

## HEROES OF THE FAITH IN THE HUNGARIAN UNDERGROUND CHURCH

It is quite with mixed feelings that I discuss in a scientific paper Rev. P. György Bulányi, one of the most discussed leader figures of the so-called underground church in Hungary. Diffuse in the sense that his teaching and his person were in the years of my youth personally very important for me. As I started to work on this particular topic, I thought that it would not be so difficult to do this. But after reading and studying some important scholarly literature on the very broad and complicated topic, namely, heroes, elaborated in different times through different theoretical approaches – I was promptly certain that the task is anything but easy. In my paper first I try to present a short life story of Rev. Bulányi. In the second step before I can focus on the special question of Bulányi's hero existence, I refer to two dimensions of my theoretical frameworks: one about the different sub-periods of the last six decades of Hungary, and another about the turn between two important theoretical approaches in ethnology and in the scientific study of religion as well, specifically, from the phenomenological to the discourse theoretical one. In the third step I examine the figure of Rev. Bulányi in relation to some classical definition of the hero. On the basis of these my conclusion is that Rev. Bulányi and other characteristic representatives of the underground church should be interpreted as heroes of the faith only with very strong limitations.<sup>1</sup>

### Christian Churches in the Underground

In the approximately 40-year-long period of persecution of Christian churches and other religious organizations after World War II in Central and Eastern Europe, thousands of church members – priests, members of various congregations and laypeople as well – played a crucial role in passing on and renewing Christian beliefs and the praxis of Roman Catholicism. Some of these people suffered severe punishment and in some cases, interdicts too. Considering this, one may designate these people as heroes of the faith. In my paper I attempt to differentiate between two periods of communist persecution by using two Biblical metaphors: those of the Egyptian and Babylonian captivity.<sup>2</sup> The heroes of the faith have different functions in these two different periods. In the former they symbolized the possibility of general survival. In the latter period they symbolized characteristics

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2 Luther also used the metaphor "Babylonian captivity", but in a different sense. Luther 1947.

of special spiritual and ecclesiastical ways of living in persecution.<sup>3</sup> After the collapse of communism (a Post-Babylonian time) in the contemporary period of “existing democracy” and religious pluralism, there are no more heroes of the faith on the political side of the societies of Central and Eastern Europe. The heroes of the faith can be found more in places of solidarity and of spirituality. The various functions of heroes of the faith will be discussed through the biography of P. György Bulányi SP, founder and leader of one of the best known “movimento” grass roots movements in Hungary.

### **Bulányi’s person and work<sup>4</sup>**

György Bulányi was requested to organize small communities by an emissary of the Holy See in 1945 in the hope that the Church will survive the suppression of the communist regime by living in small groups. For this pastoral activity Bulányi was arrested and with the charge of leading an anti-state organization he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1952. He was set free in 1960 but was not allowed to be employed by the Church, thus he worked as a transportation worker.

During the sixties he completed his six-volume theological work (“Seek the Kingdom of God!”), in which he analyzed the words of Jesus in the Gospels. He concluded that Jesus wanted human society (built upon domination and violence) to be changed here on earth into a world based on love, following the ideals of non-violence, serving others, and giving. Bulányi was convinced that all people are capable of following the teachings and life of Jesus; moreover, this is the only possible path for humanity.

Following the model of the community of Jesus’s disciples, Bulányi restarted the organization of [small] communities (later known as Bokor – “bush”) [...]. After 1979, an increasing number of young community members refused to obey the military conscription order and underwent several years of imprisonment for their decision. Therefore, the communist regime exerted pressure on the Hungarian Catholic bishops to enact coercive measures against Bulányi. (The state could not take direct actions against him due to the Helsinki Accords.) A Church body lead by Cardinal László Lécai suspended him from public priestly functions [...]. His punishment was not withdrawn with the political change of 1989, and the restrictive measures were officially cancelled as late as 1997.

