

Hromadka – for the Future?

By Charles C. West

Josef Hromadka was born in 1889. He died in 1969, in the midst of the great ideological and military division of the world known as the Cold War. He was an ecumenical churchman and theologian, but he was Czech. He wrote first in that language and for that people. What, if any, is his significance for the 21st century?

Perhaps a bit of history would help. Europe was transformed during Hromadka's lifetime, and we are still living with that transformation. Consider the stages:

a. Europe before 1914 was a world of progress, competition and idealism. Economies were expanding, with the help of empires overseas. Nations competed, but within a world where empires at home maintained relative order and peace. Cultures interacted and movement was fluid between them. There was discontent among subject nations, but it was idealist and liberal. There were Marxist-based revolutionary movements but they resolved themselves into socialist parties in the political process. Hromadka was part of that. Tones of nostalgia for it interweave his later writings. His early education was in Vienna and Heidelberg during that age of calm though swelling seas

b. It all exploded in the First World War. The Communist Revolution succeeded in Russia and projected its unsettling challenge through Communist Parties into every European country. The treaties of Versailles, Saint Germain and Trianon broke up the Austrian and German Empires, and created new national states. The League of Nations was to be the new vehicle of world order and peace. For some it meant liberation. Czechoslovakia was an example. For others, notably Germany, Italy, and Hungary, it was a catastrophe. For all, it contained the seeds of economic disaster and wrenching conflict, with Communism at one extreme and Fascism at the other.

Hromadka was in the midst of all this. He shared the liberal nationalism of his country's founder, Thomas Masaryk. At the same time he sensed the historical power of the socialist revolution and sided with many of its goals.

c. Then came the Great Depression, and with it the rise of Nazism in Germany and the struggle between democratic socialism and the Communist extreme with its base in the Soviet Union. Hromadka, a friend and spiritual adviser to many in the government, barely escaped with his family when Czechoslovakia was taken over by Hitler. He spent the war years teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, involved in the war effort, but with a deep sense of the collapse of western civilization. **Doom and Resurrection** was the title of his book in 1945.

d. After the war Hromadka decided to return to his country. It was not an easy decision. Czechoslovakia was a socialist democracy but it was in the Soviet sphere of influence. Could it be a place where a new society would emerge offering hope to both east and west? Despite the dangers, Hromadka hoped so.

e. It was not to be. The coup of 1948 made his country a Communist state. Hromadka accepted it and determined to work as a theologian to bear witness to the judgment and the grace of God in that Communist dominated world, and to the West from that world. He remained, through the ideological and power struggles of the Cold War, a voice whom western theologians could trust as a fellow believer, and with whom they could talk, even when they passionately disagreed..

f. He almost succeeded. In 1968 it seemed as if a new spirit was rising in Czechoslovakia. "Socialism with a human face" it was called by Marxists and Christians alike. Hromadka had cultivated it through the years, talking with Communists, bringing them into dialogue with Christians, even sometimes when they had been thrown in prison together by the hardliners who were in power. But then the Soviet Union invaded the country and clamped dictatorship on it again. Hromadka protested. But at the age of 80, his dream unrealized, he died.

What does all this matter today? Communism is gone, as a world power and an ideological challenge, though the name lingers here and there. New challenges arise. New demons beset us. We face new conflicts. The mission of the church takes new forms in a world where the West and its traditions are no longer the center. How can a theologian of the church then help us, even in Europe, today?

The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Hromadka was a *prophetic* theologian. Prophets are not always accurate political analysts. They often exaggerate, both the sins of the people and the judgments of history. But they speak to us of the judgment and the mercy of God. We had better listen to them, whether their first audience was ancient Israel or Christian civilization in the 20th century cold war.

To begin with, Hromadka was a theologian of crisis. This he shared with Karl Barth and others. But for him it was a journey from critical relativism to new faith. In his own words it was around 1918 as a young pastor that "it became clear that the central problem of theology is the problem of God; that what matters is not religious experiences but their absolute truth; that God is no mere principle of life but the first starting point of any theological thinking; that it is not important what men experience, but what they are called to experience; that the problem of faith is no problem of the human mind and of internal spiritual process, but the question who is God, what does God want us to do, and what are God's plans for the world." But for Hromadka this crisis was not only an article of faith; it was a social experience. He felt, internally, as prophets did before him, the total crisis of Christian civilization.

This meant that his prophecy had, in addition to the pastoral which endeared him even to his opponents and enemies, two other dimensions. He was a theologian of revolution. He saw the hand of God in the revolutions of his time, including the Bolshevik revolution in Russia with all its cruelties and atheism. "Look history in the face" was his continual advice. Don't cling to past ideals or politics which claimed to be Christian but cloaked injustice and privilege. Accept the judgment of God in the events of the time and look for the hope which God's kingdom promises through these events. But Hromadka was also a *theologian* of revolution. He warned the revolutionaries that God was their judge and redeemer, that they would build a new tyranny if they tried to build a classless society by human power alone. The witness of the church was to preach and live the reality of Christ which would give a human face to socialist society.

We all know what happened to this vision. Socialism with a human face succeeded in Czechoslovakia, then was crushed by Soviet invasion. Twenty years later the Soviet command economy itself collapsed of its inner weaknesses. It was replaced not by "free enterprise" but by unrestrained economic power bordering on anarchy which governments in the east are still struggling to manage. Ethnic nationalism, often rooted in traditional religion, has filled the ideological vacuum, and has torn peoples apart who once had lived in peace together. Ecumenism has weakened. But worst of all there is no vision of peace and justice which inspires peoples to transcend their divisions and their interests.

Where would a Hromadka take hold in such a world today? Let me close with just three tentative suggestions.

First, before God our society is in crisis today, as it was then. It has a different form. We need to rediscover that form. There is no single revolution challenging us with its worldview and its political power. We crumble within, by our own self-righteousness, our greed, our complacency, our sin. We worship our own traditions, our own wealth and our own power. How can we learn to repent? How, in concrete political, economic, and cultural analysis, can we identify the judgments of God?

Second, God speaks to us through events, movements, and other peoples. There are many of them. They differ and often conflict, with each other and with us. There is no single voice of the exploited, the oppressed and the poor, in the world today. So we need to listen and respond in many ways to our neighbors, in Europe and around the globe. We need to expand and make more open the international agencies through which we cooperate and extend them to include the poor and the powerless. We need to explore new ways of discerning what God is doing with them and with us.

Third, Christ is not divided. We need to seek an ecumenical vision for the world, whose form we have yet to discern. That vision transcends nations and cultures. The search for

it draws Christians in all churches together. The ecumenical movement is vital to every church's witness. Through it we discover, despite all our confessional and social divisions, the form of the hope to which we are called to witness in our words and our lives.