

# CROSSING THE BORDERS

## Meeting of Religions, Shaping the Sacred in the Age of Globalisation and the Internet<sup>1</sup>

### **The problem**

In my short talk I wish to report briefly on a new research project, more about plans, hypothesis and less about results. Two years ago I invited eight of my former students to work on a joint project. We want to examine what happened and is happening in Hungary in the period following the downfall of the communist-socialist ideology and institutional system that had functioned as a quasi-religion, now that there are no limitations on the operation of religions and churches. When all that is needed for the state recognition and registration of a church is the unanimous declaration and co-operation of one hundred people. When no one and nothing examines the social aspects and impact of religious teachings. When, as a consequence of migration and globalisation, previously unknown western and eastern religions and esoteric teachings have appeared and become institutionalised. When the traditional, so-called historical churches and a wide variety of new formations are present in the society. When especially inside the Roman Catholic Church appear new spiritual movements, tendencies, groups, and arise breaklines? And confront traditional and new opinions, interpretations, practices? And all this in a strongly secularised environment. What interference arises among the religions and how do they formulate the concept of the "sacred", for themselves and for the society? What kind of new formations arise, and what are their characteristics?

### **The social background and context**

A process of marked secularisation and religious individualisation took place in Hungary (and the whole of Europe) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the central and eastern part of Europe this process was set off when opposition to churches and religion was made an official state policy and historical materialism was a compulsory ideology.<sup>2</sup> In countries to the west of Hungary the

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1 The research work financially is supported by OTKA (National Scientific Research Fund) K 68325 project.

2 Hungarian ethnology and cultural anthropology has not dealt with the consequences of the persecution of religion and the churches, when the activity of the churches was restricted to religious services. The churches lost the religion-based social institutions attached to them as they were banned by the socialist State. See: SUGAR 1989., RAMET 1991.

cause was the rapid loss of religion in the consumer society. In the case of the Jews, the Holocaust and then the mass emigration to Israel following the Second World War created a new situation in Hungary and throughout Central Europe. As a consequence of all this and of the large-scale international migration, there was a change in the place and role of the Hungarian (and European) historical Christian religions and churches. Religious pluralism arose as a result of migration and mass communication. A strong process of individualisation began. This change affected not only the different Christian denominations but also to a large extent Hungarian (and European) Jewry. Parallel with this, in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries secular institutions acquired prestige and as a consequence there was shift in the role of the churches in society. As a result the earlier strong connection between religion and culture, religion and identity was weakened or broken.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of the change in 1989/1990 in the political and legal system, the new freedom of assembly and organisation brought with it the possibility of re-organisation of the church/denominational frames and the freedom to establish or relaunch lay religious associations. With the widening of the political horizons and the end of ideological restrictions and as a consequence of globalisation, besides the revival of old religions, new religious movements appeared in Hungary and the neighbouring countries: the 1990s saw the introduction of eastern religions (Buddhism, Krishna consciousness), as well as small churches of western origin (e.g. Church of Scientology, Goddess Temple), as well as new religious movements arising in Hungary (e.g. Ósmagyar Táltos Egyház [Ancient Hungarian Shaman Church]). Religious ideals and thoughts flowed freely across the political borders and within Hungarian society too, they crossed the social boundaries of the different social strata, classes and age groups. 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.<sup>4</sup>

The dominance of the historical Christian denominations and churches has diminished. They have had to and still have to face the fact that numerous minor churches and movements of both eastern and western origin have targeted, reached and won over some of their followers. The individual (re)discovery of religion has played a much bigger role in this process than insistence on traditions. The emphasis has shifted from religion to religiosity, from institutionalized religions to private religiosity.

The new religious movements have established a new religious culture, e.g. new music 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

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

4 FURSET – REPSTAD 2006. 80–82.

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.). In our age marked by the loss of religion we can observe the desacralised form of the celebration of originally major church feasts (e.g. Christmas), in which the traditional forms mingle with elements of the civil religion and “profane religiosity”.<sup>5</sup> This mingling is especially striking in commemoration rites and on national days. Clearly the concept itself of “sacred” has expanded.<sup>6</sup>

### Aim of the research

Social science research in Hungary has not yet studied or only barely touched on this world in the midst of transformation, the co-existence of secular and religious communities that meet and at times come into conflict with each other, the breaklines of the churches, the secondary and virtual communities arising on the borderline of the encounter, the emerging new, often colourful forms of religious practice, the culture of sacral or desacralised celebrations now undergoing reorganisation, and the contact of this culture with the political sphere.

