

THE ORIGIN OF NEW RELIGIONS IN HUNGARIAN CHURCH HISTORY

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“New Religion” in the strict sense of the term is a new form of religion, as opposed to an “Old Religion”. It is a complex new system of beliefs (and their theory, usually called theology) and activities (commonly called rites), as well as a new way of social organisation both of individuals and groups. Christianity as opposed to Judaism and Reformation instead of Mediaeval Christianity in Europe are sparkling examples. But during the entire history of mankind not only totally new religions arise – sometimes only (important) features change. The Second Vatican Council, the Awakening(s) in Northern Europe and the constant fight between Shiites and Sunnites exemplify this. When a “heathen” people is baptized, when atheism emerges (Karl Marx quits the faith of his Rabbinic father, young Stalin leaves the Orthodox priests’ seminar, etc.), one can ask the question: Is the previous or the latter form truly a “religion”? And, it is a well known fact that non-religious social and political movements often play a part on the spiritual (hence: religious) stage (like the great French Revolution, already from 1790 on), too. It is not always easy to differentiate between a religious sect (i.e. a new group within an already existing religion) or a truly new religion. We can verify the existence of a religion only from a distance and after a considerable amount of elapsed time (which might be at least several generations). Thus the question of determining or declaring a “new” “religion” is not an easy task.¹

Still it is very important to look at Hungarian church history from this point of view. It is a well-known fact that, alas, there is no concise scholarly history of religion(s) in Hungary. My sketch will only be a glimpse into that striking issue. There is no need to discuss why this topic is so important not only for the proper ecclesiastical history in Hungary, but also for the general history of Hungary and her culture, including folklore aspects, too.

Fully aware of the theoretical importance of such a study, I will try to be humble and only discuss some of the basic data relevant to the topic empirically.

If one starts with a terminological problem, one should mention that in Northern Europe, the name is *New Religion* (e.g. by the influential Åbo symposium in September

¹ Because of accepted limits of my paper I shall not give an exhaustive documentation or a concise bibliography of the questions mentioned. I shall refer only to some of the latest and summarizing publications, which contain further references.

1974)², while in the other parts of the world “new religious *movement*” is the more circumspect term. H. W. Turner in his summarizing bibliographies³ uses that term. It is not so easy to determine when the term was first used. For us it seems to be that e.g. Tibor Bodrogi, Andreas Lommel, Guglielmo Guariglia, Jacob Needleman, Günter Lanczkowski and Carsten Colpe have used somewhat different, somewhat similar nominations for the same phenomena. In this regard the breakthrough of the simple term (new “religions”) can be ascribed to Needleman. His first summary⁴ – as well as the later books, published by him and by his colleagues – gave impetus to further research. As an unquestionable authority, Lanczkowski, in his widely read paperback⁵ has canonized the view according to which “new” religions are phenomena only of our age. If we accept this approach, in Hungary we can find “new religions” only after the second world war. This is a good chance for actual folklore research in Hungary, since about twenty years ago religious movements *bokor* and *Nagymaros*, *Hare Krishna* (and perhaps early Satanites) appeared on the Hungarian scene⁶. The reason I tend not to accept this overly narrow approach to “new” religions is that it does not represent the entire time span (history) of religions in Hungary.

Another well-known understanding of the term “new religions” (as exemplified by Hans Waldenfels⁷) is, that they are by grace (and not in fact) innovative forces in Asian religions. To name only a few: Ananda Marga, Brahma Kunaris, new forms of Buddhism or Chinese religious practices, Divine Light Mission, Divine Light Zentrum, and all kinds of modern, personal Gurus. Also there are those trends in modern Hinduism, Mahikati, Meher Baba, Moon-Religion, Rajneshism, Rissho Kosei-kai, Sahaja Yoga, Sai Baba, Seicho-no Ie, Soka Gakkai, Sri Chinmoy, Tensho Kotai Jingukyo (to some extent developed from shamanistic background), etc. belong to that. The selection is still not complete – it focuses on India and Japan, and mentions succinctly some other countries, like Vietnam and Korea; on the other hand, it neglects very important and well established similar movements both inside and outside Asia⁸. In contemporary North America and Europe, some of those new religions have taken root, while others seem to be absent. In Hungary, their popularity mirrors the “Western” pattern – an important fact, we have to mention, because, e.g. in Russia, Ukraine and other Soviet-style cultures the picture is different. They have absorbed several new religions both from the East and the West. In today’s Hungary, most of these new religions are a very recent phenomenon. It is rather a curiosity that Baha’ullah a century ago once travelled through Budapest, too. But his visit then was without any important impact on Hungarians.

