of Berezcky’s protest were “*quaestio stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.”¹⁰² Moreover, Chao’s letter was so “disappointingly without contents” that it was no shame that it was not read out in plenum. Barth also questioned the wisdom of Berezcky’s withdrawal to the position of an “observer,” by which he robbed himself of the possibility of joining the future discussions of the WCC CC in a responsible way.

He also knew about the fact that Berezcky had published an article on the Rolle conference in the Hungarian press presenting his resignation in such a way as if it were the only or at least the major topic at the conference.¹⁰³ In the Hungarian press, there was no word about what other topics had been discussed and decided on at Rolle. “But you really think it right that the press informed by you did not have anything else to report to the Hungarian people about Rolle

then this: that you have fought a battle there about the unfortunate Toronto declaration?"¹⁰⁴

Barth did not save on his critique: "Your leadership of the Hungarian churches and their congregations finds itself in a curve in which, according to all that I know and understand, it may come to disaster. There may still be time to avoid it. But not without a very strong pull on the rudder."¹⁰⁵

Bereczky handled Barth's letter confidentially. He showed it only to the inner circle of the church leadership, and he personally took a copy to the head of the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH), István Kossa, who sent it to Mátyás Rákosi.¹⁰⁶ Rákosi was also informed about Barth's showing the letter to Visser 't Hooft, who – as an "enemy element" – sent it to others.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Visser 't Hooft published it in newspapers without Barth's consent. Kossa even planned a plot, to exploit the unauthorized publication in order to turn Barth against Visser 't Hooft.¹⁰⁸

After Rolle (September 1951 – December 1952)

The impacts of Bereczky's resignation

Roland Kiss, similarly to Barth's ascertainment, reported to Mátyás Rákosi, how Bereczky tried to overstress the importance of his resignation in the following months.¹⁰⁹ He wrote that after a while it had become very boring that Bereczky discussed Rolle on every public occasion and that he was very disappointed because the Western newspapers did not take a due account of his resignation.

Bereczky also sent a letter to Chao, in which he expressed his admiration for the Chinese bishop's move.¹¹⁰ We do not know whether Chao answered his letter or not. In mid-September, 1951 three English and nine French protestant pastors visited Hungary. Their visit concluded in a study conference in Budapest. Josef Hromádka, Czech Protestant theologian and member of the WCC CC, also attended the conference and declared that he agreed with Bereczky in "every essential question," he approved his behaviour in Rolle and described the Toronto Statement as an "awful resolution."¹¹¹ Bereczky's lecture on the ecumenical relationships of the RCH was still ruled by the alleged importance of his performance in Rolle.¹¹²

Bereczky's lecture went so far that the WCC felt the need to request an official rectification, saying that Bereczky's account gave an “erroneous impression” in many aspects. For example, that he did not get sufficient opportunity to express himself, and that his statements were not published as fully as those of other speakers; that the WCC decided not to send an observer to the World Peace Council but to send one to the UN; and that the “crisis” of the WCC consisted in the fact that, it did not struggle against injustices, oppression and exploitation, though, it was aware of reality.¹¹³ The Hungarian Church Press released the text of the rectification together with Bereczky's wearisome explanation about his version.¹¹⁴

Bereczky's honorary doctorate (January 23, 1952)

On 23 of January 1952, Bereczky received honorary doctorate from the Comenius Faculty of Theology in Prague, recognizing his role in peace service. According to the Dean of the Faculty, Josef Hromádka: “Bereczky's word can be heard today in the whole Protestant World, his work for peace has born its rich fruit. Today, we want to express our solidarity and fellowship with him in front of his church and the whole word.”¹¹⁵ The other speeches of appreciation also testified that Bereczky's recent activity in the WCC was understood as part of the service for peace. As Rudolf Rican, the “Dekan spectabile” of the Faculty noted: “Albert Bereczky strives to hinder the World Council [of Churches] to get into the middle of the biased political conception of the West. He fights as an active member of the movement for safeguarding peace.”¹¹⁶ Bereczky's honorary doctorate served as an open statement of the Czech Protestants that they identified themselves with the goals of the peace movement and they approved its advocacy within the WCC. This is telling about the atmosphere of the festivities, among which Bereczky received his diploma for his peace-service while the trombones of the orchestra were playing Hussite battle marches.¹¹⁷

Spider-bombs and Greek revolutionaries

In 1952, the RCH joined the protest of the Hungarian state, the World Peace Council, and the Soviet Union against the supposed use of biological weapons by the US in Korea. The state officially requested all – both Catholic and Protestant

