

HOW ETHNOLOGY TREATS RELIGIOUS ISSUES

An Example from East-Central Europe

My paper is based on the volume of studies on the history of the ethnology of religion as a discipline in 14 European countries that I edited in 2004 under the title *Ethnology of Religion*, as well as on two special issues of *Acta Ethnographica: Essays on Religious Ethnology*, and *Studies on Folk Beliefs, Rituals and Shamanism*.¹

Looking back on the past two centuries, three major periods can be distinguished in which the views, aims and methods of research in religion differed radically: the 18th-19th centuries, the late 19th to early 20th century up to the middle or last third of the 20th century, and from then to the present. Naturally there are no sharp boundaries between the mentioned periods.²

1. The first period was the classical age, in the 18th-19th centuries, when research sought and found, or thought it had found in religion the archaic, pre-Christian and mythological. Ethnology was a traditional, cultural-historical oriented discipline which sought in rites, customs and beliefs remnants of traditional and old life, worldview and religion.³ A classical work of this period was Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, in which he reconstructed the pre-Christian German mythology, creating an example to be followed by his contemporaries and following generations of researchers.⁴ There was a great attempt in the 19th century almost everywhere in Central and East-Central Europe to reconstruct the pre-Christian religion, stressing the continuity and invariability of folk culture, on the basis of which some kind of reconstruction would be possible. Romantic tradition caused a mystical approach to folk beliefs, seen as the source of the original aesthetic and spiritual values of ancient origin. Folk religion was practically interpreted as the remnants of primal religions that were easy to mark off according to evolutionist theories as survivals of former periods of religious evolution.⁵ The main goal was to find out what is old and pre-Christian.

2a. In this way we reached the second stage where, besides revealing old and archaic elements, it became important to describe and discover the *national features*. This was the period of nationalist ethnology, when ethnography became a national science. This trend is also found in all European countries and

1 BARNA 2004, *Acta Ethnographica Hungaria* 39 (3–4) 1994, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 48 (3–4) 2003.

2 I mostly use Hungarian examples with outlook on other East-Central-European countries.

3 Šantek cites Jasna Čapo-Žmegač. ŠANTEK 2004. 24.

4 I refer to the works of the Finnish Matthias Alexander CASTREN (1853) and the Hungarian ARNOLD Ipolyi (1854).

5 SZYJEWSKI 2004. 223.

peoples. Especially among the Slavic peoples of Central Europe these two periods merge and pre-Christian mythology remains an important research theme right up to the present.⁶ In the field of research on religion the main aim was now not only to reconstruct the old mythology but also to find the national features and specific characteristics of folk beliefs. In Hungary, drawing on the work of their predecessors, researchers sought and found relics of the earlier Hungarian shamanic beliefs not only in mythical legends but also in other genres: in tales, ballads, historical legends, children's games and rites. Before the WW I Lajos Katona carried out comparative work with the aim of finding universal human cultural similarities. He focused above all on religious feasts, adopting a cultural historical and comparative approach.⁷ In the first half of the 20th century Géza Róheim brought his distinctive psychoanalytical viewpoints to research on beliefs and rites. He compared the Hungarian beliefs mainly with the material of the surrounding Slavic peoples and reached the conclusion that after their settlement in the Carpathian Basin the culture of the Hungarian people came to largely resemble that of the surrounding Slavic and non-Slavic peoples. A characteristic conclusion of the book he published in 1925 was that "Hungarian folk belief is Slavic folk belief". On the other hand he also pointed out that "the peoples of Europe do not know how close they are to each other spiritually".⁸ It was Vilmos Diószegi who continued the comparative link in the middle of the 20th century, carried out fieldwork both in Siberia and Hungary, and became one the most important researcher of Shamanism and Hungarian folk belief.⁹

2b. However, the other trend appearing at that time sought to learn how Christianity imbued the peasant/national culture and examined lay folk religious practice from this viewpoint. One of the most prominent researchers of this trend, was Sándor Bálint, a former professor of our department (1947–1965). With his cultural historical approach he was closely associated with Lajos Katona, a researcher already mentioned; in his recognition of the importance of fieldwork he was close to Lajos Kálmány, while his research themes linked him to the German religiöse Volkskunde of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the work of Richard Andree and Georg Schreiber. Sándor Bálint examined the whole of peasant culture in Szeged and its vicinity, including beliefs, religiosity and customs. However, in examining the so-called folk religiosity he always kept in sight the universality of Catholicism and interpreted religious traditions in Hungary within these frames.

