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National and Congregational Identity in the Shadow of Dictatorship

Mr Chairman! Dear colleagues!

We are here at this conference, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.¹ Two decades ago the founding fathers summarised the mission of the university in the preamble of the founding document as follows, I quote:

“The aim of the University is the education of young people who, in the spirit of the Word of the Bible, consciously pledge themselves to the universal Christian moral and spiritual values; and also the training of qualified professionals with up-to-date knowledge for the sake of the Hungarian nation between and beyond borders”². Education of confessionally conscious Christians – for the sake of the Nation.

The two concepts exposed in the preamble, that is, confession and national commitment accompanied the grim history of the 20th-century Reformed Church in Hungary. One can say that they were one of its key issues. And it was in a historical period much graver than the political transformation of the 1990s that our predecessors had to find the answer to the following question: what constitutes the responsibility of the Christians towards the national community, and also, how denominational and national identities relate to each other.

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“A question has arisen, which is defective to its foundations, yet, seemingly, it is vital and enormous: am I primarily Hungarian or Christian?”³ – A Hungarian Reformed minister from the mid-1930s angled the problematics of the relations of national and Christian identities (in his text) in that way. What makes the (figure of the) author, Kálmán Rácz interesting is that he, as teacher of religion in the famous Reformed College of Pápa, in all probability faced this

¹ This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

² Founding document of the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary
<http://www.kre.hu/portal/index.php/alapito-okirat.html>

³ Rácz, Kálmán, *A református keresztyénség apológiája*, Pápa, 1934, 274.

“question arisen” amongst his own students and in his own surroundings. And it highlights the fact that in certain segments of Hungarian society and, inside of the Hungarian Reformed society, this question probably appeared as a real dilemma in that period.

In order to interpret the conflict suggested by Kálmán Rácz, and also the proposed answers to it, it may be worth providing at the beginning, a brief overview of the main characteristics of the early- 20th century church history, and of the history of ideas. It is well-known that the interwar period brought drastic changes, and moreover vigorous renewal to the life of the Hungarian Christian Churches, including the Reformed Church. This renewal, generally considered as a “Religious Renaissance”, or even as a kind of “second confessionalisation” was, in fact, born out of an answer to a multifactorial crisis.

The drastic changes were compelled by the coefficient of at least four factors.

1: By the end of the 19th century, the Reformed Church in Hungary found itself in a highly secularised society. Mass laicisation from the mid-century brought to surface symptoms of crisis in the social presence and the religious life of the church. The apparent decline of the patterns of traditional religious practice and the formalisation of ecclesiastic life made it clear that the framework of the “people’s church” had become hollow. Due to migration to cities, especially to Budapest (which was expanding into the size of a metropolis in that decades), the number of Reformed people dramatically increased who had left, alongside with their homes, their lifestyle and religion, or at least its traditional forms. These deeply-rooted structural problems compelled the Hungarian Reformed Church to radically reevaluate its status, message and social engagement.⁴

2: Adding to this, the great intellectual currents of the 19th century, alongside with its derivative theological teachings and ideas of church, proved inadequate to cope with new challenges. The period brought the harsh critique of the liberal theology of the optimistic 19th century. The very reason for Reformed people being particularly sensitive to this was that one of the greatest influence on the shaping of Hungarian Reformed identity (and at the same time

⁴ Bogárdi Szabó, István, Kálvin hagyománya Dunamelléken. In Farbak, Péter – Kiss, Réka (eds.), *Kálvin hagyománya – Református kulturális örökség a Duna mentén. A Budapesti Történeti Múzeum kiállítási katalógusa*. Budapest, Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, 2009, 20., KÓSA, László: Bevezetés: reformátusok kisvárosban – nagyvárosban – világvárosban. In KÓSA, László (ed.), *Reformátusok Budapesten*, Vol. 1., Budapest, Argumentum Publishing House, 2006, 11–35.

on the forming modern national consciousness) was just made by the 19th-century interpretation of history, rooted in Romanticism and Liberal traditions.⁵

This was the time, when certain long-lived ideas concerning the Protestantism took root: such as

- the topos of Protestantism playing an excessive role in the creation of national culture; (similarly to general intellectual patterns Europe-wise)

- the intellectual structure that connected the sources of liberal and democratic traditions with the Reformation;

- furthermore: the thesis of connecting the Reformation with Progress through the Enlightenment;

- finally, an interpretation of primary importance; the interpretation of history declaring Protestantism as the depository of struggles for religious freedom and national independence.

