

# Ethnology of Religion

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# Experiencing Religion

New approaches to personal religiosity

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## Chapter 8

### Crossing the Borders of the Sacred and the Profane: Holy Visions of a Clairvoyant from Hungary<sup>61</sup>

Orsolya Gyöngyössy

Visions, transcendental impulses and the apparitions of saints constitute a special category of religious experience. Unlike the highly organized system of the church, clairvoyants are in what can be regarded as a kind of *religious illegality*: they keep their experiences hidden mostly because of the fear of incomprehension and a possible attitude of rejection by the others. Still, some clairvoyants accepted their 'special gift from God' and became leading figures in local church life. In Hungary people used to call these charismatic individuals *szentember* (holy man / holy woman). A *szentember* is a person whose religiosity is extraordinarily heartfelt and who has mystical enthusiasm (Barna 1998; Czövek 2000:106).

It seems that visions break down borders between 'two worlds' (visible and invisible), opening the gate – which keeps the two sides of existence (transcendent and immanent) completely separated – and giving free scope to a reciprocal communication. As a result, seers often consider their transcendental experiences to be as natural as the actions of the material world. Wolfgang Beinert – who tends to regard visions as psychogenic projections – said:

“when an apparition happens, God elevates the spiritual life of man, and leads the seer beyond his or her own possibilities. This explains how and why clairvoyants sense (see, hear) normally invisible beings (Jesus Christ, the Holy Virgin, Saints) or things that happened in the past (birth, or the crucifixion of Christ) as real.” (Beinert 2004:454)

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It is a miraculous fusion in the life of the individual. János Hetény also points out the importance of this phenomenon which tends to show a close similarity to the world view of the Middle Ages: "There is no difference between the *religious I* and the *civil I*, so the connection with the Absolute is perpetual and its manifestations are concrete, living and informal" (Hetény 2001:37).

According to Roman Catholic Church doctrine, the revelation was locked at the time when the last apostle died. Additions or modifications are now excluded. The message of further visions is accepted only when its content harmonizes with the Bible (Antalóczy 2000). Visions without a new dogmatic message are *obiectum occasionale*; they strengthen the given teaching of the Church. The apparitions of the Holy Virgin are mostly private revelations (*revelationes privatae*), so they do not imply direct dogmatic consequences. These private revelations inspire the Church in given situations to do its work according to the Gospel (Rahner-Vorgrimler 1980: 458-459). Protestant Churches reject all kinds of visions, and especially their messages. Although visions are not accepted by doctrine we can find several examples among Protestants too. While Protestant seers travel between heaven and hell, Catholics report miraculous meetings with saints, the Virgin Mary or the Holy Trinity (Gacsályi 1985:260-272; Harsányi 1985:190-218).

My case study is about a Roman Catholic clairvoyant living in a small town in Hungary (Gyöngyössi 2008)<sup>62</sup>. She has been having visual and auditory perceptions in the Church of Our Lady since 2003. Since then, holy visions have given her not only delightful visual experiences but also a mission, advice and instructions. The way she tries to visualize and read the message of visions at the same time by making drawings is most interesting. Those drawings of the visions put the transcendental experiences in a scenic frame, open to hermeneutical challenges.

The aim of my essay is to examine how these transcendental experiences change and shape the clairvoyant's way of living and thinking. Can we recognize any influence on the people around her? The results could bring us closer to understanding the connection between the message of visions and the convictions of this religious person.

Firstly we need to know a few details about the background of the clairvoyant we shall call Mary. Mary is a 76-year-old Roman Catholic woman living in a small agricultural town (Csongrád) in southern Hungary, by the River Tisza. Mary's family were quite poor; they had only a few livestock and a small plot for vegeta-

<sup>62</sup> The town in question, Csongrád, is situated by the river Tisza in the south of Hungary, with around 18,000 inhabitants. Csongrád is a typical agricultural town with a Roman Catholic majority (around 93%). The patron saint is Our Lady (Maria Assumptae).

bles. The parents – as usual at the time and in this area – gave Mary and her four siblings a deeply religious upbringing. She was always entranced when she saw the painting of the Crucified Christ in the Church, she used to ask her mother to tell the story of the Saviour again and felt a strong sympathy for him.

She was only thirteen when religious education was forbidden and ended in schools.<sup>63</sup> But her family did not stop attending the Sunday Mass and praying together every evening. Mary was fifteen when her father died as a result of an accident and she had to give up her studies and work to help support the family. After her marriage she gave birth to two boys and worked as a shop assistant until her retirement. In her active life period she used to pray the Rosary at home, and when her children grew up she joined the local Confraternity and went to church nearly every day.

In early 1999 she fell suddenly ill and her life was in danger. She prayed the Rosary and asked Jesus and the Virgin Mary for recovery: "Oh dear Jesus, please give me strength so I can go to church!" Finally she attributed her recovery to the help received from the Holy helpers. Mary thinks it was the first miracle in her life.

The face of Jesus appeared for the first time in the Church of Our Lady in Csongrád in 2001, on the cover of the Eucharist. Mary was surprised and thankful for the experience. She thought that she received the apparitions in exchange for her prayers.

Later the visions became regular and varied. They can be static; sometimes they move or change. The colours of the faces are similar to the usual human skin, complemented with brown and gold shades and an unearthly shine. The visions can be observed only from a distance – approximately 5-10 metres – and appear on the objects around the altar (for example the host, tabernacle, Eucharist cover, etc.). The clairvoyant emphasizes in her narration the splendour and dynamism of the visions. She describes the faces as alive.