² BIEZAIS ed. 1975.

³ TURNER 1977–1992.

⁴ NEEDLEMAN 1972. For his more wide, later views (e.g. for the term of “used religion”) see: NEEDLEMAN 1994.

⁵ LANCZKOWSKI 1974.

⁶ See e.g.: SZAKOLCZAY 1989; KAMARÁS 1989; BALDUCCI 1992: 7–8; KAMARÁS 1998, etc. On the impact of New Age, see: GASSMANN 1987. On Hungarian impacts: GÁL 1997.

⁷ See e.g.: WALDENFELS 1995.

⁸ See e.g. the various entries in GASPER–MÜLLER–VALENTIN 1995.

According to common understanding in Hungary, the new religions among us are recent and direct imports. Hare Krishna, Scientology, New Age and similar groups are the most popular. Hungarian Baha'i belongs to that group, too. Serious study of those new religions among us would be an important task of the sociology of religions in Hungary. The legal and social situation of those contemporary "new religions" in the country has changed over the last decades. Only after the second World War did the legal status of the churches and religions (in general) undergo a modernization in Hungary. Before that time there was only one state church ("state religion"): the Roman Catholic Church and a few "historical churches" (such as the Calvinists, Lutherans and Unitarians) existed. These had privileges. The Jewish religion held an "emancipated" place, but the legal situation for the other churches and religious groups remained without favorable regulation.

At the end of 1940's, when there was not yet a one-party system, but a coalition government in Hungary, agreements were signed with many of the churches in Hungary, separating the church from the state. The new situation gave relatively more rights to some small (and to the so-called "free") churches, but not to all and not too many. And deprivatisation of the property in fact paralyzed the regular activities of the churches. Soon a communist style secularization and atheism became dominant. After many radical changes in governing the society the actual regulation of the religious life in Hungary dates back to recent years. In theory the state and the churches are completely separated, but education, communication network and social and medical care organized by the churches are being supported (to some degree) by the state. The cultural activity of the churches in Hungary is a vivid one, and some churches even are engaged in activities close to politics. There is no official difference regarding the legal status of the registered (!) churches in Hungary, their number is at the moment about 75⁹; including not only the world-wide accepted major denominations, such as the Jewish, Christian and Islam religions, but also several new formations (among them those based on Hinduism, Buddhism, Lamaism, etc). We could name here only the best known groups, in order to show, how many different movements got already acceptance in Hungary: Hungarian Ecumenic Vaisnava Church, Gate of Wisdom Buddhist Church, Buddhist Mission – Hungarian Arya Maitreya Mandala, Karma Dechen Özel Ling, Hungarian Chan Buddhist Community, Hungarian Karma-Kagyüpa Community, Hungarian Community of KRISNA-Conscious Believers, OM Vishwa Guru Deep Hindu Mandir, RIME Tenzin Sedrup Ling Rime Buddhist Centre, Szangye Menlai Gedün – Buddha, the Healer's Community, etc... Some of those "new religions" appeared in Hungary considerably earlier than in our days, as e.g. the Nazarenites, Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Free Christians, Brethren and Jehova's Witnesses. Other "registered" churches or religious movements in Hungary are more a curiosity according to the common opinion of the Hungarians. The general knowledge on churches like AGAPÉ Community, Hungarian Church of the Speaking Bible, Salvation Army, International Church, Unifying Church,

⁹ See the official annual lists of churches in Hungary: PLATTHY 1996. Hungarian associations give lists on churches and ecclesiastic institutions among the Hungarians in Serbia, Romania, Ukraine, etc.