Bulányi emphasized several times that “the alliance of Throne and Altar” is in opposition to the will of God. He often requested the Church to face sincerely its own past. Until the end of his life, he was working for a Church that re-embraces

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3 The churches and oppositional actions in three formerly communist countries – Hungary, Poland and Romania – were elaborated on in a very interesting comparative study by Daniela Angi. Although, she did not analyze the Christian underground movements either in Hungary or in Romania. Angi 2011.

4 I have taken the short CV from the official website of the Bokor Movement ([www.bokorportal.hu](http://www.bokorportal.hu)), which I am presenting with minor corrections for greater neutrality. In this paper I can and should only concentrate on the symbolic dimensions of Bulányi’s life story.

the very roots of the teachings of Jesus and wants to turn the Earth into the Kingdom of God not by words of power but by the network of brotherly communities.

After elaborating on his work in detail in my earlier book written in German,<sup>5</sup> now it is a quasi-playful task for me to examine and to present his symbolic features. It is certain enough that there is a mutual interaction between the real life story of a particular person, in our case Rev. Bulányi, and the creation of a societal symbol. From a hermeneutical point of view it is not the various details that are particularly important but the interpretation and the reflection on concrete societal groups behind the hermeneutical processes.

### **Symbol of opposition**

From the short life story it may be clear that one of the most important characteristics of Bulányi's story is the status of opposition: against the communist dictatorship, against the "friendly coexistence of church and state", and against the course of Roman Catholic hierarchy because his collaboration with communist church persecutors.<sup>6</sup>

### **Symbol of the underground church**

Bulányi's main activities were building and leading small Christian communities, according to his own notions: the formation of the kingdom of God. He was very active and effective in their management, initiating the formation of several dozen groups and organizing a broad collaborative network of the groups, with roughly 5000 members in total.

### **Constructing heroes**

The main question can be formulated as follows: which special population makes a social unit – e.g. a person, an event, a place, a historical fact etc. – into a heroic or much broader, should I say, extraordinary unit. According to one phenomenological approach, heroes have special characteristics and impact on different populations. But at the same time, one has to recognize the relevance of each hero as well. I prefer to focus on the approach of critical hermeneutic and discourse theory, which offer to us very useful tools for understanding the mutual interaction between special values of particular heroes, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the special cultural and political interest of the particular society by naming an average person as a hero.

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<sup>5</sup> Máté-Tóth 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See the historical analysis about Roman Catholic hierarchy during the Kádár regime in Hungary. Ungváry 2007.

## Bulányi a hero? A definition attempt

After briefly referring to the life story of Rev. Bulányi and some preliminary theoretical conditions or requirements regarding the correct interpretation of his symbolic figure as a hero, we may now turn to certain definitions of a hero and to examine if Bulányi can be interpreted as a hero of the faith. “Heroes of the faith” - the title of this paper can shed light on a profound misunderstanding. Under heroes of the faith hagiographic literature lists, first, saints of the biblical and post-biblical centuries. Some of them are martyrs, e.g. people who offer their lives for their own faith – or, with other, often used words – they paid with their blood for eternal life. Nevertheless, in a specific sense “heroes of faith” can be used for better understanding of the role of Christian activists in the period of church persecution. In making this test of interpretation we should keep in mind the very different definitions of the hero and the very different theoretical approaches to being a hero.<sup>7</sup>

## The way of a hero

One of the classical new definitions of a hero’s main characteristics was elaborated by Campbell based on important works from the field of cultural anthropology, myth-theory and religious studies as well.<sup>8</sup> Campbell’s model focuses on the “way or journey of a hero” and has a tripartite structure. The hero starts out in the ordinary world and receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events (*a call to adventure*). If the hero accepts the call to enter this strange world, the hero must face tasks and trials (*a road of trials*), and may have to face these trials alone, or may have assistance. At the most intense point, the hero must survive a severe challenge, often with help earned along the journey. If the hero survives, the hero may achieve a *great gift* (the goal or “boon”), which often results in the discovery of important self-knowledge. The hero must then decide whether to return with this boon (*the return to the ordinary world*), often facing challenges on the return journey. If the hero is successful in returning, the boon or gift may be used to improve the world (*the application of the boon*).<sup>9</sup>

In case of Rev. Bulányi, the first stage, named by Campbell as “a call to adventure”, can be seen in the meeting between him and a Slovak Jesuit P. Kolakovič in 1945 in Debrecen. According to Bulányi’s memoir, P. Kolakovič had a very clear

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<sup>7</sup> On the differentiation between heroes and martyrs see Richardson 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell’s (1949) *Hero with a thousand faces* was much influenced by van Gennep’s basic outline of the three-fold structure of liminal processes; *preliminary, liminaire, and post-liminaire*. He took the concept and applied it to the transitional phases between the beginning and the end of a journey or transformational process. Liminality is the process of going in between two states and the time spent in that transitional zone when one is neither one nor the other but in the process of becoming. Liminality is the journey of transformation. Leeming 1998. Campbell’s model is used in Hungary by István Povedák. Povedák 2009, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell 1949.

mission from the Vatican to go to the communist East and to motivate priests and lay people to establish grassroots groups in the interest of passing on the Christian faith.

P. Bulányi's long road led him to very difficult tasks from organizing a few Christian communities through the prison of the Rákosi regime to being expelled from the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference and from the broader Roman Catholic community as well. This long way can be seen as a road of trials.

But the next stages – named by Campbell as a typical way or circle of a hero – are not applicable to Rev. Bulányi's story. Therefore, in Campbell's logic we can call the life-course of Rev. Bulányi as a heroic way to the deadlock or to a labyrinth with no exit.

In his classic work Campbell defined<sup>10</sup> hero as used in another framework too. "The Hero is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" – Campbell writes.

In the context of communist persecution of religion and church a very big part of the tyrannized society was full of fear and paralyzed by it. Heroes of the faith were capable of controlling their fear and taking the risk of an active pastoral care. Understood in this way Rev. Bulányi can also be seen as a heroic figure of faith as a hero who battled his personal fear and the prescribed roles of the regime.

## The psychology of the hero

Robert A. Segal differentiates between heroes of the classic and contemporary area contrasting the main values of these kinds of personalities. His contrast seems to be more a comparison between heroes with transcendent or in other words, holy values on the one hand and those without these kinds of values on the other. In a Christian approach we would like to make comparison between saints and heroes.

"The present-day hero is often lowly even within the human community – more the outsider than the insider, more the loser than the winner, more the villain than the savior. The contemporary hero is not a once great figure who has fallen but a figure who never rises. [...] Persistence replaces success; survival replaces achievement. Old-fashioned heroic virtues like courage and duty give way to new ones like irony and detachment. Today's hero, for example, is heroic in persisting without success."<sup>11</sup>

According to Segal's comparison, Rev. Bulányi belongs more among traditional heroes, because he successfully aimed to be a follower of Jesus as he acknowledged him, and his vision of the Catholic Church aimed to mirror the Kingdom

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10 A similar definition is found in the Brill Dictionary: "A hero is an individual who stands out from the crowd of ordinary persons by his corporeal or spiritual assets, and who provides a model for ethical orientation." Stuckrad 2007: 850.

11 Leeming, Madden and Marlan 2009: 393.

of God known from the teachings of Jesus. But reading the Segal's comparison we may feel that his description is not nearly enough to characterize Bulányi as a hero. Some aspects form Segal's image of a hero may correspond with Bulányi's life style, but Segal's main approach is too far from the whole phenomenon called Bulányi.

## Collective representations

The role of modern (national) heroes is explained by the Brill Encyclopedia of Religion in the context of collective representations. Heroes are important for constructing a sacral reality that is for the collective's survival the *sine qua non*. Followers of the national hero use him for strong identification with the nation as virtual reality and therefore, they feel free to destroy themselves and all the enemies of the sacred nation.