Sándor Bálint thought ethnology of religion to possess independence of attitude and methodology within the system of ethnology. It is a special, separate

6 ŠANTEK 2004, DVORAKOVA 2004, SEDAKOVA 2004. RISTESKI 2004 with further literature.

7 KATONA 1982. *Folklór kalendárium*

8 RÓHEIM 1925.

9 DIÓSZEGI 1959.

branch of learning that came into being at the intersection of various disciplines.¹⁰ 'It endeavours to study the reaction of the peasant soul to Catholic precepts,'¹¹ and all the varieties of local religious practice.

Even in his later works Sándor Bálint applied this liturgical approach. Already decades ago he was interested in the past and present ways of inculturation, the religious culture that emerged in its wake, and the types and functioning of its historical layers.

Since Christianity lies at the foundation of urban civilisation, some customs that were closely bound to Catholic liturgy did not find a place in ethnographical description.¹² A debate arose between the orthodox ethnological conception and Sándor Bálint's interpretation of folk religion. Some representatives considered that only phenomena of autochthonous origin should be classified as being the subject of ethnology, while forms of customs originating under the influence of Christianity did not belong there.

Sándor Bálint's approach sought to find out how Christianity was realised in the everyday religious practice, feasts, religious poetry and world-view of lay believers. However, he did not regard the forms in which these were manifested as departures from the "true religion" but rather as complements to it. In other words, it was his opinion that folk religion was rather a complementary religion and not superstition or the survival of heathen traditions. He regarded it as the big result of his research to show what the Christian (Catholic) Hungarian people had adopted from Christian culture. The greatest value of his work today lies in the fact that he explored the traditions surrounding Christian feasts and indicated the role of religious culture in linking social strata and culture.

Sándor Bálint interpreted the folk-concept of ethnology much more broadly than his contemporaries or even than many of his successors in the mid-20th century: he essentially extended it to the entire society. In this way he assisted the paradigm shift in ethnology in Hungary.

In his time the perceptions of folk religion, folk Christianity or folk religiosity were regularly interpreted as the counterpart of the intellectual conception of Christianity. There were attempts to distinguish between religion and religiosity, world-view and interpretation of life. The idea is that religions and world-views are established and institutionalized traditions, whereas religiosity and interpretations of life describe the individual effort to find meaning in life.¹³

Today it is said that the subjects of folk religion comprise all social classes, peasant culture and middle class as well as workers. Religion is evident in ordinary people and in members of revival movements or immigrants belonging to another religion than Christianity. Folk religion is not only exercised in public

10 BÁLINT 1938, 14. He refers to Hans KOREN (1936) and Georg SCHREIBER (1933), and to the Hungarians Elemér SCHWARTZ (1934) and Géza KARSAI (1937). German and Austrian research always had a powerful influence on Hungarian research.

11 BÁLINT 1938, 14.

12 ŠANTEK 2004, 36.

13 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006, 23.

places of worship, but to a large extent in the homes, both in everyday life and on holidays, the time we nowadays call leisure time.¹⁴

3. If we consider the Central European region we find that the religious life and research on the ethnology of religion has taken different courses over the past decades. In the socialist countries religion was influenced not only by both urbanisation and industrialisation but also by political suppression of tradition along with de-Christianisation.¹⁵ This attitude was expressed by the invention of new socialist holidays, whose purpose was to replace the Christian feasts and set up a new cycle of annual customs. Many Christian vernacular practices have disappeared in this way.¹⁶ The new political elite demonstrated their power. Especially instructive examples of this new socialist feast-system could be seen in the Soviet Union, and as a consequence of this, in the other socialist countries.¹⁷

This ideologically-imbued atmosphere influenced also the ethnographical, ethnological, folkloristic researches on religion. The research of religion never had an academic, institutional framework in a number of the socialist countries, but belonged, for example, to Comparative Slavic Mythology. Research on religious life was dangerous or even forbidden in some socialist countries. The study of folk religiosity was a marginal subject. Religion and religiosity were evaluated from the standpoint of the anti-religious Marxist science.¹⁸ Images and portrayals with religious themes e.g. or religious texts could be studied only within the frames of folk decorative art and folk art, and in folk poetry. This was the situation in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Croatia and elsewhere. Practically it was an escape to research ideologically non-problematic themes.¹⁹ Of course, this also resulted in the exploration of important resources, such as the monographs on glass paintings in Slovakia and Romania, plastic art and sculptures on religious themes in Slovakia, or the folk engravings and graphic art,²⁰ or the so called archaic prayers' texts in Hungary.²¹