– bishops, church leaders and seminary professors to condemn the use of such weapons. The press disgraced those who did not respond to the call.¹¹⁸ The RCH did not only join the protest but also asked the American National Council of Churches (ANCC), the WCC¹¹⁹ and the UN to raise their voice against the biological weapons similarly as they did in the case of nuclear ones before.¹²⁰

In reply, the ANCC sent an objective and calm answer, that they had formulated after a consultation with the CCIA. They stated that the use of biological weapons in Korea was not confirmed, and they were going to urge the US Government to accept the offer of the International Red Cross to investigate and establish fact before any further action was taken.¹²¹

In vain did the RCH request the WCC to protest against the death sentence of the Greek communist revolutionary, Nikos Beloyannis.¹²²

Connections with the leftist clergy of the West

In September 1952, a group of American Protestant Churchmen wrote a letter to Bereczky asking his opinion about the Bonn Treaty, which planned to give back the sovereignty of West Germany and allow its militarization.¹²³ The writers were mostly well known American pacifists,¹²⁴ but the group also involved leftists of the American church life like the Episcopalian William Howard Melish (1910-1986), the founding member of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, editor of the newspaper of the American Communist Party, and subject of the investigations of the McCarthy Commission. Bereczky, in his response, condemned the plan of the treaty, which, in his opinion, would raise the fascist sentiment and stir up the German militarism.¹²⁵

It was also typical for these years that the Hungarian Reformed press usually published reports about the activity of the significant members of the world peace movement with church background and obvious left-wing sentiment, such as Melish, Joseph Francis Fletcher¹²⁶ (1905-1991), James Gareth Endicott¹²⁷ (1898-1993) or Patriarch Alexy I (1877-1970). In August, 1951, even the “Red Dean of Canterbury”, Hewlett Johnson (1874-1966) visited Hungary.¹²⁸ He came as the guest of the Hungarian Peace Council, but as a clergyman he also met Hungarian church leaders with whom he shared his ideas about Christian responsibility for the world peace.

The church press usually exaggerated the importance, popularity and

influence of these Western churchmen to demonstrate the good connections of the Hungarian church leaders as well as the international appreciation of the peace service of the RCH to the general public. In the above mentioned example about the Bonn Treaty, we can also see how these Western circles used Bereczky in order to have a European supporter for their agenda. The press of the Hungarian church also paid close attention to the activity of “hostile elements” like John Foster Dulles¹²⁹ and Myron Charles Taylor, who acted as the promoters of the western instrumentalization of the churches.¹³⁰

Conclusions

The close association of the RCH with the world peace movement

The RCH leadership, especially Bishops Bereczky and Péter, was deeply involved into the propagation of the world peace movement. The public manifestations, the press releases, the conferences at seminaries and for pastors, the Christmas, Easter and Pentecost messages of the church leaders and in some cases the sermons of ordinary pastors often referred to the peace service in the early 1950s. The majority of the articles published in the Hungarian Church Press and in its Hungarian version, the journal *Egyházi Tudósító*, circled around the topics of world peace. On many occasions, the church leaders declared that the peace service was the first responsibility of the church.

The intentions of the state

It is also apparent that in its endeavour, the church leadership followed the direct instructions of the Communist state. A telling example is that the news of Bishop Chao’s resignation was communicated to the church by the ÁEH with the instruction to “deal severely with this question”.¹³¹ On another occasion, no other than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent the Russian translation of a testimony of Northern and Southern Korean church persons to the ÁEH in order to circulate it among Hungarian churchmen.¹³² Also, the ÁEH provided paper for the Hungarian Church Press saying that running this newspaper was a “church political necessity.”¹³³ A little, but all the more impressive detail was a note by

János Horváth, head of ÁEH, in which he asked the Rákosi office whether he should transfer Barth's new letter to Rákosi, because "until now it was a custom that Comrade Rákosi received Barth's letters."¹³⁴ For the request of the Hungarian Peace Council, József Varga, the vice-president of the ÁEH (and at the same time a covert agent of the Hungarian secret services)¹³⁵ recommended Bereczky and János Péter for the second highest North Korean state decoration.¹³⁶

Motivations

Inner motivations

It must have been apparent for the church leaders that the world peace movement, especially its official organization, the World Peace Council was the propaganda channel of the Soviet Union and Communist interest. For what reason did they participate in it? In this aspect Bereczky's motivations were very complex.

Obviously, he might have feared to lose the favour of the state and his power at the same time. We know that Bereczky's strong association to the disbanded Independent Smallholders' Party, likewise his friendships and kinships to members of the condemned Hungarian Fraternal Community made him a potential subject of political blackmail.