Within the frame of the research begun this year we wish to study questions of the profane and religious world, the meeting of religious movements, denominations and churches of Hungarian and foreign origin, the levels and degrees of their mutual interaction, the formation of new contacts, networks and communities, the distinctive, emerging forms reminiscent of Hungarian national/state feasts, the connection between religious and political life, and to interpret their role in shaping the sacred and identity.

This problem is also one of the important questions raised by current European research on religion.<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed by the published papers of the international conferences on ethnology and anthropology of religion held recently in Hungary and other European countries (Scotland, Slovenia) by the SIEF Working Group on the Ethnology of Religion that I headed for many years, and by our own research in Szeged. This topic also has traditions at the department of ethnology and cultural anthropology at the University of Szeged: over the past five centuries Szeged has been on the borderline of major world religions. It was a meeting place of Western Christianity, Orthodoxy and Islam. In these collec-

5 As case study see: GULYÁS 2004. Theoretical background: SCHIEDER 1987., HAMMOND 1987., HASE 2001., SMITH 1996. 97–102.

6 BELLAH 1972., FURSET – REPSTAD 2006. 103–109.

7 This is confirmed by the published papers of the international conferences on ethnology and anthropology of religion held recently in Hungary and other European countries (Scotland, Slovenia) by the SIEF Working Group on the Ethnology of Religion that I headed for many years, and by our own research in Szeged.

tions of papers Hungarian and foreign authors have examined many questions from the New Age to neo-shamanism, from connections between religious and national identity to the connection between religious practice and everyday political practice, the right-wing movements and the process of re-Christianisation, through non-religious forms of celebration to the celebration of October 23.<sup>8</sup>

## Themes, case studies

We wish to analyse and interpret the problem through an investigation of nine main themes, using principally the tools, approach and methods of ethnology of religion, anthropology of religion, comparative folkloristics and research on rites. I shall outline only a few of these themes here.

*Contemporary celebrations of national feasts.* One of our questions is whether the structure of celebrations is changing in the postmodern age, in the age of globalism, and if so, how? We are examining the celebration of church feasts which are becoming secularised as profane, non-religious elements are coming to dominate them. Christmas, for example, has become the feast of love, the major occasion for giving gifts. All Saints and All Souls Day marking the respect and memory of ancestors and predecessors has become an occasion for conspicuous family consumption, in other cases for cultivating and manifesting family ties. At Christmas and Easter the predominance of elements of the consumer culture indicates the emphasis on outward show for prestige and in the cult of the dead / cemetery culture the use of expensive funerary monuments for outward show is becoming the general practice. These are forms of the respect of ancestors tied to denominations and without religiosity. In the case of the Hungarian national days (March 15 and October 23), we document phenomena of the emergence of a civil religion. In some groups of society a quasi-saints cult has arisen around the chosen people, the leaders of the Hungarian struggles for freedom against the Habsburgs, especially Lajos Kossuth and Sándor Petőfi. But similar interpretations are being made in the judgement of the 1956 revolution: the Hungarian people struggling against Evil were abandoned by the world but the blood of the martyrs was not shed in vain.<sup>9</sup>

It is our hypothesis that the celebrations with both church and state roots are the consequence of an identical or similar world view: people wish to live in the present and reject both the past and the future. With consumption and outward show people serve their own well-being in the present and their imagined or real social prestige. The rites of state and national celebrations serve not only to build the community and strengthen community values but also the political power

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<sup>8</sup> See: BARNÁ 1999.; Barna 2001.; BARNÁ 2004., Barna 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Research theme of Gábor BARNÁ. Cf. ERDELYI 2004., BARNÁ 2006. As theoretical background see: MOORE – MYERHOF 1977.

interests of the moment. In the case of state/national celebrations we wish to analyse and interpret the shaping and structuring of political commemorative rites.

