

## A CALVINIST PIOUS SOCIETY

### CONVERSION STORIES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** I collected stories of conversion from university students in Kolozsvár/Cluj. They had come into contact with representatives of the revival movement and constructed their own identities under the influence of the identity patterns conveyed by these people. The conversion means that their relationship with God becomes personal in that they accept salvation from sin for themselves, declare themselves to be the children of God and place their lives under His guidance. This goes together with a new way of life involving daily reading and interpretation of the Bible, impromptu personal prayers and participation in charity work. In the stories of conversion they speak about this new identity and the process through which they changed their identities. Parallel with the restructuring of the individual identity the collective identity also changes since, from the time of their conversion, they regard themselves as members of the community and the activity of the community extends to all fields of life: Bible hours, religious services, sports, summer camps, film club, etc.

**Keywords:** revival movement, conversion, structuring identity, community

In the 1890s the internal mission was launched in the Calvinist Church. The Scottish Mission had an influence on the internal mission. The aim of the Scottish Mission was to convert Jews. Calvinist and Lutheran ministers also took part in the Bible circles they organised. From 1878 this mission had its own building which later became the centre of the revival movement. The Charity institutions and associations were set up as a result of the activity of the internal mission. This mission developed into a revival movement when it found a suitable leader in the person of Aladár Szabó, jr., a theology teacher.

According to Aladár Szabó only revival, conversion from the old way of life, could resolve the crisis of the church. Aladár Szabó was assisted by Aladár Szilassy, István Kecskeméthy and Béla Kenessey. They introduced the main areas of activity of the internal mission, starting from Budapest: Sunday schools, charity institutions, they established the first Hungarian Christian Youth Association (Keresztényen Ifjúsági Egyesület – KIE), the Christian Student Federation, and the Bethany Society (1903). The latter was one of the organisations of communal Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In her article on religious practice in Kórógy, Márta Korpics puts the beginning of the revival movement to 1945–48, but does not refer to any literature.<sup>2</sup> Ibolya Fazekas

<sup>1</sup> I have summed up the beginnings of the revival movement on the basis of BUCSAY 1985: 222–224.

<sup>2</sup> KORPICS 1994: 177.

Vajs, formerly Calvinist minister in Kórógy has commented on the article by Korpics. In one of these comments she argues that the concept she represents is the Reformist legacy, consequently she did not take a “new Calvinist concept” to the village.<sup>3</sup> The Jungian Marie-Louise von Franz considers that revival movements arise within religious systems because the religious symbols become worn out, the religious contents lose their divine power and it is through revival and the possibilities of new interpretation that they regain their original meaning.<sup>4</sup> This means that the former minister of Kórógy may have represented the Calvinist legacy, but as the essay by Korpics shows, it was a renewed version.

There were also centres of this revival movement in the part of Romania inhabited by Hungarians, in Transylvania. During the period of communism it operated as an underground movement but after the Romanian revolution of 1989 it was able to continue legally, the CE Federation (Célegyenesen Krisztusért és az Egyházért [Straight Ahead for Christ and the Church]) was registered and they carry out their activity within this frame. The founders of the CE Federation declare that they are the continuers of the Bethany Society. The essence of the movement is that it places the emphasis on personal faith which it regards as the basis of community relations: if the individual members have a living contact with God, then the community itself also lives. Their other fundamental principle is that members must bear witness to this faith; they must carry out missionary activity in the micro communities to which they belong. This movement operates within the frame of the Calvinist Church. Despite the fact that many people regard it as a form of sect, they do not wish to break away from the church. Modernity has made the identity patterns thoroughly elaborated by the church irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> However, the revival movements have filled the empty religious practice with content, thereby also giving validity to the identity patterns. The constructionist identity theory holds that the differences are not innate, they are constructed and socialisation plays a big part in structuring the identity.<sup>6</sup> Society offers countless identity patterns, thereby giving the possibility to change identity. Those who change their way of life under the influence of the movement are actually constructing another identity. The problem of identity comprises recognition by others: all individuals want others to look on them as what they themselves consider they really are.<sup>7</sup> This is why they bear witness to who they really are in the form of the conversion story.

