

# MEETING OF THE TRADITIONAL PEASANT WORLD AND RELIGIOSITY WITH THE GLOBALIZED WORLD. CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF A HUNGARIAN VILLAGE, MAGYARFALU (ARINI) IN MOLDAVIA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The modernizational processes have appeared in the Moldavian Hungarian communities, too. Alternative, new religious ideologies have appeared beside the former world view. The church has introduced different reform steps due to the modernization. In my paper, I would like to outline some of these processes.

**Keywords:** modernization, pluralism, mobility, assimilation, innovation

Traditional social and cultural structures rapidly and basically changed in Europe in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Social historians connect these changes with the revival of rationalism, the increased mobility, the weakening of uniform social regulation, the increase of individual choice and decision making and the rise of individuality.<sup>2</sup>

The process of modernization has appeared in Hungarian communities in Moldavia as well. This led to changing attitudes towards “traditional” religiosity and the central values of the community. Alternative, new religious ideologies have appeared besides the one-time existing sacred magic worldview.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the pluralized worldview the social control has broken away from its former religious and ethical ground.<sup>4</sup> From a sociological point of view it may seem that religion or religious worldview has lost its earlier importance, however, the secular culture bearing Christian (religious) values has not split into distinct sacred and secular units. Religion by reform activities concerning

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<sup>2</sup> FÖLDVÁRI 2007: 270; GIDDENS 2003: 460; KRÁNITZ – SZOPKÓ 2001: 158; LUCKMANN 1999; MÁRTONFFY 2002: 43; MOREL 2007: 24; TOMKA 2007: 176.

<sup>3</sup> PETI 2008: 183–212.

<sup>4</sup> KINDA 2005a: 21–56; KINDA 2005b: 133–145.

the whole structure of the ecclesiastical institutions has successfully stabilized its earlier status.

My study presents some examples of the influence of modernization and re-sacralizing endeavours transforming the religious life of Magyarfalu in Moldavia.

## 1. RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN MAGYARFALU

In the context of historical premises which are not presented here we can witness an evolving,<sup>5</sup> moreover prosperous ecclesiastical (religious) life in the above-mentioned village after the change of regime. The democratic form of the state has permitted the free practice of religion, modernization has overshadowed the archaic forms of the folk religiosity and assimilation to the Romanian language has accelerated the systematic infiltration of religious knowledge. We cannot speak about religious secularization in the area, rather about changes in the external manifestation of religious experiences.

The “modernization” of the formal frame of religious life occurs on several levels. A significant part of the reforms can be understood as conscious steps of the church. These were necessary partly because of the local precipitation of globalization, partly because of the efforts made to solve the problems formulated among believers.

## 2. SOME EXAMPLES

1. One example of modernization is linguistic assimilation. The majority of Magyarfalu’s population is dual semi-lingual. They speak a dialect of the Romanian language and of the Hungarian language as well.<sup>6</sup> A significant characteristic of religious literacy is that, due to the restricted command of language, the population understands only a minor fraction from the sermons, doctrines and from the religious pulp magazines. As a consequence of the use of Romanian language in the religious life, the vernacular sacred communication has been confined to spontaneous petitions, informal/“optional” prayers following the Romanian ones.

2. Another example of modernization is the appearance of religious pluralization. It is an accepted thesis in the ethnographic literature about Csángó people that Hungarians living in Moldavia have been holding on to their Catholic religion, which has distanced them from the orthodox Romanians for long centuries.<sup>7</sup> The church accompanying the believer from the cradle to the grave is the only organized and stable institution in the local communities and the most important integrating force. It constitutes the most significant normalizing system of the social structure. The worldview necessary for the everyday life has still been provided by the Roman Catholic religion.

The attachment to Catholic religion as to the most important system governing everyday life have manifested itself not only in acquiring the relating knowledge and in practicing the rites, but in the distancing from other religions as well. The diversity of religions is

<sup>5</sup> BENDA 1989: 32, 733–734, 744; COȘA 2007: 237; GABOR 1995: 14.

<sup>6</sup> SÁNDOR 1998: 1136–1137; TÁNCZOS 1995: 67.

<sup>7</sup> POZSONY 2005: 58.

well known among the local inhabitants, but the phenomenon has really been experienced by the (mostly) male population working in industrial towns or abroad.<sup>8</sup> The most important element in the suppositions about other religious denominations was the dismissive attitude of the earlier priest towards every non-Catholic religions followed by the believers.

Except the five Romanian and by religion orthodox teachers and the forester family, every inhabitant of Magyarfalu (about 1480 persons) was of Roman Catholic religion before 1989. The situation has not changed up to the present day. From among those who left the community, about fifteen changed their religion. They joined other, in principal adventist communities at their new residence in Brasov, Bucharest or Arad. Although migration has begun in the country in the second half of the twentieth century, there was no example of religion change before 1990. The change of religion usually appears around a life crisis and spreads among family members. These families usually live far away from Magyarfalu.

The change of religion is a phenomenon related not only to migration and mobility, but to the existing relationship between the local inhabitants and the priest. During the conflicts with the local priest the villagers often suggested conversion to the orthodox religion. This is quite opposite the idea that they see their Catholicism as the only true existing religion.

