

Themes of Polemical Theology Across Early Modern Literary Genres

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Edited by

Svorad Zavorský, Lucy R Nicholas
and Andrea Riedl

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONVERSION NARRATIVES WRITTEN IN HUNGARIAN

ÁGNES BARICZ

This essay explores the ways in which the new religious identity of early modern converts to Catholicism was shaped by manuals of controversy and guides to religious conversion. Focusing on Hungarian-language printed narratives of conversion from the first half of the eighteenth century, I will show how the theological arguments contained in the mentioned manuals and guides were used to define the converts' new identity. In particular, the aim of this essay is to look closely at a recently discovered conversion narrative attributed to the wife of the apothecary of Târgu Mureș¹ in Transylvania who had been converted from the Reformed religion by the Jesuits in 1741.

The term “conversion narrative” is used here in a broad sense to refer to any account that describes an experience of conversion, be it a change from one religion or confession to another, or an intensification of faith without change of religious affiliation. In early modern literature, conversion narratives are often very closely related to other religious genres, such as religious polemics, sermons, and spiritual autobiographies, of which the last were relatively popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritanism and Pietism.²

¹ Place names appear in the official language of the country in which they are currently located. Târgu Mureș is referred to as Marosvásárhely in Hungarian, and its historical name in German was Neumarkt am Mieresch.

² Conversion narratives focus mainly on spiritual experience and processes of spiritual perfection. See, for example, Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jonathan Strom, “Pietist Conversion Narratives and Confessional Identity,” in *Conversion and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Germany*, ed. David M. Luebke,

The works discussed in this paper are narratives of conversion to Catholicism and can be described as narratives of a *conversio ad ecclesiam*,³ a conversion to the church. With direct reference to confessional conversions from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, Ute Mennecke-Haustein concludes that conversion to Catholicism is a (re)turn to the Church, to the Church principle as opposed to the Protestant Scripture principle.⁴ In the cases I review, the description of conversion is inseparable from theological arguments that supported the convert's decision; such arguments were considered to be highly effective means by which a reader might be led towards the true church. These narratives also served as examples to convince and convert others as well, and accordingly some include detailed guidance on the various steps involved in the conversion process.

The religious and political contexts in the Hungarian Kingdom and Transylvania differed considerably at the beginning of the eighteenth century, nevertheless they had two significant things in common: the Habsburg rule and the privileged status of the Catholic Church. The Counter-Reformation had proved successful in Royal Hungary in the first half of the 1600s, so much so in fact that by the last decades of the century political and religious actions could escalate into violent persecutions against Protestants. Transylvania, which had been a Protestant principality for a century and a half, also became subordinate to Vienna after the death of Prince Michael I Apafi in 1690.⁵ After a short period of relief for the Protestant churches during the War of Independence (1703–1711) led by Francis II Rákóczi (1676–1735), the Catholic Church gradually regained its positions and started to rebuild its institutional system in the Hungarian Kingdom and in Transylvania. The religious policy of the Habsburg court in

Jared Poley, Daniel C. Ryan, and David Warren Sabean (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 135-152.

³ Ute Mennecke-Haustein, *Conversio ad Ecclesiam. Der Weg des Friedrich Staphylus zurück zur vortridentinischen katholischen Kirche* (Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 38.

⁴ Mennecke-Haustein, *Conversio ad Ecclesiam*, 33-38.

⁵ For further details, see Katalin Péter, "The Later Ottoman Period and Royal Hungary," in *A History of Hungary*, ed. Peter F. Sugar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100-120; Bálint Keserű, "Shaping Protestant Networks in Habsburg Transylvania: the Beginnings (1686–1699)," in *A Divided Hungary in Europe: Exchanges, Networks and Representations, 1541–1699; Volume 2: Diplomacy, Information Flow and Cultural Exchange*, ed. Szymon Brzeziński and Áron Zarnóczki (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 183-202.

the first half of the eighteenth century did not allow open violence against Protestants; however, the Habsburgs persisted in their repression.⁶

