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A Bad Tree Bears Good Fruit? The theology of Zsófia Juhász (1928-1990)

In late 1950's Hungary, when Zsófia Juhász started her church career, the political and theological environment was not at all encouraging. The context in which she found herself was that of an atheist dictatorship combined with a highly autocratic political theology, the so-called "theology of the serving church." However, although living within this decisive theology, she pried out from it a charismatic, authentic, theological career and during her lifetime she was able to maintain a countrywide spiritual movement, which has its influence even today as a kind of female "theological Hungaricum."

It seems that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, that "a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:18) does not apply to the theological work of Zsófia Juhász, so she may prove to be an exception in church history. But what was this so-called bad tree? The "theology of the serving church," "the official theological-political ideology of the church leadership of the Reformed Church in Hungary from 1948-1989 was an attempt to conform the church to the Socialist Regime in the name of the Gospel. That way a political decision and the ideological outlook became the all decisive factors of the official statement. Standardising this idea of accommodation, the leadership of the Reformed Church became a mere tool of communist-atheist propaganda".¹

Whereas in 1960's Latin America, in South East Asia, and in some parts of Africa, theologians allied with the oppressed, giving birth to liberation theology, in East and Central Europe church leaders served the ruling communist regime by creating a kind of diaconal theology. First, I will try to summarise the main feature of this kind of theology. Then I will detail the life and work of Zsófia Juhász and relate her theology to ecumenical and liberation theology.

¹ Istvan Bogardi Szabo, *Egyházvezetés és teológia a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1948 és 1989 között*, in: *Societas et ecclesia* 3 (Debrecen/1995), 194.

István Szabó, in his dissertation² evaluating Hungarian diaconal theology, stated that the whole concept was based on an Avery Dulles-American Jesuitical ecclesial model. Dulles book *Models of the Church*³ identified five ecclesiological concepts: the church as institution, as mystical community, as sacrament, as messenger and as servant. Beginning in the 1960's, the servant Church-model appeared in Catholic theological discourse as an attempt to answer a growing secularisation, but it never became dominant because its critical and contextual element were preserved, as Walter Brueggeman stated.⁴ However in Hungary where it emerged in order to serve ideological and political aims, it dominated many realities of church life. Its message to the communist state was: we are here to serve you unconditionally. Unfortunately, in ecumenical circles, due to the lack of knowledge about the real situation in Eastern and Central Europe, this kind of concept was very well received and in the theological discourse it appeared as an example and an alternative Eastern European political theology.

That was the theological environment in which Zsófia Juhász worked. She was born in a peasant family and considered herself a kind of "peasant prophet". After finishing high school, she began her theology studies in Sarospatak, finishing up in Debrecen. She spent decades in the diaconal institutes of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Dunaalmas, in Leányfalu, and in Orbottyán. During this time she completed her Therapeutic Pedagogy of remedial teaching. Her work was not only practical – she led church community homes for the elderly and for handicapped children – but theoretical as well. She also did some teaching at the Institute for Training.

To characterise the main feature of her work, mention should be made of the following three fields: preaching, leading community homes, and writing poems and short stories.⁵ She was also a very good organiser of the church. She founded the Sisterhood of Bethesda and maintained it by writing regular circular letters at her own expense. Her work can be labelled with the

² Istvan Bogardi Szabo, *Egyházvezetés és teológia*.

³ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Doubleday, New York, 1974), Istvan Bogardi Szabo, "Egyházvezetés és teológia," 31.

⁴ See Istvan Bogardi Szabo, *Egyházvezetés és teológia*, 33, footnote 73. Szabo is quoting Walter Brueggeman, "Rethinking Church Models Through Scripture," chapter 7 in: *Cadences of Home. Preaching among Exiles* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky 1997).

⁵ See László Ötvös, *Szeretetszövetség és szeretetszolgálat, Kiss Ferenc és Juhász Zsófia szolgálata, Református Diakónia*, 1 (Cumania Kiadó: Karcag 1994), 73-86.

ecumenical slogan: think globally, act locally. While she was completely involved in all the details of the community life of disabled people, she also travelled abroad and took part in international conferences and kept in contact with the German motherhouses.

From reading her diary in 1959 it is obvious that she was not born a kind of spiritual mother of diaconal theology. It was for her a long journey with a lot of tears and agonising and uncertainty.