By the middle of the 19th century, the national character of the Protestantism, primarily the national character of the Hungarian Calvinism became the topos of contemporary public life.

This tone of 19th-century national historiography, strongly influenced the views of Hungarian Protestantism on history as well. This was the time when theories on the culture-building vocation of Calvinism, and on the intertwining of the Hungarian Reformed Church and the national history became crucial points of Hungarian Reformed self -interpretation. What is more, it was then that the association of Hungarian ethnicity with the Reformed denomination gained a new meaning.

The “Hungarian Religion”, (as Hungarian Reformed people were inclined to call themselves, alluding to the ethnic composition of the church), was not only simple ethnic identification but a sort of national religion. This meant both filling the religion with national-political content and the other way round, filling the national ideology with religious symbolism. Meanwhile, this gave a wide range of possibilities for Protestant denominational ties to express historical and cultural traditions, rather than doctrines and pronounced religious identity. However, it is important to reemphasise that this 19th-century nationalism with the

⁵ Brandt, Juliane, A protestánsok és a millennium. (Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a késő 19. század nemzeti ünnepeinek tükrében) *Századvég* 1998/11. 167–193. Brandt, Juliane, Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a 19. századi Magyarországon: a protestáns egyházak. *Századvég* 2003/3. 57–93. Kósa, László: Protestantism in Hungarian Culture. In Gereben, Ferenc (ed.), *Hungarian Minorities and Central Europe: Regionalism, National and Religious Identity*, Piliscsaba: Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem BTK, 2001, 178-193.

idea of “Calvinism/Hungarian religion”, as we have seen, was originally liberal. All later criticism, from every angle, aimed at this aspect.⁶

3. Concerning the third dominant factor which had enormous effect on the religious thinking of the discussed period, we must highlight the well-known events, cataclysms of public history and politics: the defeat in the World War, the resultant revolutions, the peace treaties closing the war, and the trauma of the collapse of historical Hungary. The trauma of the treaty of Trianon became the definitive experience of a generation, and, obviously, the Reformed Church also experienced it as an exceptional tribulation. Think about it: the Hungarian Reformed Church, only a generation after having been unified in 1881, was scattered again in the successor states of Trianon. Or: In 1909, at the Calvin anniversary in Geneva, it was the Hungarian Reformed Church which represented the largest unified church with Calvinist roots in Europe, and ten years later it became the largest Protestant diaspora in Europe.⁷

4. Finally, as the fourth factor one must call attention to the demographic and political strengthening of post-Trianon Hungarian Catholicism. The appearance of an expressly innovative, political Catholicism; its recent and successful synthesis with a neo-nationalism of governmental background; the national- catholic rhetoric of the new course all posed serious challenge to Reformed Hungarians. According to certain accounts, at the beginning of the 1920s, the speeches of the well-known Jesuit Father, Béla Bangha, concerning the Christian renewal of Hungary, were more widely heard by Reformed people than Catholics. This obviously resulted in a defined sense of minority status among the Hungarian Calvinists.⁸

These together, that is: 1. the increasingly obvious signs of inner crisis and secularising tendencies 2. the decline of liberal Protestantism 3. the trauma of Trianon, and 4. the sense of minority status all together led Hungarian Protestantism to a serious sense of crossroads. One of the determining persons of this path-finding, and of the redefinition of Reformed denominational identity; the most influential figure of interwar Hungarian Protestantism was the bishop László Ravasz.

⁶ Kósa, László: Felekezeti és nemzetiségi azonosság-tudat kapcsolódása: A magyar protestáns példa In Papp Richárd – Szarka László (eds.), *Bennünk élő múltjaink. Történelmi tudat - kulturális emlékezet*, Zenta: Vajdasági Magyar Művelődési Intézet, 2008, 391-400.

⁷Hatos, Pál Az 1909-es Kálvin-jubileum. In KÓSA, László: *Reformátusok Budapesten* Vol. II. Budapest, Argumentum Publishing House, 2006, 1163–1178.

⁸Hatos, Pál, A magyar protestantizmus és eszmei fordulata Tisza Istvántól Ravasz Lászlóig. *Múltunk*, 2005/1. 89–117.