The ethnological paradigm had regularly approached expressions of piety within the framework of the oppositons Christian – pre-Christian or faith – superstitions, religious – magical. The general basis for the concept of folk religion is an idea of opposition within the religious life of the society. Several modes of constructing such opposition, depending on the understanding of folk culture can be distinguished: folk religiosity vs. Elit religiosity; traditional vs. modern religiosity; rural vs. urban, etc.²² But (folk) religion is a heterogenous and multileveled phenomenon and siple dichotomies cannot reflect all its complexity.²³

14 GUSTAVSON 2004. 351.

15 ŠANTEK 2004. 36 cites Rihtman-Augustint.

16 SEDAKOVA 2004. 255.

17 Lane SEDAKOVA 2004. 255.

18 DVORAKOVÁ 2004. 51.

19 BENUSKOVÁ-KOVAC-PODOLINSKA 2004. 273.

20 PIŠŮTOVÁ 1969, 1979, KOVAČEVIČOVÁ – SCHREIBER 1971, KOVAČEVIČOVÁ 1974, DANCU – DANCU 1975.

21 ERDÉLYI 1976.

22 SZYJEWSKY 2004. 222–223.

23 SZYJEWSKY 2004. 223.

4. It can be said that there has been not only a paradigm shift but also a change of attitude in ethnology of religion in Hungary and Central Europe, especially in the 1980s in Hungary and after the political turn in other East-Central-European countries. Other disciplines, among them sociology, psychology, philosophy and history, cognitive sciences have also had an inspiring effect on research on religion, and the related fields have raised instructive problems: secularisation and individualisation. They served also the interest of the anticlerical Marxist opinion showing that the former determining role of the churches underwent big changes and they are not needed in the old sense, But these have remained exciting topics of debate in research on religion. Investigation of the earlier canon: church feast customs, religious rites, religious texts, objects (images, sculptures, graphic art) will remain important for a long time to come because the gaps left in research have to be filled.

The research has also been institutionalised. In Hungary Marxist criticism of religion was concentrated in the HAS Institute of Philosophy and Marxist research on society in the Institute of Sociology. The frames of non-Marxist research on religion were first institutionalised within the Calvinist church (1980), this was later joined by the other Protestant and neo-Protestant churches,²⁴ then by the Catholic church, at first on the basis of considerations of sociology,²⁵ and church history,²⁶ then ethnology. By the end of the 20th century separate institutions for research on religion also appeared: religion was given an important place in the curriculum of ethnology in the departments, research groups were organised, and the situation of religious studies within the universities also strengthened. From the 1980s ethnology of religion and anthropology of religion has been taught everywhere within university frames. At our department in Szeged special training in ethnology of religion and anthropology of religion was introduced in 1998. From 1992 we have been holding biannual thematic international conferences; the proceedings are published in the *Bibliotheca Religionis Popularis Szegediensis* series.²⁷

Religious culture became one of the main fields of folklore in the last decades in many institutions. This research direction is flourishing, while during the time of the state-party, dealing with religious topics was allowed mostly from a critical point of view. There are different important schools of ethnology or anthropology of religion in Hungary.²⁸ In Szeged we try to continue the heritage of Prof. Sándor Bálint who was dealing with the so-called lay religiosity mostly from a cultural historical point of view, supplementing it with new themes and approaches. Although he was working especially on Roman Catholic tradition, he was very open to the life and culture of other Christian denominations and even

24 See the periodical *Vallási néprajz*.

25 Magyar Egyházzociológiai Intézet

26 SZÁNTÓ 1983–1987.

27 The series of source publications by the Szeged workshop: *Devotio Hungarorum*, monographs and volumes of studies: *Szegedi Vallási Néprajzi Könyvtár/Bibliotheca Religionis Popularis Szegediensis*.