The apparitions occur spontaneously, no emotional or any kind of tactical experience precedes them. The clairvoyant is not responsible directly for the creation of the preconditions. But – as she mentioned – she perceives visions usually after confession or communion. The subjects of the visions are the sufferings and resurrection of Jesus and the sorrow of the Holy Mother. Although the seer feels honest sympathy towards Jesus and the Virgin Mary, she does not share their grief in a direct (physical) way. She does not have any stigmata and never feels the same pain as Jesus did.

The holy visions give her not only delightful visual experiences but also a mission, advice and instructions. Following the guidance of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary she recognized her mission in society. The lack of religious education and

<sup>63</sup> It was a major policy after the atheist-communist takeover in Hungary in 1948.

the general immoral lifestyle of today inspired her to fight for the souls of young people. She used to write letters to state services (department of education) asking for obligatory bible classes and religious education. She thinks that she is a kind of instrument or mediator of the will of the Virgin Mary. She writes automatically as the Holy Mother inspires her. She does not hear instructions in an auditory way, only through feelings and impulses that come from 'somewhere outside' her mind.

The only way she can express herself and share her experiences with her environment is by drawing: after a strong emotional and visual experience she tries to draw what normally would be indescribable in words. Mary likes drawing in her spare time too; in her house there are paintings she has made of birds and flowers. She emphasizes that her drawings about apparitions are not the exact depictions of what she really sees. It is only during interviews that she is forced to put the visual expressions into words and coherent texts.

When I ask for the meaning and the message of the visions she never becomes confused. Mary interprets the visions for herself clearly with the help of Jesus and the Virgin Mother. The holy faces emphasize the presence of Jesus in the human world for her. The message of Jesus is vital even if we are usually unable to see him. The Virgin Mary also expresses her concern for our souls; the clairvoyant saw her statue in the Church crying. The main point of the apparitions is apocalyptic, with the hope that true faith may help to save humanity.

The sacred experiences have become integrated into her everyday life. For her the sacred and the profane world have nearly the same level of reality. Nevertheless she receives these messages only in the special atmosphere of the church, she brings the visions "closer" to reality by making them visible for everyone in her profane environment. She puts her drawings in different places at home where these pictures can be easily seen, e.g. behind the glass front of a cupboard.

Her natural modesty and reticent, contemplative temperament prevents her from organizing (or leading) a religious group or speaking about her experiences in a public sphere. Mary is not planning to advertise her visions because she is afraid of the condemnation of wider society. She does not seek leadership roles or engage in self-promotion.

The clairvoyant regularly shares the story of the holy faces with the local Catholic priests in the frames of the confessional. In the last ten years – since the visions became regular – there were six or seven priests in the local parish. Most of them attached no special meaning to the visions. Sometimes they warned Mary to keep her secret if she did not want to be an object of ridicule. An old and respected priest said that he did not want his parish to become a place of pilgrimage.

Mary took the advice seriously so the wider society knows nothing about the appearances. She has two churchgoing friends who have been let into the secret and Mary gave them drawings as a present for their birthdays. So they are related to the visions somehow. Both of them were happy and surprised to hear about the mystical experiences. Later one of them warned her that maybe it is not allowed to draw the holy face of Jesus this way. The other wept tears of joy on receiving the drawings and wished to have similar impressions. Mary's family takes a neutral, understanding view. Her children and grandchildren never show serious interest in their grandmother's unusual experiences. In fact it is not a topic of family conversations.

The only person who lives among the visible mementos of the holy faces and who cannot avoid adopting a position on them is her husband. He is confronted with the drawings every day at home. His opinion is sometimes unclear, mainly dismissive and neutral. He never accompanies his wife to church and does not inquire about the drawings and the visions, unless Mary makes feeble efforts to explain them. The clairvoyant thinks that her husband is under the control of the Evil One who makes him blind to the truth. This assertion has no consequences in their profane level of life. They live in a kind of harmony.

It can be said that Mary's interpretations of the visions always strengthen a formally accepted article of the Catholic teaching. The visions give no further information about Jesus or Mary, the meaning does not carry theological novelties. The visions have not led to radical changes in Mary's way of life. Holy appearances prove and legitimize her conviction as reflected in her own life career. The visions do not shape, but rather strengthen her faith. Indeed, these experiences have enriched her self-identity with the feeling that she is elected by God.

The clairvoyant explains the visions for herself. The first level of interpretation – the presence of the Holy helpers in our lives – is so obvious for her that she does not feel the need to waste words proving it. Jesus and the Virgin Mary do not 'just exist' in our world, they help and work for humanity. Moreover they constantly intervene in our everyday life.

The unusual experiences gave the visionary a kind of mission and made this shy and reserved elderly woman brave enough to write letters to state departments arguing for obligatory bible classes. She is sure that this is the only way to save the souls of younger generations. My lengthy investigation and my study contributed to her confidence in an indirect manner. She was really enthusiastic and grateful for the written record of the appearances. Sometimes she keeps saying how happy she is to have these, as her experiences have not been lost and the "memory of paper" saves them for the future.

The people around her – priests, friends and relatives – try to keep her close to the profane world of reality. They are trying to protect her from the potential attacks of the “outside world”. The will of the protective circle harmonizes with her natural shyness and modesty. The well-intentioned warnings keep her in the shadow. So the effect of the visions on Mary’s environment is negligible: silence and perplexity surround her.

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