A Woman's Conversion Narrative from the Mid-Eighteenth Century

Although conversion narrative was a popular genre in early modern Europe, Hungarian-language narratives are scarce; as for those written by or attributed to a woman, only a single one is known from the period in question—namely, the one discussed in this essay. The small-format work entitled *Egy nemes, és tisztességes kálvinista aszszonyinak levele*⁷ (The letter of a noble and respectable Calvinist woman) was published by the Jesuits in Cluj-Napoca⁸ in 1742, and until recently was unknown to literary researchers.⁹ Its ascribed author, Borbála Karantsi (?–before 1787), converted to Catholicism together with her husband, the Lutheran apothecary of Târgu Mureș, Simon Schwartz (1703?–1765), in 1741. Several sources document their conversion and life, including Jesuit diaries and the *Litterae Annuae*, parish registers, and some pieces of contemporary religious literature.¹⁰

⁶ On the situation of the Catholic Church and on decrees confirming religious inequalities, see Henry Marczali, *Hungary in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910/2014), 247–288.

⁷ *Egy nemes, és tisztességes kálvinista aszszonyinak levele, mellyben a' Sz. Lélek tanításából, erős, és győzhetetlen okait adgya édes anyjának, miért akarna ő a' romai közönséges egyedül üdvözítő szent hitre állani: a' mint-is azoktól meg-győzettevén, már arra állott* [The letter of a noble and respectable Calvinist woman to her mother, in which she gives strong and invincible reasons, derived from the teaching of the Holy Spirit, for her wish to embrace the Roman Catholic faith, the only one that ensures salvation: and having been convinced by those, she had already embraced that religion] (Kolozsvár/Cluj: Akadémiai bötükkel, 1742). 12mo format, 33 [32] numbered pages. Hereafter referred to as *Letter*.

⁸ Hung. Kolozsvár, Germ. Klausenburg, Lat. Claudiopolis.

⁹ The Jesuits are known to have been circulating the booklet among the people at religious feasts. As for its reception, the same source claims that a Reformed minister, upon seeing the great effect of the booklet on his flock, forbade its reading. *Historia Societatis Jesu Claudiopoli ab anno millesimo septingentesimo primo, ab exordio scilicet seculi post Christum natum decimi octavi degentis*, National Széchényi Library, Manuscripts, Fol. Lat. 2039, 499.

¹⁰ On the narrative and the background of the conversion, see Ágnes Baricz, “Felekezetváltás a 18. század közepén Marosvásárhelyen: a patikáriusné katolizálása és annak okairól írt levele,” in *Nyelv, lelkiség és regionalitás a közép- és kora újkorban: Előadások a VII. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Kongresszuson, Kolozsvár, 2011. au-*

The religious zeal and persistent activity of the Jesuit missions throughout Transylvania was bearing fruit already in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In Târgu Mureș, the Jesuit mission started its work in 1702.¹¹ The Jesuits played a crucial role in modifying the confessional proportions in the region¹² and also had considerable influence on the town government. The Catholic community of Târgu Mureș began to gather strength during the 1730s, when they first started to demand equal representation in the senate of the town, which had, up until then, been exclusively Protestant.¹³ It was in this context that Borbála Karantsi and her husband converted to Catholicism. Contemporary sources provide some insights into their life and social ascension: in a few years after their conversion, they became members of the most influential circles in the town, and Simon Schwartz, enjoying the support of the Jesuits, was elected senator in 1748, and he also applied, without success, to the position of prime judge in 1760.¹⁴

Authorship

The *Letter* is made up of two parts: the conversion account attributed to Borbála Karantsi, signed as “Beatrix, clothed with Christ,” and an anonymous epilogue addressing the readers and urging them to follow the woman’s example. In both parts, the authorship of the woman is declared. The simple language of the account, the straightforward arguments, and

gusztus 22–27, ed. Csilla Gábor, Ágnes Korondi, Katalin Luffy, Zsombor Tóth, and András F. Balogh (Kolozsvár/Cluj: Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, 2013), 342-361.

¹¹ They attained the status of a parish in 1727; their parish records document conversions, too. On the work of the Jesuits in Târgu Mureș, see József Marton, “A marosvásárhelyi katolikus egyházközség története,” in *Millenniumi megemlékezés. Marosvásárhely 2000. április 7–8*, ed. Géza Finna (Marosvásárhely: Juventus, 2000), 202-207.