28 BARTHA 1993.

non-Christian religions. The background of his openness was that the neighbourhood of Szeged, the former territory of South Hungary, which is now occupied by Serbs and Romanians, was and is the meeting zone of Western and Eastern Christianity and Islam.²⁹ After his remarkable results in ethnology of religion the present department in Szeged is dealing also with the influence and reflection of globalization processes, the emergence of new religious movements, the individualisation of religions and faiths. With the support of the Hungarian National Research Fund a small group of young scholars who finished their studies at our department is working on religious interferences under the general title of *Borders and Interferences*. The earlier strong connection between religion and culture, religion and identity was weakened or broken.³⁰ Religious pluralism arose as a result of migration and mass communication. There was a loosening of the traditional forms in which religion and culture, religion and society, religion and ethnicity intertwined, while at the same time new connections arose.³¹ Practically all the phenomena examined are the consequences of the mingling of the global and the local. Our research seeks the historical roots, observes the cultural contacts and the received influences. These are good examples of religious syncretism, innovation and renewal.

In 1997 the first department of religious studies was set up at the Szeged University with a focus mainly on sociology of religion. After 1990 departments of religious studies were established in the other Central European countries as well. The departments of religious studies at Krakow, Brno and Bratislava are especially important.

In the middle and second half of the 20th century, under the influence partly of cultural anthropology and partly of sociology and psychology, throughout the world, research on religion increasingly broke away from its denominational bonds and turned its attention towards the societal and individual role of religion and towards the religious phenomenon itself. It could be said in a way that together with aspects of form and substance, investigations into function or role have come to the fore. Substantive definitions include characteristics of the content of religion. Functional definitions describe the utility or the effect that religion is supposed to have for individuals and/or society. With other words: substantive definitions tell us what religion is, functional definitions what religion does.³² And this latter has won importance in our days. Works on religious topics in East-Central European countries were intensified after the so-called democratic changes (1990), and different interpretative methods and models were used in analysis.

29 BARNÁ 2004.

30 For further problematization see: McQUIRE 1997. 141–184, FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 171, (especially) 75–96, 199–200.

31 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 80–82.

32 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 16.

The new religious movements have established a new religious culture. With this, people in the previously non-religious/atheistic strata have also begun to explore the colourful, varied religious culture. Many individuals have experienced conversions or events of religious revival. However, this has affected not only the historical Christian denominations but the entire “religious market offer” in Hungary. The germs of various forms of civil religiosity have also appeared along the lines of state celebrations and political ideologies, and a kind of “profane religiosity” is also emerging. The latter can be observed especially in the star cult as a kind of cult of profane saints, and also in various quasi-religious forms (nature cult, health cult, etc.) and in different “secular rituals”.³³

The main characteristic of our postmodern age is that previously closed and isolated regions have also become part of the global processes and large-scale migration has begun everywhere in the world. In this process religious people are taking with them their religion practised at home, expanding the religious offer in their new homes. Germany and even Hungary are examples of this, where growing numbers of mosques serve the religious life of Muslims. Stupas are also appearing in the wake of Indian religions. New reality has brought new forms in vernacular religion and created new rituals.³⁴ This concerns not only the traditional Christian denominations, but also the atheistic way of life. As a consequence of globalization the “market of religion” had become wide, and missionary movements have strengthened. The mingling of religions, known as syncretic movement, has begun. Despite or as a consequence of the great technical, technological and scientific development, and in the former socialist countries the anti-clerical ideology on every level of our life, the individual remains defenceless. In their search for individual security people very pragmatically construct new rituals, consecrate new places (it is sufficient to mention only the special memorial places, crosses along the highways). Esoteric and occult views, in combination with “old pagan” and Christian spirituality characterise the new forms of mass religion and individual religiosity.

The importance of subcultures or counter-culture has grown.³⁵ Some of these subcultures are connected to different music styles and new religious movements. To mention only one example: Rastafari, which is a special world-view, way of life, religious movement and which came from the Caribbean, but has roots in Ethiopia (Africa).³⁶

There has been a phenomenological turn in the discipline: the religious phenomenon, the forms of manifestation of the sacred, the role of religion in individual and community self-building and the expression of identity have become the most important problem to be interpreted and examined. The phenomenological

33 Such as the festivity here in Turku, celebrating the anniversary of the Department of Ethnology of Turku University.

34 SEDÁKOVÁ 2004, 267.

35 SZAPU 2003, Nagy 2003.

36 NAGY Terézia diploma thesis, manuscript and NAGY 2003.

approach can be placed on the border of ethnology and sociology.³⁷ Denominational attachment has grown looser in research, expressing as it were one of the consequences of globalism. This can also be seen in the so-called constitution of the European Union that has left out reference to Christianity as one of the foundations of the European spirit, mentality and culture.