Living Word Fully Evangelical Christian Church, Living God's Church, Community of Faith, Federal Mission of God's Community, God's Church, Christian Brethren Community, Followers of Christ, Christ's Love Community, Hungarian Religion Community, Hungarian Golden Rosicrucians Religious Community, Hungarian Late Rain Community, Hungarian Panthocatholic Traditional Church, Hungarian Scientology Church, Hungarian New Apostolic Church, Revival Prayer Group Mission's Church, Raise your Hand for Christ Love Community, Ancient Christian Apostolic Church, Shalom Open Biblical Communities, Fully Evangelical Christian Community (MAHANAIM), Swedish Trollhattan Pentecostal Missions Source Community, etc. We did not include here the smaller or not registered groups, and the above given names are perhaps not always identical with the official English denominations. But it is obvious that the number of such movements in Hungary is already considerably high, their tendencies are of very wide range. And, it is clearly impossible to describe the church history in Hungary without mentioning their activity during the last more than one-and-half centuries. But this topic is not relevant to my present paper, and I plan to come back to it at another occasion¹⁰.

Furthermore we must make a clear distinction between history of religion(s) and history of church(es) in Hungary as well. Religion is in this respect a sum of ideas and rites, while church is in the same respect an institution of the given society. However, because of practical reasons, in the following pages I shall use the terms synonymously. Moreover I shall not make a distinction between folk and "high" religions, because I want to give a general view of my actual topic. But it is quite obvious that the picture I am going to present is only a first attempt to show the problem which must be elaborated upon. For the same reason I will not give an exhaustive bibliography here. Unfortunately, there is no concise bibliography on the history of religions in Hungary.

"New religion" – according to the above mentioned distinctions – might have appeared for the first time among Hungarians, when they were first baptized. According to common view, it happened exactly at the moment when Prince Vajk was baptized (between 990 and years before 997 A.D.) or, when he was crowned (1000 A.D.) and became King St. Stephen, the founding ruler of Christian Hungary. But in fact the conversion of Hungary was a longer and complicated process. Prince Bulcsu (948 A.D. in Byzantium), Prince Géza (father of King Stephen) and 5000 (!) notables (972 A.D. by German missionaries), finally – after a treaty with the German leaders (973 A.D., Quedlinburg) – the whole political elite in Hungary became Christian; thus by 978 A.D. both in ecclesiastic and political terms Hungary already belonged to Christian Europe. Several and close ties with Prague, Nitra, Salzburg, Passau, Bavaria, Venice, Rome and Byzantium showed the multiple character of such contacts. Greek and Latin documents refer to the new religion among the Hungarians of this time¹¹. In common view on early Hungarian history it is not yet according to its importance accepted fact – nevertheless it is a very decisive moment that important Hungarian terms of religion and culture (e.g. *kereszt*

¹⁰ The actual summary on major churches in Hungary: GESZTELYI 1991.

¹¹ See the summary as given in GYÖRFFY 1983, especially 67–81.

'cross', *keresztény* 'Christian', *apát* 'abbot', *vecsernye* 'evening service', etc.) can be traced back to that very time of the conversion of the Hungarians. But just from the limited character of such "new" terms, we could think that Christian doctrine and terminology must not have been unknown to the Hungarians before that time. If we list only shortly such important basic terms of the Christian religion (and church) in Hungary as *Isten* 'God', *ördög* 'devil/Devil', *ég/menny* both mean 'heaven', *imád* 'adores, prays', *hit* 'faith', *bűn* 'sin', *bocsá(j)t* 'forgives, leaves off (the sin), gives penitence', or even *írás* 'writing, script', *betű* 'letter (of the alphabet)', *ró/rovás* 'carves/tunic script', *könyv* 'book', etc.¹², we cannot exclude the possibility that before the aforementioned "official" conversion of Hungary, a relatively high system of beliefs had already been known, which we can term – according to the distinction given before – at least to some extent as religion. If this was the case, the conversion of the country at the second half of the 10th century after that earlier "religion" was in principle already the first "new" religion for the Hungarians.