Thus, in the following I would like to outline briefly his relevant views relating to the question of nation and confession, highlighting only a few aspects of these complex issue.

László Ravasz, as part of his ambitious episcopal programme in 1922, declared “the creation of an integral Calvinism: pure in its institutions, worldview and confession with its first and most important duty of preserving the essence: evangelical Christianity”⁹. Thus, for László Ravasz the starting point of the intellectual renewal of Protestantism lied in the return to Biblical foundations and in pledging to the traditions of Luther and Calvin, which defined Protestant theology – in other words, it lied in the primacy of the religious roots of Reformation and of Reformed identity, in concentrating on their religiousness. This ideological-theological shift provides the interpretative framework for the bishop’s concepts on nation and on the relations of nation and Christianity.

Concerning this, let me highlight a few aspects of this complex question.

It is well-known that one of the great temptations of modernity was the conception of political ideologies (including nationalism) as a kind of political religion, that is, the sacralisation of those ideologies. Ravasz reflected on this phenomena in his text titled “Spirit of the age/ or *Zeitgeist* and revelation”. As he puts it: “While *Zeitgeist* is a temporal trend rooted in the human intellect and is historically defined, revelation is eternal. The problem begins when these two are interchanged: the dignity of revelation is bestowed upon *Zeitgeist*, or the truths of revelation are reduced to the level of a particular *Zeitgeist*”.¹⁰ The first process results in a false substitute for religion, in idolatry; the second leads to scepticism or faithlessness. But both – argues Ravasz - “endanger Christianity in its wholeness”. Ravasz consistently defines the Reformed position in opposition to two intellectual agenda. One is Ultramontane Catholicism, the other is secularisation, which (and the bishop here makes a fundamental recognition) “has deviated from the ideological world of the Enlightenment to that of nationalism”. Accordingly, in Ravasz’s reading, the secular threat to Christianity is twofold: one is Bolshevism resurrecting the anti-religious traditions of the Enlightenment. The other is nationalism functioning as a secular substitute for religion, as a political religion, which took its most threatening form in Nazi neo-paganism. This recognition by Ravasz is apparent at quite an early time. I quote from his speech in 1931: “It is no wonder that the totalist state,

⁹ Dr. Ravasz László dunamelléki püspök beiktatása alkalmával elhangzott beszédek és imák, B. MAJOR János (ed.) Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület, 1921, 35.

¹⁰ Ravasz, László, Koreszme és kijelentés In id. *Isten rostájában Vol. III.* Budapest, Franklin Publishing House, 1941, 195-211.

especially when born through revolution, lays its will into the hands of one man, who thinks for it, wills for it. We should not be surprised if this will imagines itself as lawmaker for and above the church and wants to tell the church what to believe and how to act. It is the secular image of the Catholic Church, based on some unsound biological theses of race. This approach – argues the bishop - shatters the concept of church”.¹¹

Ravasz sharply turned against secular nationalism functioning as a replacement for religion. Since Ravasz considered national feeling as a definitely religious, transcendent phenomenon, for him the concept of nation was primarily an issue of worldviews. “The nation is not the product of earthly forces, not the sum of arbitrary things but the creative thought of God” – he writes.¹² That is why its cohesion is not defined by material factors: “it is an utterly basic truth that the nation is not held together by land, not by the organisation of state, not by economic fellowship but by spirit”.¹³

Thus, for Ravasz the national bond is a spiritual bond, first and foremost. Linguistic, regional and economic characteristics are secondary. To put it differently, his conception of nation is not defined by political fellowship, but by emphasising the spiritual sense of nation. He outlines three acts here: 1. the knowledge of national traditions 2. pledging to history experienced as a national community 3. the missionary aspect of being Hungarian.

The result of this is that for Ravasz the nation is not only a spiritual concept, but at the same time, also a moral-ethical one. I quote: “belonging to the nation is always an intellectual and moral approach, a spiritual reality”.¹⁴ Searching for the intellectual sources of this range of ideas, we find his background of the so-called Transylvanian school, incorporating the influence of Károly Böhm, the greatest Hungarian Neo-Kantian philosopher. The theologians present here can describe, much more subtly than me, the role of the Neo-Kantian philosophy, and of the value theology played in the formation of Ravasz’s views, and the historians can

¹¹ Ravasz László, Egyház és állam – nemzet és emberiség, *Protestáns Szemle* 1931. november, 243.