¹² The data of the parish register show that not a year passed without at least a dozen conversions. *Matricula ecclesiae parochialis Maros Vásárhelyiensis ab anno 1739 usque ad annum 1770 inclusive*, the Târgu Mureș Branch of the National Archives of Romania, Collection of Registers, Roman Catholic Parish Records.

¹³ Out of the 12 magistrates, 6 were Catholic; the offices of prime judge and deputy judge were held alternately by representatives of the two confessions. Sándor Pál-Antal, *Marosvásárhely XVII–XVIII. századi jogszabályai és polgárnévsorai* (Marosvásárhely: Mentor, 2006), 28-42.

¹⁴ They formed connections with a large part of the Catholic élite by becoming godparents to their children: *Matricula*, the register of baptisms. On his senatorship, see *Diarium missionis Societatis Iesu Marus-Vásá[r]heliensis. Tomus III* (National Library of Romania—Batthyaneum, Ms XI 99), 103^r. On his attempt to become a prime judge, see Pál-Antal, *Marosvásárhely*, 148.

the choice to rely exclusively on biblical references in argumentation form the basis of the *Letter*, and in turn powerfully vindicate the ability of a lay person with no theological education to author such a work. Nevertheless, the sources identified in the *Letter* and the nature of its composition suggest that it was shaped by someone well-versed in theological literature and with some experience of writing. Manuscript sources point to the Jesuit Michael Kattics (1683–1756)¹⁵ as the author (or at least co-author), a figure who can be connected to several other religious publications. The Reformed response prepared to the woman’s narrative and circulated in manuscript in the years following her conversion claims that Kattics was the “secretary” of the *Letter*.¹⁶ As president of the Confraternity of the Agony of Christ in Târgu Mureș, Kattics is known to have obtained financial support for the printing of a booklet which could be used by the sodality.¹⁷ He is also the most likely author of another religious book written in Hungarian, the *Pais* (Shield),¹⁸ which constituted an important

¹⁵ Ladislaus Lukács, *Catalogus generalis seu Nomenclator biographicus personarum Provinciae Austriae Societatis Jesu (1551–1773)* (Romae/Rome: Institutum Historicum S. I., 1987–1988), II, 690, Michael Katich.

¹⁶ *A nemes és nemzetes aszszonynak amint tudjuk a M. Vásárhelyi patekariusnenak levlére . . . anyai szelid vallas tétele* (Romanian Academy Library, Cluj Branch, Ms. R. 1115), 1^{r-v}. The manuscript uses the Latin *secretarius* to refer to Kattics’s role in the composition of the *Letter*. This term allows several interpretations ranging from that of Kattics advising the woman on the content but leaving the writing completely to her to that of Kattics himself putting the text of the *Letter* on paper in the convert’s name. However, the available data concerning Kattics’s literary activity and the sources of the *Letter* suggest his involvement in the shaping of both the content and form of the work.

¹⁷ *Diarium III, 22^r; Historia Missionis Societatis Jesu cum ingressu ejusdem in oppidum Siculicale M Vásárhely Anno 1702 inchoata, et subsequentibus continuata* (Târgu Mureș Archives of the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, Parish Archives of Târgu Mureș), 244. The booklet itself is most probably a book of prayers related to pious death (a translation from Latin, prepared, in all likelihood, by the president of the confraternity): *A’ Halalrol való mindennapi emlekezés* (Kolozsvár/Cluj: Akadémiai bötükkel Becskereki Mihály által, 1742).

¹⁸ *Az Isten igéjében fundáltt világos igazságnak paises, melly az igaz hitnek oltalmazására, mind azok ellen, kik azt ostromolják, most a’ magyar híveknek kezekbe adatik* [A Shield of the Clear Truth Founded on the Word of God] (Kolozsvár/Cluj: Akadémiai bötükkel Fej András által, 1741). Hereafter: *Shield*. The Jesuit writer and the patroness remain anonymous in the publication. In 1741, the three Jesuits working at the mission house in Târgu Mureș were entrusted with the preparation of this book. It was already in press before the end of the year, thanks to the generous patronage of Countess Zsuzsanna Petki (d. 1750), see *Historia Missionis*, 246. Kat-

source of the *Letter*. The duties Kattics was entrusted with after his reassignment to Cluj at the end of 1741 also support the idea of his authorship: he was appointed librarian and curator of the *Bibliotheca Catechetica*, a newly founded series which aimed to provide the Catholic community with edifying works—Beatrix’s *Letter* being its first issue.¹⁹