Although the influence of this movement was not felt in the early 20th century in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca/Klausenburg, it became one of the focal points after the Romanian revolution of 1989, thanks to the university students who had come to the university town from settlements where the revival movement had gained ground. Since they had moved far away from the communities to which they belonged and

<sup>3</sup> KORPICS 1994: 183–184.

<sup>4</sup> FRANZ 1998: 34–35.

<sup>5</sup> CALHOUN 1997: 101

<sup>6</sup> CALHOUN 1997: 103.

<sup>7</sup> CALHOUN 1997: 104.

where they practised a pious way of life, they felt the need for a community. They began to hold Bible hours in hostel rooms even before 1989 when it was forbidden to hold meetings. After the revolution far more students attended university and a hostel room was no longer sufficient. The ban was lifted and the Bible hours were moved to the meeting room of a Calvinist church. Growing numbers joined the community, indicating that the mission among the university students was successful and this room too, became too small. The community now uses the meeting hall of another Calvinist church.

Kolozsvár is a university centre in Transylvania, Romania where Hungarian-speaking students can also study. I did a case study among university students living in Kolozsvár who had become followers of the revival movement. I collected stories of conversion from them and in analysing them I observed how they identified with the principles and way of life of a community and in this way how they built a new identity. I have not given the names either of my interviewees or of those active in the movement but have used only initials since the stories they told are very personal. Olga Nagy has pointed out that it would be worth making a study among followers of the revival movement directed at the religious experience; she suggested to record the manifestations in which they narrate their conversion, or bear witness.<sup>8</sup> The concept of conversion can be interpreted with the biblical story of the apostle Paul. There are commonly used expressions in the Hungarian language – *pálfordulás* (conversion of Paul) and *Saulusból Paulussá lett* (Saul became Paul) which refer to this story. Saul persecuted Christians until Christ spoke to him and struck him with temporary blindness on the road to Damascus. From then on his life was entirely changed: from a persecutor of Christians he became a preacher of the faith.<sup>9</sup> Among the interviewees, G. L. gave two interpretations of the concept of conversion: “I understand conversion to mean an attitude where, whether you want to or not, you always ask whether you are doing the right thing”, in other words a control of actions, the awareness that actions must be controlled. The other interpretation was: “what I understand by conversion is that everything is wiped clean, in my opinion there are no questions there”. In this sense conversion is a complete change, a definite turning-point. Gy. A. made the following statement about conversion: “I think that if someone is converted, it is something inexplicable that does not depend on him, but God tries to speak to you and in most cases you are unable to accept it, but once in a person’s lifetime there is a moment when he is able to receive that seed. That is grace, when that moment occurs.” Korpics also gives two important characteristics of conversion: one is a re-examination of the individual’s life, followed by a confession of sin, the other is a qualitatively different, renewed way of life.<sup>10</sup>

As a way of bearing witness the members of the revival movement recount how they changed their lives, how they accepted this different way of life. The stories of conversion are told on occasions of evangelisation, in Bible circles and personal

<sup>8</sup> NAGY, 1991: 14.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 9: 1–20.

<sup>10</sup> KORPICS 1994: 177–178.

conversations. I do not have stories recorded on such occasions. The stories of conversion that I studied were told at my request. Many of those I asked refused the request because it was made for the purpose of research. One person said that he would tell me but it was so personal that he did not want it to be used for research. Everyone I asked said that they could not link their conversion to a single, traumatic turning-point. They regard the conversion as the result of a process, but in general link it to a feeling, conversation or experience. The interviewees expressed the fear that their story might not be what I wanted because it was not spectacular; because it was inexplicable; because it was not a “conversion like Paul’s”.