*Changing concept of the sacred.* A kind of “profane religiosity” is also emerging. One form in which this is manifested is the changing concept of the sacred. Elements and actors of the everyday world can acquire sacred characteristics. The latter is particularly striking in the star cult as a “profane cult of saints”<sup>10</sup> and in a number of quasi-religious forms (nature cult, health cult, etc.). The media plays a big role in their emergence, spread and cultivation.<sup>11</sup>

*Traditional religiosity in the globalised world.* Another area we are investigating is the encounter of traditional peasant religiosity with the globalised world. One case study examines folk religiosity in Magyarfalva, a village in Moldavia, Romania. Right up to the 1990s the villages of the *csángó* Hungarians living in Moldavia were very closed. They were closed because of the political and economic situation of existing Romanian socialism, and they were also closed because of their religious difference: in contrast with the Orthodox Romanians, the *csángó* Hungarians are all Roman Catholics. As a result of the strong migration in the 1990s and the early 2000s, the *csángó* communities opened up to the outside world: the *csángó* people who went to Italy, Spain and also Israel to work were cut off from the everyday religious life of their communities. Then when they return to their native land they try to introduce new customs, rites and ideas within the Catholic church communities. Young people who have been to Hungary, for example, organise village days where a big emphasis is placed on Hungarian-language local culture. This is a novelty in the life of the community which had previously celebrated Catholic church feasts exclusively in the permitted form in the Romanian language. It was also a consequence of this opening towards the world that the previously unknown rosary confraternity was formed in the village. It can be seen that new colour has been added to the local Roman Catholic religious practice and that the village has acquired a celebration independent of religion. Loss of religion and numerous individual forms of religiosity are appearing, but community control is still strong among the *csángó* Hungarians of Moldavia.<sup>12</sup>

In Hungary the relatively uniform traditional Roman Catholic religious practice has become more varied and colourful under the influence and as a consequence of the revival of old spiritual movements and the introduction of new ones from abroad. Christian/sacral light music which largely emerged from the 1960/70s on the borderline between traditional Christian religious practice and modernity, has become popular among young people. The second Vatican synod,

10 Research theme of István POVEDÁK. POVEDÁK 2006., POVEDÁK 2008. See further: DOSS 1999., BARBAS 2001., BOWMAN 2001., ROJEK 2001., HANKISS 2002.

11 Research theme of István POVEDÁK. Cf. POVEDÁK 2007.

12 Research theme of Laura IANCU. IANCU 2006. See further: BRUCE 1995., SZÁNTÓ 1998., TOMKA 1998., ALDRIDGE 2000.

Polish Christian light music and the strong influence in Hungary of the Taizé ecumenical community all brought a surge in its popularity. At the same time it also indicates the emergence of a new form of religiosity within the Catholic church, associated mainly with young people. This musical trend has especially strong links to the Catholic secondary schools and the charismatic movement.<sup>13</sup>

After the change of political direction in the 1990s, religious communities that may have previously been in hiding came out into the open, old communities renewed their activity and many new ones were formed. A strong process of ageing and feminisation could be observed over the past decades in the prayer confraternities. This is an indication that the activities with greater prestige are to be found elsewhere in church and religious life: principally in the productive activities bringing economic and financial profit, in public life, and in various public forums. Most of the religious prayer confraternities (e.g. the rosary confraternity) cultivate memory, that is, they turn towards the past and provide for the future, while the greater part of society is oriented towards the present and consumption.<sup>14</sup>

The transitional rites of priestly life have also undergone change. The “spiritual wedding” that in form used to follow the rite of wedding feasts now more closely resembles a banquet, a gathering combined with a simple, cheerful, festive meal. The earlier ritualised form has been simplified, the compensatory nature of the rite has almost disappeared and it has become merely a festive meal. This is an indication of the change and loosening in the concept of “sacred”.<sup>15</sup>

*Written Devotion.* Guest-books used by the faithful to record their thoughts are known to have been in use from the 1920s in the churches in a number of places of pilgrimage in Hungary. Their study lies on the borders between several disciplines, involving ethnology of religion, sociology and cultural anthropology. Writings that can be classified among the modern manifestations of popular written devotion were placed – in Hungary almost exclusively – in places of pilgrimage, giving people making pilgrimages there the opportunity to express also in this form their gratitude, joy, sorrows and requests in the sacred place. In some places where there is no book, the pilgrims record these thoughts on scraps of paper, postcards, invoices and on many other things.