Motives of Conversion and Argumentation

The conversion narrative of the *Letter* is set out in three parts: the introduction outlines the first doubts of the woman regarding her religion and her growing anxieties that she might not achieve salvation; a series of arguments then follow which support the truth of the Catholic Church on the one hand, and attempt to prove the fallacies of the Protestant teachings on the other; finally, the convert addresses her mother, and in a strong, emotionally charged monologue, turns to God, pleading for justice, that is, the justification and eternal life promised to all those who obey the word of God.

According to the narrative, this woman first experienced doubts about her religion whilst reading an old Reformed agenda.²⁰ For here she discovered prescribed elements of ritual and worship that were already disapproved of by the eighteenth-century Reformed Church. She expressed her concerns to learned theologians, but they were unable to reassure her. However, the immediate cause of Beatrix’s further inquiries about religion was that

in this wicked world I have no delight since God has not given me a child, and so that I do not become eternally unhappy in the other world, I have resolved to find out the truth in this matter, to the best capacity of my feeble mind.²¹ (p. 6)

tics is known to have been in contact with the Petki ladies during that summer, see *Diarium III*, 23^r.

¹⁹ On his duties in Târgu Mureş (1741) and Cluj (1742), see Ladislaus Lukács, *Catalogi personarum et officiorum Provinciae Austriae S.I.* (Romae/Rome: Institutum Historicum S. I., 1994), VIII, 482, 493; *Diarium III*, 26^r-27^r.

²⁰ This is most probably the irenic agenda of János Samarjai [Johannes Samaraeus], *Az helvetiai vallason levő ecclesiaknak egyhazi ceremonijakrol es rend tartasokrol valo könyvetske* (Lőcse/Levoča: Brewer, 1636).

²¹ “Nékem ebben a’ rosz világban semmi gyönyörűségem nincsen: mivel az Isten gyermeket sem adott: azért hogy a’ más világon-is örökké boldogtalan ne legyek, eltökélém magamban, hogy bizony, a’ mennyire az én vékony elmém fel-éri, végére megyek ennek a’ dolognak.” Childlessness, as it will be discussed further on, could

To support the conversion, the narrative enumerates several “invincible” arguments centred around some of the main themes of the Catholic-Protestant polemics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²² The first three arguments, asserting *the continuity of the true church* as regards its temporal existence, its rites, and its teachings, seek to prove that the Reformed Church failed to preserve the uniformity of their rites and ceremonies (p. 4-6), that Protestant denominations were new compared to the Catholic Church which could be traced back without interruption to its founder, Jesus Christ (pp. 7-9), and that the Reformed Church was doctrinally at variance, since the ministers in her town seemed to disagree not only on different theological questions but even on something as fundamental as the Creed (pp. 9-10).

The main concern of the fourth, fifth, and sixth arguments was *Holy Scripture* and the *unity of the true church*. The fourth argument claimed that Protestant teachings could not be found in the Bible but only “in the heads of the ministers.” It was pointed out that Protestant denominations contradicted one another in important theological matters although they all declared that their teaching was based on Scripture. In contrast, Catholic doctrine was said to be constant and based on the teachings of the church fathers and councils, and ultimately on the Bible (pp. 11-13). Argument five contained a denial that Calvinists taught in accordance with the Bible, or indeed followed its teachings. The argument stems from the promise of the invincible Church built on Peter and the idea of one fold and one shepherd, that is, the unity of the Church. It is claimed in the argument that Protestant ministers, just “hanging on to the skirts of their wives,” do not seek to put this idea of one fold in practice, while Catholic priests make eminent missionary efforts in all parts of the world (pp. 13-15). The sixth argument simply reproves the Reformed Church for having removed whole books from the Bible (pp. 15-16). The arguments described so far were made up of two parts: one refuted the Protestant teaching, the other confirmed the Catholic position on the respective matter.

The seventh argument condemned Reformed ministers for spreading lies about the Catholic Church, especially about *the veneration of images and the invocation of saints* (pp. 17-19). Finally, the eighth argument exhorted readers to leave the Reformed faith on the grounds that it was the Catholic Church that the pagan Hungarians were converted to after the

stigmatize married women and couples in early modern Transylvanian society because it was often considered to be the result of God’s punishment. See footnote 39.