¹² Ravasz, László, Nemzeti lét és nemzeti öntudat. In id. *Legyen világosság Vol. III.* Budapest, Franklin Publishing House, 1938, 230.

¹³ Ravasz, László, Szellemi egység. In id. *Legyen világosság Vol. III.* Budapest, Franklin Publishing House, 1938, 301.

¹⁴ Ravasz, László, Asszimiláció és disszimiláció In id. *Isten rostájában Vol. III.* Budapest, Franklin Publishing House, 1941, 356.

find the set of arguments of the trend in the history of ideas, which is connected to Gyula Szekfű, the significant historian of the period.¹⁵

What is important for our purpose here is that Ravasz defined being Hungarian primarily as a concept of value, the realisation of Christian morality on the national level. The nation and Hungarian identity for him served one purpose: Christian faith and value system. It is for this purpose people should be good Hungarians and a strong nation. “Since the most super man is the Christ-like man, our duty, as Hungarians, is to become Christ-like in order to become truly Hungarian”.¹⁶

This religious, national metaphysics results in a number of fundamentals:

1: Since for Ravasz nation was a moral concept – as we have seen in a previous quotation – he clearly opposed any kind of racial theories. As he puts it in 1927: “Being Hungarian is not a racial notion but a moral marker”.¹⁷ According his argumentation: the best Hungarian is the highest on a moral level. And for Ravasz this highest moral level is the Reformed moral conception.

2: Consequently, the issue of social problems, including that of national renewal, is basically an issue of mission. Thus, mission based on Christian faith and morality is the duty of the church, for the sake of the national community. But here, a fundamental dilemma arises, concerning the way home and foreign missions of the church – prioritising evangelisation and spiritual renewal – relates to a) secular society and b) to non-Christian layers of society. Also, how can it voice and represent basic Christian values and realise them with consequence in the political world. These dilemmas became potential pitfalls in the time of Anti-Jewish Laws, when the church had to take a stance on the issue. The lack of success in the synthesis of theological, political and humanitarian angles led to the well-known contradictory historical situation, that while the leadership of the Reformed Church, including Ravasz, had responsibility in passing the first and second discriminative Anti-Jewish laws, his merits are indisputable in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust and organising church protests.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hegedűs, Loránt, *Újkantiánus és értékteológia*. Budapest, Mundus Publishing House 1996., Tóth-Matolcsi, László, *Műhely a lehetetlenséghez. Ravasz László és Bibó István kapcsolata*. Budapest, Argumentum Publishing House, *Eszmetörténeti Könyvtár 4.*, 2005, 142-148.

¹⁶ Ravasz, László, A nemzeti lélek. In id. *Legyen világosság Vol. III*. Budapest, Franklin V, 1938, 255.

¹⁷ Ravasz, László, A keresztyénség és az erkölcs In id. *Tudom, kinek hittem*. Budapest, Studium Publishing House, 1927, 16.

¹⁸ Hatos, Pál, The Post-war Reformed Church in face of the Holocaust., *Hungarian Studies* 2004, Vol 18, 2004/2, 199-213., Tóth-Matolcsi, László: *ibid.* 168-190, 229.

3: The fact that the church considered the nation as the object of its mission program had apparent relations to society, and resulted in a church attitude highly sensitive of social, economic and communal problems. It is a well-known fact that the Reformed Church took up the role of representing significant national problems of the age. The issue of the excessively ill-proportioned land ownership, or the problem of only children in Transdanubia come to mind here.¹⁹

4: For Ravasz the consequent separation of national and state entities was crucial: while the nation is an ethical category, the state is a political one. One may support its political aims, as Ravasz supported, presumably, the Christian-based politics of the PM's, István Bethlen's liberal-conservative consolidation, yet he was more inclined to find alternatives to the close ties between church and state. As he puts it in his speech as bishop: "Increasing state power is desirable, yet by that increase, social autonomy diminishes, and with it the autonomy of church, the noblest and socially most important of all, also diminishes. Today there is utter harmony between leaders of church and state, but the moment they turn against each other the whole structure of the church of today would collapse (...) I perceive that every church that grows into vital fusion with the state collapses, in its apparent external structure, in the time of a state crisis".²⁰

What I would like to emphasise from the last quotation is the essential concept of church autonomy.