“If I ever had a prayer in my heart, now it is the most important time to have it, because I never felt myself so sick and burdensome. I am awful. I have no will and no aim. Perhaps my aim was just myself and seeing this now, I became aimless. I can’t find my place. But where, where to go my God? I do not know. Perhaps the diaconia. But something stops me. Perhaps the teaching. Éva⁶ said once, your gift is to prophesy – but I am rootless. I cannot love the people, as they are not mine, they have nothing to do with me. Perhaps my parents. Yes, they are mine alone. They love me. Oh, God why was I born? ... Oh God liberate me from this kind of taking away life, and transform me into giving life... There is a special curse on me. I judge myself, but I cannot be different, only when God, you help me...”⁷

Late 1950’s Hungary meant a political environment where you could choose from only one political party. It meant a church where you could choose only to deal with the “leftovers”, with those for whom nobody cared, the elderly and the handicapped, and as a woman theologian you could choose only to serve in the diaconal houses. However, all these restrictions became part of Zsófia Juhász’s legendary mission and in the Hungarian Reformed Church of the 1970’s and 1980’s “Auntie Zsó” became a kind of ideal. Her influence was extraordinary and it is no exaggeration to say that she was an epoch-making person. Her funeral in 1990 was a countywide church event and thousands of Christians and non-Christians travelled to Jaskiser, her hometown, to take part in it.

It is a pity that the period in which she lived did not allow her to build up a relationship with the ideas of feminism and to come out of a cultural, mental, and political isolation. (Travelling abroad was strictly controlled by the State Office of Church Affairs.) However, she represented a radical otherness in her theology and actually touched all the issues which are very much part of the feminist discourses.

⁶ She is probably referring to Éva Szabó, one of her colleagues.

⁷ Unpublished manuscript. Translated from the Hungarian by the author.

Let us quote from a leaflet written by her about the church community homes;

“The 16 institutions of our Churches are not ordinary places. All of them are lively homes which are the representation of Christ, the serving places for Christ. That is why they convey a very rich and complex message. In these homes, Christ teaches us something about his love towards us. Books could be filled with stories, examples and themes. So our church homes are in some ways qualified places which mobilize our faith. Individuals and congregations are moved and touched by our homes. After visiting these institutions they start to believe Christ differently. I believe all those who have visited and worked in the world of suffering find that their Christianity is affected. Go there and experience it.

It can be the goal of an excursion or the object of your prayer, your exhausted soul can be renewed there, it teaches you to be grateful for the life of your beloved people, and so many other things can be found there. Above all you will find that these places are necessary for your own sake. Without them, your high days will be poorer, your summers would be emptier, your afternoons more boring, and your mornings more tired. Think on this and look for these places, because this is not less but Christ.”⁸

Listening to this kind of church-movement language, one may be reminded of the tune of the communist movement speeches, but then, this was the historical context that shaped the minds of church people as well, even as they offered a kind of alternative program for believers.

To highlight the main features of Zsófia Juhász's theology:

1. She believed that the starting point of doing theology is experience. Her context was the world of the disabled and the elderly, the world of broken vessels (Jeremiah 18).
2. This key text shaped her message and she adopted the Gospel to the world of broken vessels. In communicating the Gospel, she took into account the reality of cultural and lifestyle differences. She emphasised the right to otherness and the need for its theological articulation.
3. At the same time, she challenged those kinds of theology which understood this broken vessel life as a punishment from God. She articulated a different “body theology”.

⁸ Zsófia Juhász, *Egyházunk szeretetszolgálat* (Református Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya: Budapest 1969), 22.

4. She understood otherness as a task of theology. It meant bringing the marginalised into the centre. She opened the institutionalised ghettos of the disabled by taking them to different congregations where she was preaching and having the handicapped children contribute in the worship.
5. “She gave a voice to the voiceless” by letting them take part in church events and also by writing about their lives.
6. Her theological keyword was “participation.” Young and old people from many congregations visited the homes and helped there. Some of them stayed for weeks because the homes suffered from a lack of workers.
7. In her work she diminished the dichotomies between body and soul, practical work and theoretical, universal and particular, profane and holy.⁹
8. She related her work to the French worker priest model.¹⁰
9. She believed “people must be fully involved in the process of doing theology.”¹¹

For her, following Christ meant a whole life commitment. She was unmarried but a kind of mother of the homes and a spiritual mother for the whole church.

Zsófia Juhász constantly challenged the so-called Sunday priesthood with its black garb by offering the “white garb,” the nurses’ uniform, as a symbol of daily service.

Thus, she managed to create an alternative model of female priesthood, which originated in the roles of deaconess and nun, but which she broadened with a kind of prophetic element. Rather than feminising the male pastor’s role, Zsófia Juhász sanctified the feminine qualities such as caring, etc., as Christ-like features. The church homes became theological workshops as well and she organised conferences, always inviting the best theologians.

In my view, she managed to overcome the compromise mentioned by Rosemary Radford Ruether:

“Women win inclusion in this same ministry, without asking whether ministry itself needs to be redefined... Women are allowed... to integrate themselves into this male-defined role. They adopt the same garb, the same titles (Reverend, if not

⁹ When she bathed the handicapped, she used to say: “This is the moment when the angel’s pen is at work in our life book.”

¹⁰ Manfred Josuttis, *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion: Grundprobleme der Praktischen Theologie* (Chr. Kaiser: München 1974), 19-20.