²² On topics occurring in Hungarian polemical literature in the early seventeenth century, see János Heltai, *Műfajok és művek a XVII. század magyarországi könyvkiadásában (1601–1655)* (Budapest: Universitas, 2008), 111-112.

establishment of the Hungarian Kingdom. Furthermore, the holy kings Stephen and Ladislas were, in the Kingdom of Hungary, considered saints even by Protestants, although they obviously had been members of the Catholic Church. However, as Beatrix argues, it is only in the true religion that one can become a saint (pp. 21-22).

In sum, the first argument introduces the doubts that precede the woman's conversion, the following five engage with several key topics of religious controversy, whilst the last two close the polemic and lead to the decision to convert. The debates in the arguments present a spiritual and intellectual struggle. Beatrix's knowledge of the Bible ensures the progress from one argument to another, and also from doubt to conversion; after each step, she suddenly remembers another and another biblical text, each of which arouses a new doubt about her religion (pp. 10, 17).

Sources

By the eighteenth century, a large pool of well-tested theological arguments was available for authors of religious works to choose from according to their needs, knowledge, and skills. Although the arguments of the *Letter* cover the most common themes of theological controversy of the period, they nevertheless point to several well-identifiable sources.

The *Shield*, mentioned above, is doubtless the most important source of the *Letter* attributed to Borbála Karantsi. Itself a compilation of several pieces of Catholic apologetical literature, it gives theoretical and practical guidance, on a level that even the simplest audience could take in, for debates about faith, which, according to the anonymous Jesuit author, inevitably occur in confessionally diverse regions. The aim of the *Shield* was to summarize several important apologetical works in order to make their contents available to the Hungarian-speaking Catholics and non-Catholics of Transylvania (p. 2). In addition to providing a series of arguments in favour of the Catholic faith, the *Shield* arms its readers with debating strategies, even, for example, identifying possible techniques of the adversary and advising on ways to combat them.²³

²³ The *Shield* consists of six parts: Part one shows how to repel a siege against the Catholic religion, part two offers a short method of averting possible attacks, part three advises on how to respond to opponents of the Catholic religion, part four sums up the main reasons why one can safely remain in the Catholic religion or convert to it (both a longer and a shorter formula of profession of faith is also attached to this section), part five puts Protestant religions under examination, and finally part six contains a short catechism of the Catholic Church.

The *Letter* fully assimilated the fourth part of the *Shield* entitled *A brief summary of all the main reasons why each and every person can safely remain in the Catholic religion or convert to it* (pp. 121-130). This part outlines twelve short reasons why non-Catholics are not true Christians, and another twelve which attempt to prove why Catholic worship is the true religion. The majority of these appear in the conversion narrative of the *Letter*, which explains and buttresses them with biblical texts and references.²⁴

The second part of the *Shield* provided the author of the *Letter* with practical advice on how to discuss religion with Reformed theologians. This author also adopts the suggestion that Protestants should be pressed to defend their teaching exclusively from the Bible, especially given their insistence on the primacy of Holy Scripture (pp. 67-72). Accordingly, the *Letter* cleaves closely to the wording of the Bible, and when confronting the arguments and explanations of Reformed ministers who attempt to keep the woman in their fold, Beatrix refutes each of these using biblical texts that she has “suddenly remembered.”

The arguments that appear in part four of the *Shield*, but are left out of the *Letter*, cover issues like the sacraments and certain signs of the presence of God in the Catholic Church, such as miracles, exorcism, the supremacy of the pope, and so forth. These might have been omitted simply by reason of their length, or because they were considered too sensitive in a community with a Protestant majority.

The second source identified in the conversion narrative is the Jesuit Martinus Szent-Ivany's (1633–1705) *Négy rövid első könyvecskék* (The first four brief booklets), a collection of polemical writings, first published in Hungarian in 1702.²⁵ It also served as one of the main sources of the previously discussed *Shield*. Its four books are bound together in the Hungarian edition by their paratexts and, taken together, represent one of the most comprehensive Hungarian-language works of religious controversy from the first half of the eighteenth century. While the main texts offer a repository of thematically grouped theological arguments, the paratexts present a (fictitious) conversion account.