In medieval Hungary historical sources refer to the heathen uprisings ("revolts"), and in some cases to heretics, too. Any pagan "revival", of course, is by its nature not a "new religion", just to the contrary, an anti-religious move. But can we find forms of heresy, in the strict sense of the word, in early medieval Hungary at all? Before we decide the case, we could mention that there are only two such candidates for this kind of interpretation.

Bishop to south-central part of King Stephen's Hungary – one of the first recognized Catholic intellectuals in the newly converted land – Gerardo Morosini (after 997–1046) from Venice (in Hungarian documents: St. Gerhardus/Gellért), in his homiletic book *Deliberatio supra hymnum trium puerorum* (written about 1042, a lengthy and extremely complicated commentary on prophet Daniel's book from the Old Testament), among different theoretical contemplations, fighting desperately against various dangerous contemporary heretics, he refers to prior to then unknown abusers of the Christian doctrine. According to some recent Hungarian scholars, the actual "heretics" in question have been the Bogumils (in Hungary). But after a thorough scrutiny, Gerardo's "actual" statements are mere quotations from Isidore, Archbishop of Seville's *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, thus not referring to the contemporary situation of the religion in Hungary at all. Instead of the romantic picture of Bishop Gerardo (so vividly presented by some Hungarian "philologists"), traveling in the uncivilized Hungary with dozens, or even hundreds of theoretical books, in which he was looking for the final theological refutation of the arguments by the many living Bogumils in Hungary, we might easily accept the fact that the imaginary heretics in Gerardo's book shadow only Isidore's, the Hispanian erudite's vast knowledge (from about 633 A.D., i.e. thousands of miles and hundreds of years away from King Stephen's Hungary). Bogumils appeared within the confines of the medieval Hungarian kingdom considerably later. According to the primary sources (as in J.D. Mansi *Sacrorum consiliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, Florence, 1759 on) Bogumils were traceable "in Bulgaria, Dalmatia, Croatia, in the vicinity of Hungary" from about 1201–1202, 1203–1206 – also not during Bishop Gerardo's lifetime. Even if the Bogumils played later (in the 13th century) an important role in Bosnia, i.e. southwards

¹² For the etymologies see the latest summary, with references to earlier dictionaries: BENKŐ 1992–1997.

of the Hungarian Kingdom, it is not an evidence for the activity of Bogumil heretics in Hungary by about 1042! Thus the activity of the dualistic heretics of the Bogumil church cannot be termed as an early indication of a “new” religion in early Medieval Hungary¹³.

The book-length manuscripts, known as the (*Hungarian*) *Hussite Bible*, are more reliable documents of the religious dissenters’ life in Medieval Hungary¹⁴.

Tamás Pécsi and Bálint Újlaki, two Hungarian priests, were studying (most probably between 1399 and 1411) divinity at the University in Prague, and became followers of Dr. Ján Hus’ doctrine. We do not know for sure, when and how they returned to South Hungary (today’s Slavonia, between the rivers Danube and Sava), where then they selected and translated various texts from the Bible: mostly the prophetic parts from the Old Testament, disciplinary books from the Gospels and actualizable songs from the Psalms. Their translation might have been done between 1416 and 1441. Because of the inquisitors’ intimidating search, together with their communities, they fled to Moldavia (east from the Carpathians, now in Romania). We have got long parts of the translation (in later copies from three codices: *Bécsi-kódex* about 1450, *Müncheni-kódex* about 1466, *Apor-kódex* by the end of the 15th century, and further in only some other, indirect documents), which make quite possible to understand the then modernized religious view of the Hungarian Hussite communities. On the other hand, besides these translations (in an elaborate Hungarian language, and with no reference for Hussites in Hungary of other but Hungarian tongue) we do not know much about the activity of the Hussite movement among the Hungarians. The fact that important parts of the Holy Scripture have been translated into Hungarian (and not into any other local language of the plurilingual Hungarian kingdom) speaks for the Hungarian primary interest in the background of the Hussite movement in Hungary. Still we cannot declare for sure that a “new” (Hussite) religiosity then developed in the country. Even if we admit that the written sources stem from the enemies of Hussitism, who fear and downplay the new movement, we could not think from the contemporary references in Hungary that Hussitism did play during the 15th century any significant role for the majority of Hungarians (in contrast to Bohemia). Thus we cannot find then a “new religion” in Hungary, originated by Hussitism.