On the other hand, we can truly say that we have come to the assumption that Bereczky deeply and consciously accepted what he proclaimed, namely that the fall of the old social and political establishment of Hungary and the rise of the new, revolutionary-socialist one derived from the will of God, and Christians needed to accept it with faithful obedience. Therefore, he was not a hypocritical but an honest servant of the Communist interest.

An additional minor detail is, that Bereczky always liked to relate to foreign political issues. Supposedly, he was the illegitimate child of Count Albert Apponyi, leading diplomat of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. His mother wanted to educate the young Albert to become a diplomat, however, he chose to become a Reformed pastor after the example of his step-father. Probably, his compulsion to conform toward his mother and inattentive birth father was the reason why Bereczky always searched for the opportunities to get involved in foreign policy during his short secular political career after the war, he was, namely the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in 1946. According to his

close colleague, Gyula Muraközy, Berczky he dreamed of once becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs.¹³⁷

Berczky's competition with János Péter

Another motivating factor can be connected to this last element, i.e. Berczky's dream. There was somebody who realized Berczky's dream, but not for Berczky. Bishop János Péter, who laid the foundation of his political status by his successful engagement into church diplomacy, became the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Kádár-regime for more than a decade, from 1961 to 1973. The important factor for Berczky's immersion into church diplomacy was his apparent rivalry with his younger and more capable counterpart, János Péter.

We had a glimpse into the nature of their competition when Berczky decided to meet Visser 't Hooft alone on 2 September 1950.¹³⁸ According to another note, Berczky arranged to travel to Rolle leaving Péter at home in order to accentuate his own importance.¹³⁹

It was widely known that the 40-year-old János Péter was much more talented in diplomatic dealings than Berczky. While Berczky knew only German, Péter spoke fluently in German and English as well as in French. It was also rumoured that Péter was also much more polished in theology than his 70 years old counterpart.¹⁴⁰ Péter was much more favoured by the state than Berczky (we already discussed Berczky's suspicious relations to anti-communist elements) and step by step he earned the loyalty of the significant officials of the leadership of the RCH, like Sándor Fekete, István Finta or Imre Kádár, who impatiently waited for the fall of the “old fool” – this is how they called Berczky.

In my opinion, Berczky's desperate attempts in the field of church diplomacy can be attributed to this deepening rivalry with this “new star”¹⁴¹ of the RCH, János Péter. By his alleged successes in the field of church diplomacy, Berczky could strengthen his legitimacy as a bishop and hoped to earn the favour of the state. Here we can refer to how Berczky always kept the ÁEH and Rákosi in the loop of his foreign activities.

Distraction of the church public

In my opinion, another motivating factor for the zealous participation of the RCH

leadership in foreign church affairs was to distract the Hungarian church public from the disturbing processes within their own church.

Bereczky's office term was overlapped with the harshest anti-church policies of the Communist State. The state did not want to engage into a direct confrontation with the Reformed church (as it did in the case of the Catholics), but acted out its anti-church program with the help of internal collaborators, like Bereczky and János Péter. This method was later aptly described by the resigned Bishop Ravasz as the "weakening the church by the church." As a result of the secularization of church schools, the downsizing of church media, and the termination of missionary and charity organizations, the RCH lost its almost half-thousand yearlong formative roles within the Hungarian cultural, social and political life within a decade. By the 1951 amendment of the bylaws of the church, the church government could relocate any pastor from his congregation to another— an "administrative tool" which became very useful to discipline-defiant pastors and established a system of fear and mistrust. The adjustments of the diocesan borders in 1952 also served the purpose of centralization and personal purges.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian society also went through the most radical alteration of its history due to the adaptation of the Communist social, political and economic order. Many lay church members were the victims of the coerced changes, such as the smallholder peasantry whose lands were collectivized by the state, or the intellectuals and the bourgeoisie, which lost its social status from one day to the other.

While the leadership of the RCH got engaged into the fight for peace, human rights, social justice and equality abroad, it did not raise its voice in order to ease the pressure on its own lay members. On the contrary, by the theological verification of the Communist revolution, the RCH of the Bereczky-era became — by the words of László Ravasz — a "spiritual State Security Force."

Gábor Papp, pastor of a minor Budapest congregation, wrote a highly critical letter to Bereczky, which resulted in the termination of his pastoral position by a show-trial, a disciplinary action usually seen at secular Communist courts of the era. One fragment of his letter is expressive: "It was fake love which wept over the sufferings of black South Africans and Koreans but did not have a word for the misery of their own blood."¹⁴² So, distraction from the harsh realities of the Hungarian society was also a motivation for Bereczky's foreign involvement.