The foreword to the first book of this work contains a letter of a young Protestant nobleman. It describes how he, having wavered in his faith,

²⁴ See *Shield*, 121-122 (the first three and the seventh argument of the *Letter*), 123-124 (arguments four and six), and 129-130 (argument eight).

²⁵ *Negy rövid első könyvecskék, melyeket a' hitben támadott versengesekrül irt, és külön külön ki-bocsátott Jesus Társóságában lévő Szent-ivanyi Márton pap és theologus* (Nagyszombat/Trnava: Academiai bütökkel Hörmann János által, 1702). Hereafter: *Four booklets*.

turned to Protestant theologians, to whom he expressed his doubts and asked for reassurance. Not receiving an answer, he then approached a Catholic theologian, who, during their conversations, convinced him about the truth of the Catholic religion. In the foreword to the fourth book, the young nobleman summarizes the process of his conversion, detailing his initial desperation, the ensuing discussions on religion, his thorough reading of theological and polemical literature, religious debates, continuous praying, solitary deliberation, and finally the decision of converting to the Catholic faith (pp. 368-369). His decision was preceded by a proper spiritual preparation, followed by a rigorous, rational examination of the arguments on both sides, the methodology of which he also shares with his audience (pp. 368-371).

Several arguments from this fourth book reappear in arguments five and eight of the *Letter*, which deal respectively with the achievement of church unity through missionary work and with the authority and example of Hungarian ancestors.²⁶ The topics and the wording seem to point conclusively to the fact that Szent-Ivány's work is the direct source in these cases.

The third source of Beatrix's conversion narrative is the book entitled *Nyolc okok* (Eight reasons).²⁷ Some of the arguments of the *Letter*, but mainly its formal characteristics and the description of the conversion process, can be traced back to this treatise, which in fact is an eighteenth-century anonymous reprint of Peter Pázmány's (1570–1637) work *Bizonyos okok* (Solid reasons) from 1631.²⁸ The 1631 original can be linked to Count Adam Batthyány's (1610–1659) conversion to Catholicism in 1629, in which Pázmány was himself personally involved. Dedicating his book to Batthyány's Lutheran mother, Pázmány wrote it in the form of a letter

²⁶ *Four booklets*, 537-540; *Letter*, 13-15 and 185-209, especially 208-209; *Letter*, 21-22.

²⁷ *Nyolcz okok, mellyekre nézve egy tudós, nevezetes fő-ember megvetvén az új vallásokat az Romai hitre tért* [Eight reasons why a learned nobleman rejected the new religions and turned to the Catholic Church] (Kolozsvár/Cluj: Akadémiai böltsükkel, 1738). Hereafter: *Eight reasons*.

²⁸ Péter Pázmány, *Bizonyos okok, mellyek erejetül viseltetven egy fő ember az új vallások töreből kifeslet, es az romai ecclesianak kebelébe szállott* (Pozsony/Bratislava: [typ. Societatis Jesu], 1631). This very popular work was reprinted many times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; on its editions and impact, see Heltai, *Műfajok és művek*, 124. The Jesuit academy of Cluj published the *Nyolcz okok* both in 1736 and in 1738, omitting the author's name, but without any change in the main text. Since it was a useful instrument of missionary work, the mission house of Târgu Mureş obtained a large number of its copies, see *Diarium II*, 162^r.

in which he explained the count's motives of conversion. It is clear that Pázmány's work was not a direct source for the *Letter*, for although all the topics treated in Pázmány's work, except for the Eucharist, can be found in the *Letter*, there is little overlap between the two in terms of wording and explanations. However, when neither the *Shield* nor Szent-Ivany's work adduce scriptural evidence for their statements, the biblical references in the *Letter* seem to coincide with the texts in Pázmány's work.²⁹