Research on the neopagan movements has become an important research theme. Neopaganism concentrates on serious national and historical issues everywhere it emerges: in Hungary, in Slavic or Baltic countries. As a form of religion it has its own scripture, a pantheon, sacred places.³⁸ In Russia there are many groups, spread all over the country, in Hungary only a few. Neopaganism is strong in the Baltic and Scandinavian states,³⁹ there is a movement also in Catholic Poland. It can be interpreted as a critique of the Christian world, a sign of globalisation, and a reaction to globalization. We can distinguish two forms of religious reaction to globalization. The first one includes various forms of religious fundamentalist movements against globalization, the second one celebrates the diversity.⁴⁰ In Hungary the so-called *Ósmagyar Táltos Egyház* [Ancient Hungarian Shaman Church] has revived shamanistic traditions, not independently of ecological thinking. The Ancient Hungarian Shaman Church founded in 1998, which regards itself as the “prehistoric catholic church”, (Catholic means universal) occupies a special place among the churches in Hungary. It is a unique mixture of neo-shamanism and Christianity. In its rites and even more in its teachings it is a typical syncretic institution. It considers its task to be to restructure not only religious but also Hungarian historical awareness, and integrates into its teachings elements of Hungarian prehistory that are firmly rejected by mainstream historical studies: the Hungarians are one of the world’s archaic peoples and their archaic language is related to Sumerian, they are the oldest inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin, etc. Among its heroes or saints we find the Christian saints: Saint George, Saint Martin, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, etc., but they also include figures from legendary Hungarian prehistory, such as Attila. They have created organisational frames for the church and chosen office-bearers with special titles. In addition to their own sacred places (e.g. Hortobágy, Pilis Mountains), they also visit Catholic places of pilgrimage: Máriapócs, Csíksomlyó, Mariazell, which are good examples of syncretic holy places.⁴¹ Although the Budapest Goddess Temple has contacts with the Celtic traditions, with Glastonbury in England and the Nemea Goddess Center in Austria, behind the teachings (mythology) there are strong local attachments and Hungarian traditions said to be ancient, influence of feminist and green movements.

One of the distinctive phenomena of the 20th century has been the so-called civil religion. Although it has been described from the United States, there

37 SZYJEWSKI 2004. 230.

38 SEDAKOVA 2004. 263, SOMOGYI 2007.

39 SVANBERG 1998.

40 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 80–81.

41 Thesis of Judit SOMOGYI. SOMOGYI 2007.

are many signs of it in European culture too. However very little memory of it remained after the downfall of the brown and red dictatorships in Central Europe, except perhaps in some countries (Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, etc.) in their national symbols (flag, arms, national colours) and the material of their holidays. Civil religions offer a 'functional equivalent' or 'functional alternative' to institutional religions in our highly secularized world.

The individual forms of religiosity have become very important in our age. In general the degree of religiosity has not declined in the region but, in place of the so-called historical churches people often develop their own religious formations and rituals, and/or join neo-Protestant churches. Rituals are standardized interaction patterns with symbolic content that are carried out in a specific way. Their function is often to create order or maintain meaning and belonging.⁴²

Summing up, it can be said that research on religion has always set the directions for research to examine the problems raised by the given age. In the period of shaping the bourgeois nation it stressed the ancient and national aspects, later it sought the common human features. Today it would like to understand the global processes taking place in the field of religion too, and as a counteraction to them, the emergence of local cults and religious movements, the appearance of religious syncretism. Within these general processes ethnology analyses principally the place and role of individuals and micro-communities (e.g. family) and their religious culture, developing different trends in approaching the questions. In researches of religion in our days the sociology plays a determining role in Hungary and other East-Central-European countries using more and more qualitative methods. The common element in all these trends is the phenomenological approach. However, the extent to which the different trends (mythology or reconstruction of pre-Christian religion; lay Christian religiosity; phenomenological approach to religions) are present in the scholarly life of a country depends on the scholarly traditions and social goals of the country, meanwhile the discipline itself reflects on its methods, research-methodology in which we Hungarians have enough to retrieve and supply.

42 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 128.

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