The question arises: in which genre category can the conversion stories be classified? The essence of these texts is that they recount in the first person how an ideology was accepted and how as a result they changed their lives, or expressed in other terms, their experiences with the transcendent. This means that the experience or event really occurred because its influence can be shown in the change in the way of life. The criterion applied in the examination or categorisation of the texts is not whether the things occurring in the text correspond to the rational worldview. The conversion story is thus a true story as regards genre. This remains so until someone refutes this statement and demonstrates that they can be classified in another genre category. Ilona Dobos distinguishes two major categories of true stories: stories of experience recounted in the first person and stories that have been passed on and recounted and therefore represent a higher degree of folklorisation.<sup>11</sup> Within these two major categories she lists a number of types of stories, depending on the subject of the experience. In the group of stories of experience recounted in the first person the conversion stories can be regarded as an independent type, their subject being the religious experiences. Miklós Réthey Prikkel lists more than two hundred names that belong in the genre category of true story.<sup>12</sup> Among these the conversion story can be regarded as related to the religious narrative and the miracle narrative.

One group of members of the movement grew up in families practising their religion, they were raised in a tradition of active religious life. For them the conversion is the result of a process, the turning-point was when the tradition became personal for them, that is, when they experienced or felt that Jesus Christ saved them too. They applied the concepts of sin – redemption – salvation to themselves. This was followed by a kind of change which was naturally not a radical departure from their previous lives. The cases of B. M. and G. L. can be classified here. B. M. and G. L. identified with the identity pattern transmitted by the religious family.

B. M. is from a large Christian family. The family has an active religious life, reading the Bible every evening. The event leading up to the conversion what that she asked for a Bible and Jesus for Christmas; her mother replied that she can give a Bible but not Jesus, she can only pray that Jesus will be born in her heart too. She

<sup>11</sup> DOBOS 1986: 195–208.

<sup>12</sup> RÉTHEY PRIKKEL 1991: 84–85.

links her conversion to a date, 5 December, 1985, when during a family devotional session at the age of eight and a half she asked why it was a sin for the heathen king to sacrifice his son to the idol gods and not a sin for God to sacrifice Jesus for mankind. This was followed by a conversation with her mother; she does not remember the content but she felt guilt and conversion was manifested at the level of emotions: "I felt almost tangibly that He forgives, that Jesus Christ had to die so that we can have eternal life. That he really wants to free us, and at the time this somehow became personal for me". This was followed by prayer with her mother: "Then we prayed together and I felt that it was a decisive turning-point, when I felt that I am God's, that the way I live is very important". The change occurred in her behaviour; her mother said that she had been a whining child but changed greatly.

G. L. grew up in a Catholic family with a tradition of religious practice. There was no traumatic event in his life. During adolescence he rejected the religious way of life, but this protest ended when he emerged from this period. The change of direction is not linked either to an event, an experience or a feeling, it was merely indicated by a change in the way of life and thinking: "at the time there really was a kind of conversion, but it took the form of, I don't know, I condemned my earlier drinking, or if I touched beer or anything else, I always asked myself whether what I was doing was good". Precisely because this change cannot be linked to a specific turning-point, he questions whether he is converted.

Those who did not grow up in a religious family came into contact with the members of the movement on different occasions. One case of such contact is living together in the hostel with others who are converted. Another possibility is when members of the movement invite friends who do not practice their religion to the camp they organise. On such occasions the outsiders generally come into contact with a different way of life and view of the world which they find positive. They become acquainted in the community with a different identity pattern and under this influence they change their own identity and structure their new identity.

Gy. A. could not link his conversion to a date either. He came into contact while still in secondary school with a minister (H. L.) who was a participant of the revival movement. When he saw how the minister's family lived he understood that Christianity is not only a worldview but also a way of life. He saw the difference between the conflict-solving strategies of his own family and the minister's family: the ministers took their problems to God, that is, they discussed them with a third person. He took part in the youth Bible hours directed by the minister, went with them to a camp organised in the Carpathian mountains. He was converted at the camp, but he does not know what preaching or story influenced this: "suddenly at that camp I was able to declare that I belong to God. But it was not a vow or not a declaration made in a very public place, it was once in a prayer and in the end I really can't say how this change happened in me". Since then he has not been able to apply even half of what he saw in the camp and learned from the minister, but he is trying.