Instrumentalization by the state

But most importantly, while analysing the motivations we cannot neglect the apparent instrumentalization of the church by the state for the sake of its foreign policy. For this aspect, a memo of János Horváth, head of the ÁEH, to Mátyás Rákosi is worthy of our consideration.¹⁴³

In this memo, written in December 1952, Horváth drew Rákosi’s attention to the recent “successes” of Hungarian Protestant churchmen in international church organizations. According to Horváth, the Hungarian churchmen could overcome the Western plans to isolate and ban them from the WCC. In the long run, Bereczky’s protest against the Toronto Statement defended the goals of the world peace movement.

The memo also refers to an earlier, now lost, instruction of Rákosi, in which he directed the Hungarian Protestant churches to “maintain and strengthen their Western relationships in the future, not by the declaration of socialist messages, but rather by emphasizing their nature as churches instead.”¹⁴⁴

The memo is full of tangible examples about how the state enforced its intentions through the international work of Hungarian churchmen, like: “we prepared the performance of the Calvinist and Lutheran delegates at the conferences in Lund and Hannover.”¹⁴⁵

According to the memo, the situation was now ripe enough to leave the defensive position and start a gradual offensive in order to gain serious positions within the WCC. The international acknowledgement of the Hungarian Protestant leaders made it possible to infiltrate into the WCC, which was until then ruled by American imperialists, and declare the messages of the “Peace camp,” urge the WCC to release “right” statements or give interviews for the sake of the peace movement as WCC officials. Consequently, the state gave its full support to the RCH to expand her international connections. This was also the reason why the WCC CC was invited to Hungary (CC meeting in Galyatető in July-August 1956), whose idea first appeared in an ÁEH motion.¹⁴⁶

Concluding remarks

The aforementioned interesting memo about the successes of the Hungarian

Reformed foreign policy also underlines that Bereczky acted on his own when he first raised his voice against the Toronto Statement, while the state paid close attention to the international involvement of the church and made direct steps for its manipulation. In 1985, József Éliás – once Bereczky’s adherent, but later a harsh criticizer of his activity – in his samizdat work (*The Reign of the Chaff*) was still uncertain whether Bereczky was a “kibitzer” or he acted on the instruction of the state when he wrote his open letter.¹⁴⁷

According to the analysed sources, we can state with assurance that Bereczky did not act on the request of the state when he attacked the Toronto Statement of the WCC CC, but he acted upon his own, inner motivations. However, that time his motivations were profoundly defined by his compulsion for conformity with even the undeclared demands of the state.¹⁴⁸

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- 4 VISSER 'T HOOFT, W. A.: *Memoirs*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1987, 220.
- 5 Bereczky, A.: An Open Letter to Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, *Hungarian Church Press* 2.14 (9 August 1950), 1-6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*
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- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Albert Bereczky's letter to Mátyás Rákosi*, Budapest, 14 August 1950, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltár – National Archives of Hungary (MNL OL), 276_f_65.362 öe, 171.
- 15 *Information about some events of Reformed church life*, Budapest, 4 August 1950, MNL OL, 276_f_65.362 öe, 169.
- 16 *Information about some events of Reformed church life from 10 August to 19 October*, Budapest, MNL OL, 276_f_65.362 öe, 185.
- 17 The goal of this letter was to secure Rákosi's endorsement for Bereczky's and Péter's travel to Strasbourg. There is a handwritten text on the document: “Comrade Rákosi approves. Inform Darvas.” *Memo to Mátyás Rákosi by József Darvas*, Budapest, 15 August 1950, MNL OL, 276_f_65.362 öe, 179.
- 18 Unfortunately, Barth's attitude towards the RCH after WW2 and especially his advice to Hungarian church leaders during his visit to Hungary in 1948 amidst the rise of the Communist