3. Religious communities are the most popular among alternative communities helping the integration into the new environment. According to the locals, the believers usually change religion because of financial and social reasons, and religious communities are meant to compensate the deficiencies. In towns, most of the Adventist religious communities ("pocăilt") were established by Roman Catholics moved to live there. These communities have their supplies also from the group of believers mentioned above. This means that the worldview of the Roman Catholics from Moldavia living in migration has been determined not by secularization, but by an openness towards new forms of faith and religion.

In the case of Magyarfalu, the cause of the change of religion does not mean a total defection from the Catholic Church. This would infer a total break-away from the family and from the community as well. There has been a complex cultural and territory change in the lifestyle of the group living in migration. Under the circumstances the more rational and modern town-Catholicism compared to the one experienced before proved to be unacceptable.<sup>9</sup>

The church/religion playing a decisive role in the life of the villagers occupied a constant place in the life of the individuals and of the whole community as well. The Csángó people who moved to a town-Catholic environment consisting of wider social strata faced a series of "inconsistencies". They usually miss the more ordered, transparent and, perhaps, more conservative peasant or village Catholicism. This is the reason why they usually choose a minor and more ceremonious religious community instead of town-Catholicism. Otherwise there can be traced a kind of estrangement not only from village-Catholicism but from the peasant lifestyle and culture as a whole among those who left the community.

<sup>8</sup> PETI 2008: 183–212.

<sup>9</sup> ALTERMATT 2001: 13.

### 3. ECCLESIASTICAL REACTIONS TO MODERNIZATION

It can often be read in the ethnographic literature about the Csángó people that the Roman Catholic Church in Moldavia, in order to maintain its exclusive legitimacy, proves to be intolerant of modernization.<sup>10</sup> The church's dismissive attitude is strong especially towards other religious organizations.<sup>11</sup> Among the believers this attitude leads to a total identification with the official religion.

Some reform activities aiming at the local religion have already occurred. These ended some old, anachronistic customs and institutionalized new ones: clerical dispensations abolished the obligatory wearing of the headscarf and permitted the wearing of trousers for women and they also permitted for girls to play a role in the liturgy.

### 4. SOME NEW PHENOMENA

One of the reform steps of the diocese was that the priest, who had served in Magyarfalu since 1978, was transferred in 2007. In fact inner conflicts helped in making this decision. The faith in the priest's status had substantially been trembled and this led to the negligence of religious practice.

The infiltration into the community of the newly come priest was followed up and appreciated by the community in correlation to the former priest. The locals expected the rehabilitation of the religion's traditional sacrality and the priest's status. During his activity the new priest employed several new ("modern") arrangements thus directly changing ("modernizing") the religious life of the community.

Compared to his predecessor, the new priest performs the Sanctification of House at the beginning of every year in ten or more days, (not in three days), he does not collect ecclesiastical taxes from the poor. At the Sanctification of House he spends some time in the Old People's Home. He also spends time at families during his visits to sick people or during the shriven before bigger religious holidays.

The priest has rented the lands belonging to the parish and he patronizes the seminars and the local poor from the incomings.

He uses new methods in teaching the children and the young people. He meets the smaller ones in the Sunday morning children's mass and the older ones after the high mass. He discusses with them age specific moral problems and other questions concerning religion.

Besides representative religious events, nuns coming from various dioceses and orders usually organize so called Campus activities for young people during the summer. By means of these activities Magyarfalu joins the international Catholic, charismatic movements, which by means of various symbols also get integrated into the local religion.

Local reactions to modernization are the disintegration of local religious practice, the unfolding of individual devotion and the ecclesiastical sponsorship of the above men-

<sup>10</sup> KINDA 2005a: 28.

<sup>11</sup> PETI 2006: 139, 140.

tioned. In fact we can speak about the appearance of religious prayer associations, which are well known from universal Catholicism but still evolving in the local religion. They cannot be interpreted as radical reformatory movements aiming at the entire religious life and they are not identical to the framing of alternative religious traditions, rather initiatives addressed to certain social strata or generations.

Besides the Sunday masses and religious classes for children the priest plays an important role in the formation of the believers' cultural identity based on their feelings and faith and in the communication between the believers through various symbolic actions. One example of this is the resuscitation and modernization of profane and religious calendar habits. Another factor related to the religious identity is the renovation and modernization of ecclesiastical buildings (church, parish) ongoing in our days as well.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Iasi has been carrying on missionary activity among those who have moved from its territory for several years. The church's missionary activity is quite reassuring for the relatives of those who live in catholic colonies in Israel, Italy, Spain, England and Hungary. The missionary activity forms and maintains the collective identity between those who live in Moldavia and those living abroad; between the static and mobile strata of the local communities. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Iasi is the only institution which, by various data recording, has precise information about the activity and religion of Catholics born in Moldavia but living abroad.

In conclusion I can say that in Magyarfalú's Catholicism tradition and modernity are in an ambivalent relationship. We cannot speak about linearity or about an obvious intention for the possession of power. Modernization uses tradition for its own purposes and tradition defends its position by means of modernization. The secular processes of modernization made the major part of the community more attached to religion and to the church. Thus it seems that the essence of faith can suitably be made attractive by the variability of the structure and tradition in altering historical periods.

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