G. T. took part in religious life as a child through her grandparents, but when she went to live with her parents her contact with the church was broken off. At that

time the Bible was a vague story for her and she speaks of “an image of God resembling Father Christmas”. She moved to Kolozsvár to attend university where she lived together in the hostel with converted people who had been converted under the influence of a particular minister (H. L.). She saw their way of life which she regarded as good and attractive and heard their conversations. They did not invite her to the Bible circle, but she received an invitation to the summer camp which she accepted. She recounts the following about her experiences in the camp: “I heard about Jesus Christ, Son of God, which is rather strange that I heard about it so late. (...) What I mean is not that I hadn’t heard it with my ears but simply that I had not heard it said in a way that had any real meaning. And I think what is the most important for me is that I saw people living a quite different life.” From then on she went to the community Bible circle. The following year she went to camp again and had a conversation with a minister (V. F.). She said that she cannot decide without a traumatic or positive experience. But the minister said that one can decide for Christ even without a sign. Then the conversion occurred: “I felt that I don’t feel anything, that there is no change in my thinking, simply that an existential situation has been made complete, I somehow saw not only with my mind but with my whole being that this is really so, that it is ridiculous for me to want signs. (...) And really all that happened is that I prayed for the first time in my life. I sat down to pray on that evening: Jesus, I don’t know how I can reach you, but I beg you to be merciful to me.” She cannot point to any change in her life, but she does not want to withdraw what she said and she is convinced that there is no other way.

L. É. went to Kolozsvár to the university and her aim was to study; she regarded knowledge as a certain point in life. After a while she suddenly realised that however much she studied there was still a great deal more that she had to learn, and despite the learning she felt rootless. As a consequence of this crisis her life seemed to have no perspective or aim and she even questioned the meaning of life. Her roommates in the hostel were converted and their example showed that it was possible to live a happy life. Her roommates did not speak to her about God but they encouraged her in her studies, they were happy, cheerful, full of purpose and calm, while L. É. was embittered. The roommates took her to a Christian family and later she often went there to play with the children. She saw that in that family they read the Bible, sang and prayed. She began to attend a Bible circle but for a long while she was unable to accept that the community was not perfect. In her third year she had to choose between repeating the year or not continuing her university studies. She was very exhausted: “I felt that I was going crazy and that was impossible. (...) Then a turning-point occurred in my life when I said that I would repeat the year; I felt that this was the first situation I trusted to God in my life.” The other example she raised to prove divine intervention was when she wrote her thesis; here too she worked in a very exhausted nervous state because of the pressure of time and the last parts of the text were written together with the teacher who was supervising the work: “I went to see her, we wrote it together and I simply felt that this moment, what had happened, was not human intervention.” The change following the turning-point was manifested in her relationship to the members of the community. She was an

introverted person and she found friends in the community and felt drawn out of herself there: "I feel it was God's grace that this succeeded." (L. É.)

S. É. also made friends at the university with a girl who was a member of the community. The girl spoke about her own faith and religious practice, but this had no effect on her because she tried to understand it with her intellect. Her university years were characterised by depression and a state of lethargy. She had two experiences in that period which she associated with the transcendent: "There were two cases like that in that period when I wasn't yet converted... I thought this must be what the believers talk about when they say that the Holy Spirit seized them." One was listening to a hymn and the other was Zefirelli's film about Jesus. The conversion happened on the last evening of a long trip rambling around Hungary. She remembers precisely: it was the 8th of August. She was with a Catholic friend who was not converted. She experienced an emotional crisis: "I was simply washed out, I was afraid of the future and what would become of me". She began to cry and felt guilty; she talked about this to her friend who told her to turn to Christ because He had already given a sign twice. "And, in the end, this was the moment when what I could call my conversion happened. Then I understood in an instant that what J. had told me about Golgotha and the cross, as a good Calvinist, I had understood perfectly with my mind. Now I understood the essence, how I could be saved by this, and how my life could change from that state of lethargy I was in." After a while she no longer felt the presence of God. When she went back to her family she did not have the community, she felt that she did not have to go crazy, she did not have to take it so seriously. She returned to the state she was in before the 8th of August. She considers that her second conversion did not happen in an instant but was a slow process. She recalled memories of the community and once again felt that she was acting foolishly. Then things were clarified during a religious service when she was once again flooded with guilt: "I saw then how much I had sinned and how much this did not count". After the Easter vacation, when she was afraid but this did not have the same effect as previously, she went to a minister (L. L.) and told him that she would like to undergo confirmation. During the confirmation she consciously reinforced the second decision: "It was a real confirmation".