The steps of Beatrix's conversion are very similar to what is described in the *Eight reasons*; with a few minor exceptions, she walks the same path as Pázmány's young aristocrat did: her love of books and reading trigger her initial doubts; she shows keen interest in the matters of religion; Reformed ministers cannot give her satisfactory answers, and, as a result, she is brought to Catholic priests and then to conversion. Besides the common features—both were troubled by anxiety, even despair, at the thought of having their salvation at risk in their current religion, both initially abhorred the Catholic religion, and both prayed assiduously for guidance and enlightenment—the inner process of conversion is more fully expounded in the *Letter*. In Beatrix's case, the moving descriptions of inner struggle, including prayers and supplications, have a crucial role, as these regularly result in the discovery of a new argument supporting the Catholic teaching. The stronger her doubts and struggles are, the more she feels that God fills her with love of the Catholic religion. Eventually, she admits that she cannot resist the inclinations of her soul and kick against the spur of God (pp. 22-23), and expresses her strong faith and reliance in God (p. 24). Leaving all her worldly worries behind, she decides to focus exclusively on her salvation and, after long periods of praying and crying, she is reassured of the rightness of her feelings and believes that a just God would never condemn her for a decision induced by Himself (p. 26 [25]).

The *Letter* closes with a strong dramatic monologue addressed to the Lord, and we see Beatrix defending her conversion on Judgement Day. Identifying herself with the stray lamb which in the biblical parable is sought out and returned to the fold by the Good Shepherd, she stresses that in her case the search works the other way round:

Look, how much I have been praying and you have not given me the Spirit of your grace! Where is your righteousness, my Lord? . . . I ran not from You but to You, I never expected You to search for me, but helped by

²⁹ For example, in the case of the eighth argument of the *Letter*, see *Letter*, 22; *Four booklets*, 216; *Shield*, 122-123; *Eight reasons*, 16.

Your grace, I searched for You, and still, You have not received me among your flock! . . . Where is your mercy, my Lord? (pp. 27-28)³⁰

The closing lines of the monologue demonstrate the unwavering faith of the woman, and her trust in God and in the correctness of her decision:

If I am deceived, it is you who deceived me because it is your promise I believed and trusted. But I know such a thing will never happen because I know whom I have trusted. (p. 28)³¹

Finally, a fourth source can be identified in the *Letter*—the Jesuit Johannes Berzeviczi's³² (1692–1750) work entitled *Egy el tévelyedett juhokának oktatása* (A teaching guide for a lost sheep).³³ In addition to the parable of the lost sheep, which frequently appeared in contemporary conversion narratives, there are further similarities between Berzeviczi's work and Borbála Karantsi's account. According to Berzeviczi, the lost sheep is well aware of its erroneous ways but still believes in the possibility of its salvation. Therefore, the sheep begs the Lord to set out on his search so it can be brought back to his fold. The fervent prayers, the various expressions of trust and complete reliance on God, the repeated appeals to the mercy, righteousness, and truthfulness of God might have influenced similar sections in the *Letter*. The idea of one fold and one shepherd as well as the closing profession of faith are all reminiscent of Beatrix's monologue:

³⁰ “Imé én téged mennyit kértelek, még-is nékem meg-nem adtad az igasságnak lelkét! Hol Uram a' te igasságod? . . . Imé én nem tölled, hanem hozzád futottam; nem vártam, hogy engem keress, hanem a' te kegyelmedtől segítettven én Téged kerestelek, még-is a' te aklodba, a' te juhaid közzé nem fogattál engem! . . . Hol Uram hát a' te irgalmasságod?”

³¹ “Ha meg-csalattam, te csaltál-meg engem: mert a' te ígéretidben hívén, és bizván csalatkoztam-meg. De tudom, hogy az nem léssen: mert tudom, kinek hittem.”

³² Berzeviczi participated in Transylvanian missions, and he was professor at the academy of Cluj from 1728 to 1731, then again from 1740 to 1742, and once again from 1745 to 1750. Lukács, *Catalogus*, I, 95.

³³ *Egy el tévelyedett juhokának mennyei pásztorától kért s nyert vezérlő oktatása. Avagy a' Kristus Jesusnak egy üdvössége el-nyeréséért szorgalmatoskodó Lélekkelvaló nyájas csevegése* [A teaching guide for a lost sheep by the heavenly shepherd] (Kassa/Košice: Academaii böttükkel, 1731). Hereafter: *Teaching guide*.