¹¹ John Waliggo, „Inculturation,” in: *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (WCC Publications: Geneva 2002), 571.

Father), the same clerical modes of functioning in a hierarchically structured church... Women play the ministerial role by endlessly proving that they can think, feel, and act like 'one of the boys.'"¹²

While the majority of church believers in Hungary distanced them from the so-called official diaconal theology of church leaders, Zsófia Juhász's work was very well received and she had many followers all over the country. The secret of her mission was that while accepting the political realities and the marginalized territory of the church, she took her gender otherness very seriously and used it to create a unique authentic theology.

Analyzing her otherness reminds me of Carol Gilligan's theory,¹³ when she states that in the case of women, the so-called caring morality overrules justice morality. For Zsófia Juhász working in the field of the marginalised, the actual caring was more important for her theology than the official theological discourse with its unjust totalitarian character.

Zsófia Juhász managed to maintain an authentic "mission" even in a very unjust theological framework. Just as in ancient Christian church life when the Gospel was communicated to the non-Christian world primarily through diakonia, by telling the "pagans" that it is a Christ-event to visit and care for the sick, the widowed and the poor, so Zsófia Juhász experienced also in the time of atheism the power of a secular Gospel. For her, that was expressed by caring for the needy in the framework of church institutions.

Because of her spirit and her daily interpretations of the Bible, the places where she lived and worked became holy places for those hundreds whose lives became converted just by taking part in the everyday life of the church homes.

Therefore I do not think that it is right to silence her name and work by evaluating critically this period of Hungarian church history.¹⁴ However bad the tree was, it could still bear good fruit. One of those fruits was Zsófia Juhász. We need to liberate her theological work from silence. Because when we throw out the baby with the bath water, we end up with a church service among the elderly and other needy ones which may be highly professional, but

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a feminist theology* (Beacon Press: Boston 1983), 200.

¹³ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice, Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press: 1982, 1993, Thirty-second printing, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England).

¹⁴ See Istvan Bogardi Szabo, *Egyházvezetés és teológia*.

which loses its soul and may appear more like a church-business than a charism of church life.

Die Lehre aus der Bergpredigt, dass “ein guter Baum nicht schlechte Früchte bringen kann und ein schlechter Baum nicht gute Früchte bringen kann” (Mt 7:18) scheint nicht auf das theologische Werk von Zsófia Juház zuzutreffen. Sie könnte sich als eine Ausnahme in der Kirchengeschichte erweisen. Doch was war dieser sogenannte schlechte Baum? Es war die “Theologie der dienenden Kirche”, die offizielle theologisch-politische Ideologie der Kirchenleitung der Reformierten Kirche in Ungarn in den Jahren 1948-1989 – ein Versuch, die Kirche im Namen des Evangeliums dem Sozialistischen Regime anzupassen. Das war ein politisches Umfeld, in dem man als Theologin keine andere Wahl hatte als den Dienst in einer diakonischen Einrichtung. Doch all diese Einschränkungen wurden zum Bestandteil von Zsófia Juház’s legendärer Mission. Und in der Ungarisch-Reformierten Kirche der 1970er und 1980er Jahre wurde “Tantchen Zsó” zu einer Art Ideal. Ihr Einfluss war außergewöhnlich; und es ist nicht übertrieben, wenn man sie eine epochemachende Persönlichkeit nennt. Ihre Beerdigung 1990 war ein kirchliches Ereignis für die ganze Region und Tausende von Christ/innen und Nichtchrist/innen reisten in ihre Heimatstadt Jaszkiser, um daran teilzunehmen.

La lección del Sermón de la Montaña de que “Un árbol bueno no puede dar frutos malos, como tampoco un árbol malo puede producir frutos buenos” (Mt 7:18) pareciera no poder aplicarse a la obra teológica de Zsófia Juház. Podría ser una excepción en la historia eclesiástica. ¿Pero qué era aquel llamado árbol malo? Era la “Teología de la iglesia sirviente”, la ideología oficial teológico-política de la jerarquía eclesiástica de la Iglesia Reformada de Hungría de los años 1948 a 1989, que trató con ello de adaptar la Iglesia al régimen socialista en nombre del Evangelio. En ese entorno político a una teóloga no le quedaba otra opción que trabajar en un ente diacónico. Sin embargo, todas estas limitaciones llegaron a formar parte de la misión legendaria de Zsófia Juház. En la Iglesia Húngara Reformada de los años 70 y 80 “la tía Zsó” se convirtió en una especie de ideal. Ejerció una influencia extraordinaria; no exageramos al decir que es una personalidad memorable. El entierro de Zsófia Juház en 1990 fue un acontecimiento eclesiástico para toda la región; miles de cristianas/os y no cristianas/os llegaron de lejos a la ciudad natal de Zsófia, Jaszkiser, para asistir al entierro.

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