Those who break away or move away from the place of their birth or their friends, who do not find a group meeting their interests and ready to receive them are receptive to the principles of the movement. In the new environment besides study they feel the need for a community where they are welcome and can spend their free time. The resistance is greater if they are able to join a group whose members have a similar attitude to life or a common interest, such as a film club, a philosophy society or folk dance club. The lack of an aim or perspectives, inactivity and depression are factors inducing the individual to turn to God. The attraction of the positive way of life also influences such people to join the movement. Knowledge drawn from the Bible is not in itself sufficient cause for changing the way of life; such knowledge needs to be filled with new meaning and brought up to date. Experiences with the transcendent are also among the causes of conversion: the influence of a hymn or film, the solution of a seemingly hopeless situation are interpreted as divine

intervention. There is also a demand for such experience; G. T. complains to the minister of the absence of such an experience but he assures her that it is not essential. A feeling of guilt does not appear in all cases either, or not to such an extent that the interviewees mention it. It is important to mention that the members of the movement do not practise aggressive conversion like the Jehovah's Witnesses. Two of those who regarded this way of life as a positive model stressed this: "And now, looking back, I am very grateful that they did not insist that I go with them to the meetings, they didn't poke scripture under my nose". (G. T.) "I must say that it was very good for me that they never talked to me about God and all I could see was that it was through their lives that I actually came into contact with God". However, in all cases the decision or conversion was the decisive condition for experiencing religious practice as personal contact with God, but this is not a condition for joining the movement as there are many people who participate in this community life for a while and then drop out. If we observe the individuals on whose way of life this Calvinist devotional model of revival is based, the threads lead to ministers or in one case to the family of a minister (V. F., V. A., H. L., L. L.). Two of the ministers served in Marosvásárhely/Tîrgu Mureş where youth bible circles also operated. This is the reason why members originally from Marosvásárhely represent the biggest group within the micro community in Kolozsvár.

Construction of the individual and collective identity was also the result of the same process: the group of "we, the converted" became separate within the frame of the church. Collective identity expresses belonging somewhere, to someone. L. É. stresses the significance of this: "... I know that now I have friends with whom I can feel liberated, that the youth group has accepted me as a member, because I feel that there is a price for joining a community and I also feel that I have been able to pay that price, that I had to face a lot of things and I very often had to humiliate myself, that is the truth, and accept things that the community dictated". Because of her absence from the community S. É. questioned her new identity: "I was completely alone without the community, obviously the return home had an influence, they were not believers at all". The two main forums maintaining the community are the Wednesday evening Bible hour and the Sunday service where V. P. is one of the ministers. The belonging is also reinforced by shared activities. Koinónia is the cultural section of the CE Federation. It was established in 1990 by H. L., V. A. and V. P. The CE Federation owns the camps at Mahanaim and Péniel. The camps have been operating illegally for 24 years; they began to erect buildings after 1990. Camps of various types are held in these two sites: language camps, children's camps, students' camps, therapy camps of the alcohol rescue mission. Some of the summer camps are also organised by Koinónia, such as the camp for intellectuals. Koinónia deals primarily with book publishing, but it also issues the monthly paper *Kis Tükör* (Little Mirror). The Genezius Society organises the Otherworld Club where talks are given on various subjects and during the examination period art films are shown. The aim of the Protokoll Gallery is to show works of modern art. The minister's wife leads the choir made up of members of the community. The community is important because otherwise the members would drift away from this way of life. Many of the



members try to stay in Kolozsvár or to settle in a town where there is a micro community belonging to the movement. The member organisations in Kolozsvár of the CE Federation provide workplaces for them: Koinónia, Genezius and the Calvinist Rescue Mission. The community strives to cover all areas, from sport to graduation ceremonies for university students.

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