"Collective representations are necessary dynamic patterns of orientation, which must not be plugged up in dank traditionalism in resistance to reasonable correctives. The penalty for doing so will be ideological petrification, in which they will lead the public concert and discord into blind alleys. Through the repeatedly objectified belief in which the collective comes forth as if it were a subject of activity endowed with consciousness, this collective survival – or rather supra-life – can advance to the status of a 'sacred reality' that would stand above the constant train of individual realities and condition them. This 'reality' not only becomes an object of worldly and pious wishes; on the contrary, as historical experience has shown, it can become one that will seem to justify nearly any sacrifice – of oneself or of others – and any crime. Thus, the fiction of the vital political body too has contributed to the appearance that force, persecution, and annihilation were necessary for the 'self-preservation of the life of the collective', at the cost of actual, concrete lives."<sup>12</sup>

Or more general in an other handbook from Brill: "Regarded socio-psychologically, the hero is a symbolic leading figure, and serves his venerator in terms of an identification with a common, ideal 'I'."<sup>13</sup>

The importance of symbolic figures for building and defending national identity we can transpose to the religious field of society as well. The systemic logic of identity building is in the case of nationalism the same as in the case of religion. Indeed, processes of identity building itself can be considered as a genuine religious process or reality. But for us now what is more important regarding collective representation to focus on is the change of the collective, which still needs and uses the hero's presence. For a short term analysis the change of the affected population remains hidden, but a long term analysis is able to show this modification. Regarding the interpretation of the person Rev. Bulányi as a hero it is necessary to differentiate between at least three different periods. The first is the period

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<sup>12</sup> Betz 2007: 424-425.

<sup>13</sup> Stuckrad 2007: 850.

of direct and strong persecution of religion and churches, 1948-1974. I usually refer to this period with a biblical reference as the Egyptian captivity. The second period from 1975 to 1990 is the time of indirect religious persecution which can be symbolized with the Babylonian captivity. And the third period is our present time from 1990 on with the biblical metaphor of the recapturing of Jerusalem. During these three periods we can identify three different discourse situations in Hungarian society correlating with the symbolic role of Rev. Bulányi.

In the first period which I named the period of Egyptian captivity, persons like Bulányi were Christian witnesses or with the original Greek word, *martyrs*. Even in the period of total control of publicity through whispering propaganda very few Christian people knew that there were a lot of Catholics and Protestant who do not turn to apostasy. Memories of martyrs were important for keeping the faith.

In the second period referred as the Babylonian captivity the public discourse situation changed profoundly. The communist propaganda filled the media with the talk of a “good relationship between church and state”. Although the control over the churches was still total and for all insiders there was no question that the church was anything but free, the work in the movements aimed to save the original Christian mission. Central figures of the Christian grassroots movement – by far not only Bulányi – symbolized at that time the allegiance to the original message of the Gospel and to the freedom of churches. But in the period of the indirect persecution or in other words, the instrumentalization of the church, we can observe a tension between the para-official small group movements and the instrumentalized official church. The conflict of interest between church and state slowly entered into the church itself and caused inconsistency. The longer the period of communist control lasted, the more importance was accorded to the survival logic in the churches as well. In this period Bulányi represented a more radical strategy with continual criticism of the relationship between Roman Catholic hierarchy and the communist government. One of the most important consequences of his strategy was the separation of his movements not only from the collaborating hierarchy and its followers but from most other movements as well. The clearer his critics became, the more he and his Bokor-movement was ghettoized and lost their martyr character for the Roman Catholic public.

In the third mentioned period – after the Babylonian captivity – all societies of Central and Eastern Europe were challenged by the process of coming to terms with the past, even with the past of the churches as well. Most of the characteristic figures of the underground church were to work in the official church after the collapse of communist regime and were often given hierarchical functions. The other group of former heroes with more critics on the hierarchical line of his own country and of the *Ostpolitik* of the Vatican<sup>14</sup> was mostly excluded from the mainstream of the church renovation. For Rev. Bulányi himself the most difficult experience was the lack of his rehabilitation and fall into indifference. Although

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14 Stehle 1975.



Bulányi's case is special he is absolutely not alone in losing the role of the hero of the faith because of the plurality of public discourses.

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