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Religious Feasts
in the Age of Scottish Reformation

The religious feast in Szeged was, for a Scot, a strange event to witness. The close proximity of the sacred and profane aspects of the feast have parallels in the fairs and plays\(^1\) that accompanied saints' days in Scotland before the Reformation of 1560, which were suppressed by the new Protestant government. For example, a letter to the Baillies of Aberdeen told them that

\[\text{...they sold inhibit and expresslie punishe the superstitious keeping of festiuall dayis useit of befoir in tyme of ignorance and papistrie, and all playes and testing at thai tymes.}^2\]

Many practices which were seen as either Roman Catholic or pagan were also banned by an Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1581, including

\[\text{...going in pilgrimage to chapels, wells and crosses, superstitious observance of several papistical rites and saints' days, making bonfires and singing carols in and around churches at certain times of year, with a fine ordered for a first offence and death for the second.}^3\]

This attitude was also apparent in the way in which Sunday was to be observed:

\[\text{No labour of any sort should be allowed from Saturday evening. Sunday markets should be moved to other days. Later on it was recognised that Monday markets involved Sunday work, and they too were banned.}^4\]

...Sports and pastimes also were forbidden.\(^4\)

\[^1\text{MILL, A. J.: Medieval Plays in Scotland (Edinburgh, 1927)}\]
\[^2\text{Aberdeen Ecclesiastical Records}\]
\[^3\text{GORDON, A.: Candie for the Foundling (Durham, 1992) 415}\]
The new concept of Sunday, not as a holiday with an obligation to attend mass, but as a day of devotion to serious behaviour, a turning of total energies from work to religion, was successfully fastened on Scotland, and the mark is still there.\(^5\)

The century before the Reformation had seen a proliferation of saints' days and other religious festivals:

... by the end of the fifteenth century, a number of new religious feasts had been inaugurated, like the Name of Jesus, the Iconia, the Five Wounds and the Compassion of the Blessed Virgin which needed to be incorporated into Scottish breviaries.\(^6\)

The attitude of the Protestant reformers is revealed in John Knox's *First Book of Discipline*:

*Keeping of holy dayis of certane Sanctis commandit by man, suche as be all those that the Papistis have invented, as the Feistis (as thai terme thame) of Appostillis, Martyres, Virgenis, of Christmess... and uther found feistis of our Lady: ... becaus in Goddis Scripturis thai nather have commandiment nor assurance, we juge thame utterlie to be abolischet from this Realme.*\(^7\)

This tradition was to endure into the present century, with Christmas being a working day for most Scots until the 1930's. Even into the 1960's, public houses did not open on Sundays, and to be able to buy an alcoholic drink in a hotel on that day one had to prove oneself to have travelled more than a certain distance. The situation today is a little more relaxed throughout most of Scotland, but still alcohol may not be sold before 12:30, and the Outer Hebrides in north-west Scotland are not served by ferries on a Sunday.

Another aspect of the Szeged feast with an echo in Scotland's past was the attitude of the Franciscan friars. This was pointed out by the Provincial during his sermon, when he stated that religious observance in one's local church was as valid as at a special pilgrimage event; the Presbyterian doctrine of the Church of Scotland does not recognise any church as being superior to any other, there being no cathedrals.

\(^5\) ibid., 31
\(^6\) MACFARLANE, L.: *Was the Scottish Church reformable by 1513?* In: MACDOUGALL, N (ed.): Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929. (Edinburgh, 1983) 36
\(^7\) COWAN, I. B.: *Blast and Counterblast: Contemporary Writings on the Scottish Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1960) 70
Doubts were expressed to us by the friars resident in Szeged as to the proximity of the fair and market to the church. In the Scotland of the 1540s and 1550s the Franciscans, along with the Dominicans, were making efforts to reform the Catholic Church from within, and they were seen as a threat by the Protestant reformers:

Most of their houses were destroyed in 1559 and 1560. Because they were in the towns, they were more immediately subject to criticism, and accessible to Protestant looters. But the attack on them may also demonstrate their strength. What they were already doing was perhaps too close for comfort to what the Protestants wanted to do. The vision of those within the church who sought reform was often very close to the vision of those outside the church.\(^8\)

The Protestant reformers did not get it all their own way, however:

As for the Franciscans, ... it is significant that when the Reformers came to Aberdeen in 1559 and 1560, the townsfolk of Aberdeen refused to allow them to desecrate Franciscan property.\(^9\)

Both of these points illustrate a similarity in intent, if not in theology, between Protestantism and the Franciscans. The difference in hierarchical structure between the friars and the secular clergy in Szeged shows another similarity.

A final similarity with pre-Reformation Scotland was the procession. The main religious procession in Edinburgh was that of St Giles, the patron saint of the city. In 1558, however, the statue normally used for the procession

... wes taken out of the High Kirke of Edinburgh privately in the night [i.e. stolen]. And because the wicked custome wes that the said idole wes borne through the toune the first day of September everie yeare; and perceaving the said day approach, the Bishop of St Andrewes admonished the Magistrates and Counsell of Edinburgh to cause make a new idoll against the said day... [then] they borrowed of the Gray Friers a little Idoll of St Giles, and putt on a golden coate upon the same, and presented it in that guise according to the wicked custome, to be caried through the toune. It was soon taken up by the blind ignorant, and carried in procession through the most part of the Toune, till at length it wes pulled downe and broken by some brethren of the toune, who, moved with zeall, could not suffer such manifest idolatrie... \(^10\)

\(^8\) WORMALD, J.: Court, Kirk and Community (London, 1981) 87
\(^9\) MACFARLANE ibid., 34
\(^10\) COWAN ibid., 13/14
This episode is quite typical of the Scottish Reformation. The language used is extremely partisan, but despite the destruction of statues, vestments and decorations, nearly all church buildings remained intact. Very few people were killed on either side, either through executions or warfare – a distinct contrast to Scotland's experience during the following century.