The mainstream reformation appeared during the first third of the 16th century in Hungary rather quickly¹⁵. In the 1510s the whole country was in deep social and political crisis. The greatest “peasant war” (a bloody uprising in 1514, led by György Dózsa) was brutally defeated, and eternal serfdom for the peasants was again proclaimed. During the entire 16th century the German minority, the towns and the royal family in Hungary had close and direct contacts with the German world. Marquis George of Brandenburg and Ansbach, a close relative and tutor to the young King of Hungary, Louis the Second, was the first supporter of the reformatory ideas of Dr. Martin Luther in Hungary, as early as

¹³ See the short summary of my views: VOIGT 1990.

¹⁴ On the topic see my forthcoming short paper: VOIGT 1998.

¹⁵ Primary data are already mentioned in the classical histories of the Reformation in Hungary. See e.g.: ZOVÁNYI 1922.

1518! The then newly elected Roman Catholic Archbishop of Esztergom (also the Primate of Hungary), György Szathmári, proclaimed immediately (as early as 1521) the Papal bulls condemning the Lutheran doctrines, and thus a severe fight between the “old” (Catholic) and the “new” (Protestant) churches in Hungary started.

According to the general opinion (both in Europe and in Hungary proper) the history of the reformation (and similarly of the counter-reformation) in Hungary is a simple story. Until the end of the 16th century the country quickly became mostly Protestant. Then, in the next century, the counter-reformation turned back equally rapidly the country to (the already post-Tridentine and Baroque) Catholicism. But the actual historical picture is more complicated. For the task of the present study the main question is the following: how far did the Reformation go in Hungary?

Church historians agree¹⁶ that until about 1556 the Reformation in Hungary followed mainly the German (Lutheran) trend. Then the Swiss (Calvinist) trend became powerful, and consequently the Reformation divided in Hungary about 1560. Nevertheless, in spite of the serious split, and later on in spite of the massive Counter-Reformation, both Protestant churches, the Lutherans as well as the Calvinists, survived in Hungary, just into our days. In Transylvania (at the time a vassal to the Turks, but in principle an independent state), the trend of the Reformation went remarkably further. From 1564/65 on, Reverend Ferenc Dávid preached there in an unquestionable Antitrinitarian tone, founding the first Unitarian church in Transylvania. The notorious reformer in Switzerland, Michel Servet became popular in the country by the end of 1560s. Even more an interesting further step was the *judaizare*-tendency, i.e. a rigid return to the Old Testament and to the Jewish religious ceremonies, including even the celebration of the Sabbath (instead of the Sunday). A more proper label for this religious movement would be thus *Sabbatarians*. This movement can be traced back to the end of 1580s, and it has reached its peak as late as after 1624, under the leadership of the (then already disgraced) Chancellor of Transylvania, Simon Pécsi. In some Transylvanian villages the descendants of those “Jewish” Sabbatarians lived until the World War II, when they were deported and killed by the Nazis – as Jews!¹⁷

Hungarian church historians have recently stressed that such radical tendencies (Antitrinitarianism, “Jewish” ritual-following communities, etc.) came from Western Europe (but, more precisely, through East European routes) to Transylvania: still, the logic of the continuous religious innovations reflects the actual Transylvanian (and Hungarian) circumstances. Especially in the case of the later, most radical innovations, we can firmly speak of “new religions” within the frames of Hungarian church history. Moreover, it would be very interesting to make a detailed description of such churches, from the point of view of their “new religion” characteristics, because this aspect has not yet been applied to them by the otherwise very reliable Hungarian church and culture historians.

Recently another interesting kind of historical documents was published, throwing

¹⁶ See e.g. SÓLYOM 1933 (1996), and BARTON–MAKKAJ 1987, and ZOVÁNYI 1977.