- regime was not entirely praiseworthy. He could have easily felt some responsibility in paving the way for opportunists within the RCH. For details see e.g. István PÁSZTORI-KUPÁN, *Is there a crown without a cross? Two models describing the duty of Christians in the world*, *Pleroma XV* (2013), 159–172;
- 19 Visser 't Hooft remembers incorrectly when he states that the meeting took place in Geneva. Visser 't Hooft: *Memoirs*, 221.
 - 20 *Notes on the conversation with Bishop Bereczky of the Hungarian Reformed Church on September 2nd, 1950*, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondence, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66.
 - 21 Visser 't Hooft: *Memoirs*, 221.
 - 22 The original says: "I should be most happy if I could see that the Churches, throughout the whole world, had really awakened to the recognition that the period which began with Constantine the Great has now come to its end, and the Church, if she wants to live, must become the Church of Jesus Christ, in a much deeper sense and greater measure than it was the case in the past." Bereczky: *An Open Letter...*, 2.
 - 23 *Notes on the conversation with Bishop Bereczky of the Hungarian Reformed Church on September 2nd, 1950*, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondence, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66.
 - 24 We can here refer to the letter of the Quaker William Robinson to Bereczky in which he warns Bereczky in a very mild tone that he should keep an eye on the pharisaism of the Soviet Union and the Communist as well. *William Robinson's letter to Albert Bereczky*, Birmingham, 6 October 1950, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondence, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66.
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 - 26 Ibid.
 - 27 This letter was not on open one, though, its copies was sent to nineteen influential person of the WCC (and interestingly enough to Géza Soos, emigrant Hungarian diplomat).
 - 28 *W.A. Visser 't Hooft's letter to Albert Bereczky*, Geneva, 19 September 1950, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondance, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66, 2.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 Ibid.
 - 31 Ibid., 3.
 - 32 *Albert Bereczky's letter to W.A. Visser 't Hooft*, Budapest, 15 October 1950, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondance, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66.
 - 33 On the surface, the Agreement advocated the idea of "free church in a free state" and promised to end the state's involvement into church issues. In reality, it led to the gradual eradication of church autonomy and the church's total financial dependency to the state. The Agreement regulated that state subsidies would decrease by 25% every five years. The cut was explained by saying the church would become more and more self-sustaining, but

it was apparent that the state expected the church to be dissolved within the next twenty years. See more in: Kristóf, E.: Magyar Köztársaság és a Magyarországi Református Egyház 1948-as egyezményének vizsgálata, in: *Összekötnek az évezredek*, J. Újváry, Zs. (ed.), Budapest–Piliscsaba: PPKÉ-Szent István Társulat, (2011), 310–331.

- 34 *Albert Bereczky's letter to W.A. Visser 't Hooft*, Budapest, 15 October 1950, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondence, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66, 4.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, 5.
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- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *WCC CC's letter to the member churches of the WCC*, Biévres, 1 February 1951, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület Ráday Levéltára – Archives of the Danubian Church District of the Reformed Church in Hungary (RL) A/1c 980/1951, 1.
- 42 We do not have more information about the names of these two Eastern European churchmen or why they were not able to attend.
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- 52 *Andor Enyedy's letter to Albert Bereczky*, Miskolc, 6 March 1951, RL A/1c 1099/1951.
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- 60 *W. A. Visser 't Hooft's letter to Albert Bereczky*, Geneva, 18 April 1951, WCC Archives, 42.0009 WCC General Secretariat, General Correspondence, 3. Bereczky Albert, 1947-66.
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- 136 The other recommended church persons were: Lajos Vető (luth.), Beresztóczy Miklós (cath.), László Dezséry (luth.), Richárd Horváth (cath.), Béla Mag (cath.); *Varga József levele az Országos Béketanácsnak*, Budapest, 3 April 1954, MNL XIX-A-21-a, ÁEH Elnöki Iratok, 124/1954.
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- 138 *Information about some events of Reformed church life from 10 August to 19 October*, Budapest, MNL OL, 276_f_65.362 öe, 185.
- 139 *Information about some events of Reformed church life. "Az új csillag körül"*, ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-9047_0/249.
- 140 *Bereczky Albert*, ÁBTL O-9047_0/393.
- 141 *Information about some events of Reformed church life. "Az új csillag körül"*, ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-9047_0/249-250.
- 142 *Gábor Papp's letter to Albert Bereczky*, Budapest, 16 July 1953, Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Levéltára – Synodal Archives of the Reformed Church in Hungary (MREZSL)

3/a fond, Konventi Elnökségi Iratok, 22b doboz, Konventi Bíróság, 7.

- 143 *János Horváth's memo to Mátyás Rákosi*, Budapest, December 1952, in Pap, L.: *Tíz év és ami utána következett*, Bern, EPMSZ, 1992, 320-324.
- 144 *Ibid.*, 321.
- 145 *Ibid.*
- 146 *János Horváth's memo*, Budapest, 3 August 1954, MNL OL, 276_f_65.362 öe, 306.
- 147 Éliás, J.: *A konkoly uralma*, manuscript, 423. (MNL XIX_21_A_c_ÁEH_Adattár, 120. doboz, 2.)
- 148 The proofreading of this paper was funded by the Reformation's Heritage Workshop of the Church and Society Research Institute at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary