

RELIGION, IDENTITY, ASSIMILATION

In this essay I shall deal with the connections and changing relationship between religion, nation, language and individual and community identity. I would like to present the findings of my research on a single small community but perhaps the conclusions that can be drawn from them also have a wider validity.

In the last decade in Hungary too there has been an increase within ethnology research in investigations examining the link between religion and national consciousness. These studies have shown, mainly for linguistically and ethnically mixed regions, that religion, ethnic identity, language and sense of national belonging play a mutually reinforcing role.¹ On the other hand, they have also drawn attention to areas where the close, mutually reinforcing link between religion and language has ceased to exist. Religion became the most important expression of group identity, but the distinguishing role of language and ethnicity and, parallel with these, of the differing culture, has shrunk to a minimum. We consider the role occupied by religion in the structure of identity to be the characteristic of a more traditional cultural level in which there is less scope for the national and ethnic components. This important role of religion changed after the emergence of the bourgeois nation, but even in the changed and highly secularised circumstances of the 20th century has not entirely disappeared. Hungarian ethnology uses the notion of “csángóisation” to designate this process, that is, it describes the phenomenon through the analogy of the social processes occurring within the Hungarian ethnic group living in Moldavia, in the region between the Carpathians and the Seret/Dnieper Rivers. One of the essential features of this is the loss of the mother tongue and abandonment of the Hungarian ethnic identity, but strong attachment to the religion (Roman Catholic). (The surrounding Romanians are all Orthodox.) Religion has become the most important expression of collective and individual identity, while the structure of the identity and the links between its other components (ethnicity, language, culture) have changed radically.²

The link between religion and ethnicity can in cases be so strong that it produces stereotypes and in the general awareness *Poles are Catholics, Finns are Lutherans, the Russians are Orthodox* and the *Hungarians are Calvinists*. And although the links between religions and ethnic groups are rarely so clear-cut, these stereotypes in many respects serve as a correct guide. This is true even in the case of Hungarians, even though only around one quarter of the people speaking Hungarian are Calvinists and more than two-thirds are Roman

1 BARTHA 1984, 1987; NIEDERMÜLLER 1985; MOLNÁR 1990.

2 MAGYAR 1994; MURÁDIN 1994; SZABÓ T. 1994. See also: GAZDA 1993.

Catholic. However, approached from the angle of social history and in regions with a mixed ethnic population, this classification is justified and true.³

During the Reformation the greater part of the population of the Kingdom of Hungary followed Protestantism on an ethnic basis: the Germans in Hungary became Lutherans and the Hungarians embraced the Calvinist Reformation. The Calvinists played a big role in creating a network of primary, secondary and higher schools where the teaching was in the national language, that is, Hungarian, and through these schools they also shaped public thinking. The centuries of resistance against Islam and above all against the Catholic Habsburg House and the aspirations for independence in the 16th to 18th centuries for a long while were decisive in Hungarian public thinking and the approach to history. Protestantism also played a political role. It was in this way that the *Calvinist religion became the Hungarian religion*. Despite the strong Catholic restoration and the gradual emergence of a Roman Catholic majority, this role and interpretation of history have remained determining in Hungarian public thinking right up to the present.

In this short essay I would like to present the findings of my research in a few villages of what was once Abaúj County and is now the district of Kosice in Slovakia. These settlements (their Hungarian names are: Magyarbőd, Petőszinye, Györke and Beszter) were, and still are, in a fringe situation as regards both language and religion since from the 19th century the settlements to the north of them were Slovak-speaking and (largely) Roman Catholic or Lutheran.⁴ (I shall not refer here to the question of the Slovak Calvinists of the area; I have already written about this earlier.⁵) At present this group of villages lying along the 45th parallel still represents the northernmost group of Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin – if this area can still be regarded as Hungarian.

Censuses and statistics that have survived from the late 18th century on show that the Calvinist religion and the Hungarian language were dominant in these villages, although they also indicate the existence of a Roman Catholic and Slovak-speaking minority in the villages of Petőszinye and Beszter.⁶ The villages are small. Magyarbőd, the largest, had a population of 500 in the mid-19th century and 1065 in 1970; Györke had 460 and 256 inhabitants respectively, Petőszinye had 630 and 933 and Beszter had 400 and 486.⁷ Up to the 20th century each village had only a Calvinist parochial church; a Roman Catholic church was found only in Beszter. The Catholic church in Petőszinye was not built until after the Second World War. Each of the settlements is of an agrarian character. Industry of any size can be found only in the nearby town of Kassa (Košice). Magyarbőd

3 Cf.: KÓSA 1993: 14–20.

4 FÉNYES 1851: I/163 (Magyarbőd), I/73 (Györke), I/127 (Beszter), II/137 (Petőszinye); VARSÍK 1977: 44–48 (Györke), 49–56 (Petőszinye), 57–60 (Magyarbőd); VLASTIVEDNI SLOVNIK 1977: I/163 (Magyarbőd), 370 (Györke), III/9 (Beszter), 112 (Petőszinye); BALOGH 1926

5 BARNÁ 1994 where a summary is given of the earlier literature on the Slovak Calvinists.

6 See note 4: FÉNYES 1851.

7 See note 4.

and Petőszinye lie on the main route leading to Kosice, while the other two small settlements are more isolated.

I have been studying these settlements, especially Magyarbőd, since 1980.⁸ A process of rapid Slovakisation, rapid assimilation and the marked retreat of the Hungarian language can be observed in these villages. In my research I am trying to find the causes and the motivations for this process. A question that especially interests me is: *what role has been and is played by the Calvinist religion and church, regarded as the Hungarian religion, in this process? Why has it been unable to halt, slow down or reverse this process of assimilation? What, then, was and is the role of religion and the church in this change?*

Besides studying the social history of the villages in archive sources,⁹ I have conducted and continue to conduct many life history interviews in an attempt to grasp the individual fates and the individual life strategies reflected in them and through these to find trends and laws of assimilation that can be regarded as having general validity.

Let us consider briefly the social and church history of the region.

Following the First World War these villages were taken from Hungary and assigned to the new state of Czechoslovakia.¹⁰ It was this circumstance that set off the social processes examined below. Under the first Vienna Award of 1938, Györke and Beszter were returned to Hungary, while Magyarbőd and Petőszinye became part of Slovakia. In the autumn of 1938 women demonstrated for a week in Magyarbőd, demanding that the village be made part of Hungary. The authorities refrained from taking reprisals on that occasion. In my experience the separation of the group of villages did not lead to their development in differing directions as could be observed elsewhere (e.g. Zoboralja). After the Second World War both settlements became part of the territory of the second Czechoslovak Republic.

For the purpose of church administration, until the Treaty of Trianon the Calvinists belonged to the Abaúj diocese of the Cis-Tisza Calvinist Church District, then in 1922 the part of this diocese falling in Czechoslovakia was formed. In 1938 they were again merged with the Hungarian church district and after 1945 once again became independent organisationally.¹¹

In these villages before the First World War there were only Calvinist schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction. As the Czechoslovak state set up its apparatus in the region, it used every means to influence the use of language in the schools. Above all it set up state schools teaching in Slovak in all settlements, and a ministerial decree issued in 1931 stipulated that pupils attending the Slovak schools could be given religious instruction exclusively in the Slovak language. In addition, the new state encouraged the introduction of Czech and Slovak as the languages of instruction in the church schools too. It was able to

⁸ BARNA 1981.

⁹ Okresny archív Košice; parochial archives in the villages.

¹⁰ PÉTER 1926.

¹¹ PÉTER 1926; TÁRNOK 1939; SZABÓ 1990.

achieve results too: a survey conducted in the 1922/23 school year found that of the 195 Calvinist schools in the villages of the church district assigned to Czechoslovakia, Slovak was already the language of instruction in 25 schools and Slovak and Hungarian were used together in 2.¹² The church schools in the villages studied were still using Hungarian, but state schools where teaching was in Slovak had already been set up beside them. As early as 1926 the Calvinist minister of Magyarbőd noted that “religious instruction in Hungarian for children who have been educated in the Slovak language is already coming up against difficulties. Later, when they grow up, they themselves will demand Slovak religious services.”¹³ However, the measures of force taken by the state could not be entirely successful as long as the churches were autonomous and the Calvinist congregations maintained their financial independence. The years following the Second World War brought a fundamental change in this social situation.

The Czechoslovak state, once again establishing its institutions in the region, declared the Hungarians to be – like the Germans – collectively war criminals.¹⁴ Although the Slovak state authorities of the time regarded the women’s demonstration of 1938 in Magyarbőd as an action directed against the Czechs, in 1945 they held the women of the village, specifically those in the 30–50 years age group, in detention for weeks on the charge of disrupting the republic. With the collaboration of the Czechoslovak authorities, many Hungarians from this area too were taken away to Soviet labour camps. The Czechoslovak state banned the use of the Hungarian language and imprisoned or drove out the Hungarians’ political leaders. The resettlement action directed against the Hungarian population only partly affected the villages studied. The people of Magyarbőd were able to evade this, even taking material sacrifices upon themselves. However, the Hungarian schools everywhere were closed. (As a result, four grades of children were not enrolled in school.) During those years many people did not attend the Calvinist church services either and they did not want to attend the services held in Slovak, a language that many of them did not understand. The population was forced to undergo what was called “reslovakisation”:¹⁵ this was the only way they could obtain employment, permits to engage in trades activities and even food coupons at a time when supplies were scarce. It was only by paying this price that the women of Bőd, against whom criminal charges were brought, were able to avoid imprisonment. Among the arguments in their defence, they stressed their attachment to the town, Košice as a market centre. These years from 1945 to 1948 were the years of fear. And these fears, disillusionments (they were not returned to Hungary in 1938) and humiliations (detention, reslovakisation under constraint) have left a deep imprint. These were the decisive life experiences of those now over 60.

12 CSOMÁR 1940: 123; STOLCZER 1942: 85.

13 PÉTER 1926: 176.

14 JANICS 1992. This discriminative measure is still in force!

15 VADKERTY 1993. Of the 3546 Hungarians figuring in the 1930 statistics in the district of Košice, 3500, that is, 98.7%, applied for “reslovakisation”! On the relationship between Slovákisation and the churches, see: VADKERTY 1993: 135–140.

The communist take-over in 1948 put an end to most of these discriminative measures but by nationalising the land and industry and bringing the churches under total state control, it created the basis for far more radical interventions. The tendencies towards Slovakisation that began in the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic, reached a peak after 1948, when the state had broken the force of civil society. In the villages studied, the forced creation of kolkhoz-type co-operative farms¹⁶ ruined the Hungarian farmers who had been the mainstay of the church: many of them were imprisoned or forced to migrate. It was during this period that many of them moved into the nearby town of Košice from where part of the Hungarian middle class had been deported and which, under the influence of the socialist industrialisation that was starting, was increasingly becoming a town with a Slovak majority.¹⁷

In the course of the 1960s the co-operative farms in the Hungarian villages studied were merged with the co-operatives of the neighbouring Slovak villages (Rozgony, Nádás, Györgyi, Beszter, Györke). As a result, besides the obligatory use of Slovak for official administration, Slovak also increasingly became the language of everyday working contacts.

The church schools were nationalised in 1948. Although in the villages studied Hungarian remained the language of instruction in these schools for shorter or longer periods, they had steadily larger Slovak classes and were soon transformed into Slovak-language schools. In Magyarbőd the 1st to 4th grades were taught in Hungarian up to 1964; in Györke the Hungarian school ceased to exist in 1968. The Hungarian school was not even reopened in Petőszinye in 1948. Those families who did not want to send their children to Slovak schools enrolled them in the Hungarian school in Košice. However, because of the 15–20 km of travel by bus every day and the additional costs, the number of children involved steadily dwindled. (Looking back, besides the eldest generation it is largely these people who, for example, declare themselves to be Hungarian when the census is taken.) Teaching in the Slovak-language schools was compulsorily atheist and Slovak in spirit. The children heard nothing or learnt only negative things about the Calvinist religion and church and about Hungarian history and literature. In 1964 a so-called district school was organised in Magyarbőd. This meant that it is also attended right up to the present by students in the upper classes from the neighbouring Slovak villages. In 1994 a total of 417 children were enrolled in the 1st to 8th grades of the district Slovak school serving children in the 12 villages; of this total, 123 children were from Magyarbőd.

The use of the Slovak language became increasingly important in religious instruction too for the children who were unable to write or read Hungarian.

16 For the data, see *VLASTIVEDNI SLOVNIK* in the places indicated.

17 The composition of the population of Košice by nationality has evolved this century as follows: in 1910 the total population was 44,211, out of which 33,350, or 75% were Hungarians; in 1921 the total population was 52,898, of which 11,206 or 21.2% Hungarians; in 1930, of 70,117 inhabitants 11,504 or 16.4% were Hungarians; in 1970 Košice had a population of 144,445, of whom 10,197 or 7.1% were Hungarians; in 1991 out of 235,160 inhabitants, 14,804 persons, that is, 6.3%, declared themselves to be Hungarians. *GYÖNYÖR* 1994: tables 76 and 35.

State intervention in the life of the church was so strong that the state offices for church affairs even dictated the occupancy of the presbyteries. This meant that, in the spirit of class struggle, they specified how many of the presbyters had to be poor peasants. During the periods when agricultural work was at a peak (spring sowing, grain harvest, autumn harvest, hoeing maize, etc.) it was forbidden to hold a religious service on Sunday "during working hours" since all efforts had to be concentrated on the harvest. (In the 1950s and 60s, for example, communion could only be given at the evening service even on the anniversary day of the Reformation.)

As a result, the internal cohesion of the Calvinist congregations was weakened; first generational and then ethnic differences arose in the practice of religion. For the younger generations there was a weakening in the orienting role of religion and its power to organise the community. They saw it as the religion and church of the old people who had fallen behind the times and of the reactionary Hungarians. The young people still exercising their religion, who had been educated in the Slovak language, attended Slovak-language religious services. In Petőszinye and Beszter religious services are now held only in Slovak, while in Magyarbőd and Györke they are held alternately in Hungarian and Slovak. However, for other liturgical occasions – marriages, christenings and confirmation – the young generation now generally asks for a service in Slovak. Hungarian has remained in use the longest as the language of funerals, indicating that it is precisely the Hungarian-speaking elder age groups that are now dying out. Nevertheless, because of the Slovak colleagues and the growing numbers of "Slovak kin", some of the funeral ceremonies are now held in the Slovak language.

Religious instruction is now given only in Slovak in all of the villages. This shows that the change of languages between generations has largely been accomplished. The greater freedom in the social situation in Czechoslovakia after 1990 and then in the independent Slovakia now strengthens this frame. Although the number of persons practising religion fell during the decades of communism here too – around 10 % of the people of Magyarbőd attend church today – because of the change of generation these people increasingly give priority to religious services held in the Slovak language. According to the 1991 census, of the 1005 Slovak and 59 Hungarian inhabitants of Magyarbőd, 533 persons declared themselves *Slovak Lutherans*. (Calvinist did not figure on the statistical sheet.) Obviously, these people are the Calvinist Protestants in the village. Besides these, a few Roman Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses can be mentioned. The latter have a prayer-house and a "priest". The language used for meetings in the Calvinist church presbytery is still Hungarian. Generational reasons can be seen in this: the majority of the presbyters are elderly men.

The orienting role of religion in general has also diminished in the past decades. With the general decline in the prestige of religion, the frames of religious endogamy (marriages between persons of the same religion) have also weakened. The significance of religious allegiance in the choice of partner has declined. This trend has been further strengthened by the large scale of social mobility and

migration. The mixed marriages further diminished the role of the Hungarian language as well as that of the Calvinist congregation. The non-Calvinists in the district are generally Slovaks. If they embrace the Calvinist church with marriage, they add to the numbers of Slovak-speaking Calvinists and if, on the contrary, the spouse embraces the Catholic or Lutheran church for their sake, then to a certain extent this weakens the Calvinist congregations still using the Hungarian language. In the interwar years spouses of other religion and Slovak mother tongue moving into the villages studied quickly learnt Hungarian; nowadays use of the Slovak languages is becoming the general practice in more and more families because of the outsiders moving in. The large number of religious and ethnic mixed marriages shows that for decades now there has been a change in marriage strategies. The aim of Slovakisation and its extent indicates the strength of the assimilation. There is mixed language use in a number of families – on a generation basis.

Of the four settlements, Magyarbőd, Györke and Beszter have their own minister, while the minister from Beszter holds services in Petőszinye. Each of the ministers is Hungarian and of Hungarian identity, but the family of two is now bilingual through the spouse. This means that their own personal example also strengthens the assimilation life strategy mentioned above: they no longer teach their children Hungarian. The wife of one of the ministers is a doctor. Her determining role both within the family and outside also shows the social weight and prestige of the occupations. This is also a signal regarded as an example to follow in these communities. Although their personal situation is ambivalent: while they are of Hungarian identity, spreading the Christian teaching in whatever language, in their case in Slovak, is more important than cultivating use of the Hungarian language. These examples indicate the importance of the role played by the ministers in these processes.

The opinion emerging from the life history interviews conducted in the villages is that the process of Slovakisation of these settlements is unstoppable. This is the image of the future formed by members of the elder generations. They experience this as a loss since they know that with their death the change of language will become final. On the basis of their own experiences they look to the restoration of the church schools for a certain solution. But there is no chance of this at present; there is no support for the idea among the young families of Magyarbőd. The Bőd minister would like to organise a church kindergarten, offering English and also Hungarian as optional languages. However, the members of the elder generations accept the bilingualism they find in their families or the increasing predominance of the Slovak language and do nothing against it. The generations over 60 were educated in Hungarian and a greater percentage of these people practice their religion. Hungarian identity and the Calvinist religion are closely linked in their personal identity. Many of those in the 40 to 60 years age group, including even those who regard themselves as Calvinists, were educated in the Slovak language; they know less about Hungarian history and literature and have difficulty writing and reading Hungarian. These are the

age groups who have preserved their religion but are changing their language and who have a mixed sense of identity. But the younger people are now either indifferent to this process or it is precisely Slovakisation that represents a positive future image. Their ethnic identity is Slovak, with a minor degree of uncertainty that may arise because their parents and grandparents speak Hungarian and they regard themselves as Calvinists. However, religion now plays no role or only a very small role in this new identity model.

As a result of the modernisation of social and economic life and the steady advance of technical civilisation, traditional culture or even its individual elements now play no part at all in shaping and preserving the distinctive local identity. In particular the genres of Hungarian oral culture, tales and songs are disappearing rapidly; the customs and the community frames in which they lived have been transformed long ago. The traditionalising groups organised in the 1950s and CSEMADOK were disbanded under pressure from above in the 1960s. At the same time, there were instances during those years of guests being fined for singing the Kossuth song at wedding feasts. This atmosphere was another factor accelerating the process of abandoning the traditional culture. Although a folklore group was formed recently in Magyarbőd with mainly elderly members, only the years to come will show whether their activity has any success in cultivating tradition and preserving folklore in the Hungarian language.

Summing up, it can be said that in the Carpathian Basin the Calvinist religion has been closely linked to the Hungarian nation, both historically and ethnically and it has played an important role in shaping, cultivating and preserving culture in the Hungarian language. In the settlements studied in Slovakia, political, ideological and social causes specific to the 20th century resulted in a separation between the Calvinist religion and church, and Hungarian ethnic identity. As a consequence, the Calvinist religion and church has become a vehicle of Christian values not associated with a single ethnic group and language. However, by relinquishing its ethnic association it is also indirectly strengthening the process of Slovakisation and of relinquishing the Hungarian language and culture. Nevertheless, the Calvinist church is no longer the decisive factor influencing social processes, only one of the institutions involved since its earlier dominant role has been greatly weakened in the secularised world of the 20th century. It can be said that the earlier historic role of the Calvinist religion and church has been reversed: once a Hungarian religion, in a number of places in Slovakia at the end of the 20th century, including the villages of Abaúj County I studied, Calvinism has become the instrument and institution of demagyarisation and assimilation.

This investigation also has a more general lesson and timeliness: if the mother tongue is excluded from public life and the schools, that is, from the learning process, if it is excluded from religious life, there are no longer any barriers to ethnic and linguistic assimilation. Seen in this context it is easier to understand the strong protests made by the Hungarians in Slovakia against the so-called alternative schooling, that is, the use of Slovak as the language of instruction.

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