Dear Colleagues,

Now, we have no time to elaborate on the way Reformed theological teachings was modified during the post-war years (1945-48) and was distorted by the 1950s. Instead, I would like to conclude my presentation with 1956, with two quotations of bishop Ravasz from that time. The concerns of the revolution pertaining to church history, the antecedents of ecclesiastical renewal and the major turning points of the revolution are well-known. The exceptional importance of 1956 for the sake of our story is that it permitted the freedom of speech after almost a decade of totalitarian dictatorship. After a dictatorship which was both openly anti-religious and suppressed national sovereignty.

¹⁹ Kiss, Réka: Ravasz László püspöki működése. In Kósa László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten* Vol. I.. Budapest, Argumentum Publishing House, 2006. 537–578.

²⁰ Ravasz László *17. püspöki jelentése* Budapest, 1938.

The first quotation is from Ravasz's radio statement on the first of November. I draw attention to this text because it was the first and final occasion for Ravasz to speak freely, to the entire Hungarian public and express his thoughts beyond the framework of the Reformed community. That is why the text contains, essentially condensed, everything Ravasz thought of the situation of the church and its connection to the national community. I only want to emphasise one aspect of the speech, what Ravasz says about the revolution itself, namely, that the revolution of '56 was a moral liberation in its essence. "The Reformed Church in Hungary turns with admiration and reverence to the heroes of the national revolution ... who achieved the victory of our moral liberation with their blood" – the quotation goes.²¹ What demands our attention is that Ravasz does not emphasise the liberation from political or social oppression nor the recovery of national liberty and sovereignty, but moral liberation. This is the starting point from which he unfolds the account on the previous decade of the church, and defines accordingly what the duties of Reformed people are, including ministers and elders.

The other quotation comes from the proceedings of the Reformed Renewal Movement on the 30th of November, 1956.

"When I resigned from my service as bishop, my final words were these: all must set aside every work and look for funding members for the church so that the church could survive without external subsidies. These were my last words. That was not what happened. They instead went to the State Office for Church Affairs, and looked for the greatest possible subsidies (...) The church became a paid employee of the state to reach its goals in state politics. The church was recognised by the state as the best tool for propaganda, because it retained its past honour, and it reached those regions of the soul which the state could not (...) This was the reason for all kinds of corruption."²²

The fundamental message of this informal observation is in harmony with the public proclamation of the Renewal Movement. We know that the bishop, who experienced much, wrote the public proclamation amid rapidly changeable, vague, unforeseeable, malleable conditions in politics and church politics after the military suppression of the revolution. The appeal struggled for the renewal of the church and stretched the limits defined by political reality. Both, the condensed, almost thesis-like wording of the program and his informal

²¹ Ravasz, László: A magyar reformátusok szava, rádiószózat. In Bárczay, Gyula (ed): Ravasz László Válogatott írások 1945-1968., Bern, Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1988, 274-275.

²² Kiss, Réka: (ed): *Kelt mint fent. Íratok a Református Megújulási Mozgalom történetéből (1956-1957)*. Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület, 2007, 425.

observation revealed clearly that the cornerstone of Ravasz's church politics was as follows: the restoration/preservation of the inner autonomy of the church is a basic requirement.

Summing up: the most important message of bishop Ravasz in 1956 was that ecclesiastical and national renewal must be based on morality and autonomy, morality and freedom.

Looking back on his life, the elderly, and by that time permanently retired bishop drew the lesson of his career richly marked both with successes and failures. I quote: "My achievements and disappointments multiply certify that ecclesiastical life must be spiritual, must be independent, it must not connect to political systems but must find its calling in service".²³

For the elderly, former bishop the problematic of the complex relations of church – nation – state has reduced to three basic principles: morality – service – freedom. I think, we can read his words as a testimony of an outstanding but not infallible confessor of the Hungarian Reformed Church. A confessor who not only experienced two totalitarian dictatorship, but for a long time governed the Church in the grim history of the 20th century.

Thank you for your attention.

²³ Ravasz, László: *Emlékezéseim*, Budapest, Református Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya, 1992, 395.