The source group analysed, the guest-books and prayer cards are spreading in wide circles and although they are not among the most valued sources they reveal a great deal about different aspects of the everyday experience of religion. They are of importance in this respect as it is very difficult to study the individual dimensions of everyday religious practice.<sup>16</sup> The study is linked to a strong European research interest.<sup>17</sup>

13 Research theme of Kinga POVEDÁK. See further: FURSET – REPSTAD 2006. 128–129.

14 Research theme of Szilvia GYANÓ. GYANÓ 2006., GYANÓ 2007. Cf. BARNA 1998, BARNA 2006a (with further literature)

15 Research theme of Emese VÖRÖS. Cf. VÖRÖS 2004.

16 Theme of Krisztina FRAUHAMMER. Cf. FRAUHAMMER 1999., FRAUHAMMER 2002., FRAUHAMMER 2004.

17 Cf.: HEIM 1961., KROMER 1996., EBERHART – PONISCH 2000., PONISCH 2001.



*Hungarian Brahman Mission.* Changes have occurred not only in the frame of traditional religion and religious practice. Religions of Eastern origin have appeared in Hungary too, partly as a result of migration, partly through marriage ties and partly through so-called conversions. Mainly Islam and various branches of Buddhism can be mentioned.<sup>18</sup>

Four different Krishna consciousness communities are present in Hungary. The biggest of these is ISKCON. As yet very little scholarly attention has been devoted to the other three communities (Hungarian Vaishnava Hindu Association and two groups that split off from it: the Hungarian Brahman Mission and Tirtha Maharaj community). However, in all three groups a very characteristic interference can be observed between religious and national identity. Surprisingly, strong Hungarian consciousness is present in these communities, in their teaching, theology and at ritual level, in the ceremonies. The so called *Duna evangéliuma* [Danube Gospel] written by Attila Bakos, head of the Hungarian Brahman Mission, is a conscious mixing of eastern and Christian, with phenomena interpreted as archaic Hungarian.<sup>19</sup>

The appearance of national identity in the (new) religious communities of our region, the Central European postcommunist states is a typically Central European phenomenon, but it is only in Hungary that an intertwining of Krishna consciousness and national identity can be observed. In this way the appearance of national identity can be interpreted as a criterion of inculturation, ways in which a religion not based on Hungarian tradition integrates into the social environment.

*Jewish folk religiosity.* The situation of the Jewish congregations and religious Jews is even more distinctive. In the course of the 19th century Jewish folk religiosity, *Hasidism*, created substantial communities among the Orthodox Jewry in Hungary, communities that are still known and existing abroad where they preserve the memory of the former homeland. The annual pilgrimages to the tombs of rabbis with miraculous powers (Wunderrabbis) located in the territory of historical Hungary play an important role in the survival of these scattered virtual communities.

The research examines the pilgrimages made to these rabbis from the second half of the 19th century up to the emigration, as well as recent pilgrimages, return visits and meetings arranged by foreign communities. It monitors the institutions, roles and community publications that contribute to the preservation of the community's identity. In this way we obtain a picture of the organisation of a community that can be classified among the virtual communities of the late modern period. At the same time the background and precedents can be traced back more than a century. The resulting communities are examples of the virtual communities formed under the constraint of historical changes in Central and

<sup>18</sup> BARNA 2004. 147.

<sup>19</sup> Research theme of Nóra Kocsis. Kocsis 2006.

Eastern Europe in the mid-20th century,<sup>20</sup> and do not have any closer contacts to the Hungarian society.

*Neo-heathen churches, movements.* The Ósmagyar Táltos Egyház [Ancient Hungarian Shaman Church] founded in 1998, which regards itself as the “prehistoric catholic church”, 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, Csík-somlyó, Mariazell, which are good examples of syncretic holy places.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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Some conclusions can already been drawn from the initial stages of the research. It can be said that the individual’s search for security lies behind most of the cases. The individual seeks security and stability and believes that he can find it in a religion or church aimed at transcendence, legendary historical past, and offering a community. This church or organization is often a community in the sense of Turnerian *communitas*. Besides uniformity and equality, they are joined by the shared experience and common thinking. The individual strives for social integration through the institution of religion. This world and the other world, the immanent and the transcendent meet at many points of our everyday lives today. The two worlds communicate with each other. Their “hidden borderlines” are objectified and institutionalised in religious movements.