¹⁷ See e.g.: DÁN 1987 (with references to earlier publications by himself or by others).

light on a hitherto neglected chapter of Hungarian church history¹⁸. The papers for the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Rome) contain first-hand reports on recatholicizing of the parts of Hungary where the (Catholic) church organization collapsed after the devastating Turkish invasion (from 1526 on). At that time, and finally for about 150 years, southern and central counties of Hungary became subdued provinces to the Ottoman Empire. Christian religion was there in imminent danger. Catholic Bishop Miklós Telegdi wrote to the Pope in Rome, as early as 1580, that during the next century “there would be no traces of Catholicism in the land (of Hungary)”. As an actual answer to the challenge the institution of *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* was founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. Its aim was to send missionaries to the territories occupied by the Moslims (or by Protestants as well). Hungary was one of the closest and most important areas among them. They tried to direct to Hungary (and Transylvania) well-trained missionaries from Italy, Austria, Poland, Dalmatia, Bosnia, etc., who had to submit reports on the actual religious situation in the lands they have visited. Finally, during the recent years, the first modern publications of those relations appeared. Even if we eliminate the overtones and exaggerated self-praise of the writers of those reports, the picture on the actual Christian religious activity in those parts of Hungary is devastating. According to the reports, in the occupied territories of Hungary only “heathen” and “heretic” people live. If there are some Catholics left, they are scattered, and they have lost their church institutions completely. They have not seen priests and have not made confessions for generations. They do not remember the most venerated Christian hymns and prayers (including even the *Lord’s Prayer*). Baptism or funeral ceremonies have been absent for a very long time. Bishop’s visitations occurred there a hundred years ago! In the documents there is no end to such laments. In one word it means that (if their mission were successful) the regained Roman Catholic religion in those territories can be labelled as a “new religion”. (The reports are from the 17th century. But if we remember the history of the Balkan countries during the next centuries, too, we might say, this was not there the latest case for revitalization of the Christian church – in form of a “new” religion.)

Hitherto only the first volumes of Hungarian documents (from 1627 to 1707) appeared, and their evaluation has just been started. The time span of the reports is the more interesting, because it connects the age of the Reformation and of the Turkish invasion in Hungary with the age of the reestablishment of the Habsburg (and Catholic) domination all over the country.

The geography of religions in Hungary became stable also by the end of 18th century. United churches: (Greek Catholic and Romanian Catholic, etc.) are the latest formations then, but we cannot name them properly as “new” religions.

In the 19th century the first modern “new” religions appeared in Hungary (by 1839 the *Believers in Christ – Nazarenite Community*, by 1846 the Baptists, etc.)¹⁹ To describe their activity as that of “new religions” would be the task of another study.

¹⁸ SÁVAI-PINTÉR 1993–1997; TÓTH 1994 (with critical remarks on the other publication).

¹⁹ See the summary, as given in SZIGETI 1981: 16. His collected papers (containing unparalleled source material of the free churches in Hungary) have been multiplied in some copies, but are still inaccessible to a greater public: SZIGETI 1996.

Instead, I would like to mention only one more fact and to refer to one other important feature.

One could ask why there was no successful attempt to establish a truly puritan Protestant church in Hungary?²⁰ There are data that some Calvinist ministers (e.g. Imre Szilvásújfalvi Anderkó before 1610, János Tolnai Dáli between 1638 and 1646, etc.) expressed this ideology. But either they failed to persuade the religious communities to follow them, or the “high church” in Hungary could integrate the new doctrines into their system of the existing reformed theology. All this happened by the second half of the 17th century.

Protestant church historians in Hungary used to emphasize the fact that the independence of small protestant communities (usually named as *ecclesiola*) and the “lay presbyterium” are the fruits of that half-successful move toward a Hungarian puritanism. Again, this road leads us to the peasant and folk religious movements in Hungary – just into our days.²¹

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²⁰ There is no detailed treatment of the topic. The last Hungarian summary is: MAKKAI 1952.

²¹ For continuation of my paper see among others the paper by SZIGETI (1998).

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