The impact of religious rites on community celebrations in general can be observed especially well in the case of state/national days. Here a distinction needs to be made between the state and the national because the borders of the state and the nation do not coincide. The characteristics of civil religion can be

20 Research theme of Norbert GLESZER. Cf. GLESZER 2006.

21 Thesis of Judit SOMOGYI. SOMOGYI 2007.

22 Downloaded on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2008: <http://www.istennotemplom.com/index.php?lang=hu>



observed in these celebrations: the way in which national memory is attached to events, the strong use and operation of national symbols (national colours, arms, banners, anthems) in the manifestation of a kind of sacralised national identity. Ethnological research in Hungary has not yet examined from this angle, point of view the so-called irredentist movements of the interwar years which were related to the dismemberment of Hungary after the First World War and the protests against it. Or the socialist feasts of the post-war time, with strong symbolism of the international communist movement. They very clearly show how a movement and ideology takes on religious features and characteristics.

In today's more open world, migration – both voluntary and forced – offers many opportunities for the formation of virtual communities: in consciousness, through newspapers or the Internet. Swabians and Germans who emigrated from the Banat living in today's Germany "live together" in this way, creating substitutes for the sacral centres of their former lives, the Máriaradna pilgrimage held in Germany.<sup>23</sup> In the same way Hasidic Jewish communities of emigrants from north-eastern Hungary are held together by the graves of rabbis with miraculous powers and visits to them. During the pilgrimages a real religious community may be formed, even if for a short time.<sup>24</sup>

Today in many places the post-modern world and the closed, rural world are coming into conflict. The encounter is accompanied by clearly visible interferences. The secular is the factor with the stronger influence. The traditional, communal, rural values are weakening, new celebrations are emerging (Magyarfalu village days), the new forms encountered in the more open world are beginning to operate in the religious world too (the formation of a rosary confraternity).

We can observe the formation of a subcultural group within a denomination in the appearance of the so-called Christian light music trends and the growth in their popularity. What lies behind the meeting of folksong and Gregorian chant, folksong and religious light music? A disintegration of values? The emergence of new values? The meeting and clash of the modern and the traditional? Our experiences so far suggest that it is the greater assertion of individual tastes in face of the prescriptions of the centralised Catholic church. Pluralisation within the different denominations: according to age groups and devotional trends which also reflect the influence of international movements, such as Taizé. In other respects, today's emphasis on performance and (physical) achievements is playing a role in the revival of traditional elements: for example, in pilgrimages on foot in Hungary and abroad.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of religious life today is when one religious phenomenon meets another religious phenomenon but the culture behind them and arising from them is different. This is the situation, for example, of meetings between Christianity in Hungary and the communities of Indian Krishna consciousness. In such cases the newly arrived religion has an impact

23 ARNOLD 2000. 92.

24 GLESZER 2006.

not only on religious life. It tries to achieve inculturation also by partly integrating or reshaping the national and historical consciousness of the believers. This all gives a further religious legitimation to the given national culture and history and to the identity based on them.

The concept of sacrality<sup>25</sup> has also undergone change. Actors in the profane world and everyday life often acquire sacral attributes, characteristics and roles. One manifestation of this is the star cult. The majority are related to the consumption culture, participants in the entertainment industry: singers, actors, sportspersons. The respect and cult that grows up around their figures is a good indication of the changed values: the importance of outward appearance, physical strength and money rather than intellectual values, knowledge or the blessedness ideals of the Sermon on the Mount.

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. Each of our case studies can be regarded as innovation in its own context from the viewpoint of anthropology of religion, even if its representatives specifically cite historical roots. However, various interpretations can be heard from the side of the churches regarding themselves as orthodox: they are described as heresy, false teachings or, in milder cases, as distinctive movements and small communities within the church. All examples show that the most invisible breaklines, meeting points, borders arise new formations: groups, communities, and closer or looser networks. They can also be interpreted as inculturation. The turning towards pre-Christian forms of religion, and the construction or reconstruction of neo-pagan religions can be best grasped within the frame of the national discourse and interpreted in part as a critique of Christianity, as the demand for continuous restructuring of the national consciousness, in the frames of new social contacts and ties.

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25 RAPPAPORT 1999. 277–312.

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