But my Lord, if all that which you clearly explained to me and convinced me to believe is really true—as it cannot be otherwise because that would make you untruthful—[...] (p. 303)³⁴

There is, however, one significant difference in the application of the parable: Berzeviczi's lost sheep waits for the Lord to fulfil its desire for salvation, whereas the *Letter* insists on the efforts made by the sheep to find its way.

Building the Image of a Woman Convert

In the preface to a prayer-book dedicated to Baroness Mária Nikházi, who converted to Catholicism in 1737, it is stated that the greatest deed possible for a female convert is to give not only herself but also her children as gifts to God and to the Catholic Church.³⁵ Other virtues of a woman convert include piety, humility, faith, endurance, love, and also wisdom, of which the last is acquired through perseverance in reading the Bible and devotional books. She is portrayed as a wise woman, efficient in managing her household and in preparing her own soul for the reception of the Lord.³⁶

Likewise, the *Letter* attributed to Borbála Karantsi (Beatrix) supports the image of a well-read woman educated in her religion. She is depicted as one who is able not only to read Protestant and Catholic books and make comparisons between them, but also to write up an account of her own conversion. She also evinces a good knowledge of the Bible, relying on its authority whenever she takes a stance either in matters of religion or regarding controversial topics in her debates with Reformed ministers.³⁷

Her analysis of religious arguments is less “erudite” than that of the two noblemen referred to in the *Letter*'s sources, and she discusses only a few of the more important topics. This makes her account more accessible to the less learned, often illiterate inhabitants of villages and towns, and also to women. In addition to her intellectual qualities, the woman convert

³⁴ “De Uram, ha mind ezek, a’ miket ily világosan ésmértettél, és el hitettél-is velem, úgy vannak, a’ mint nem is lehetnek különben; mert egyébaránt te, igaz mondó Isten nem vólnál.” See *Teaching guide*, 2-12, 48-49.

³⁵ [Péter Ágoston], *Szívek kincse, avagy a Krisztus szenvedésén fohászzkodásokkal teljes könyvecske* (Kassa/ Košice: Academiai bötükkal, 1737), 23^v.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17^r-23^v.

³⁷ *Letter*, 10 and 17. A similar way of introducing new arguments can be found in *Four booklets*, 387 and 388, and in *Eight reasons*, 9.

is characterized by piety, faith, and utmost trust in God.³⁸ Throughout the narrative, what moves her from one step to the next is a new doubt and an answer to that, usually in form of a biblical quotation which occurs to her after a sequence of praying, fasting, and crying. Her soul moves along a trajectory from doubt to deep conviction that her inclination towards the Catholic faith is not a temptation but an act of God's grace.

By accepting this grace and converting to the Catholic Church, Beatrix finds a remedy for her worldly afflictions. Her worldly unhappiness caused on account of her childlessness is presented as the trigger for her search for the true religion, which she wants to find in order to avoid eternal unhappiness, that is, damnation after death. Being married but childless could cause a social stigma in the Transylvania of those times, just as it could in other parts of Europe. It was a condition largely believed to be caused by the sinfulness of the afflicted person. Women were considered to perform their duty in society by bearing children, and not doing so could greatly impair their social status.³⁹ Beatrix's determined search for the true religion and her conversion to Catholicism together with her husband is construed as a journey from worldly unhappiness to the possibility of eternal happiness together, in the sight of God. The couple's conversion to the true religion thus eventually bears the fruit of their life together.⁴⁰

Beatrix's narrative reverses the parable of the lost sheep by that it presents the woman convert in an unusual position: she is not a weak lamb waiting for the shepherd (or, as Mária Nikhází is presented, patiently waiting for the Divine Spouse) but a determined and active searcher for the one fold promised in the Bible where it would be possible for her to take a place next to the other lambs. The *Letter* portrays an unhappy, pious

³⁸ Most sources of the *Letter* emphasize the importance of the intellect and wisdom, both of which are related to the Catholic concept of man's active co-operation in justification (as opposed to the Protestant idea of complete passivity). The role given to intelligence and volition in this process is considered crucial in the success of early modern conversions to Catholicism, as per: Eric-Oliver Mader, "Conversion Concepts in Early Modern Germany," in *Conversion and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Germany*, ed. David M. Luebke, Jared Poley, Daniel C. Ryan, and David Warren Sabean (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 37.

³⁹ Infertile women were considered suspicious and often social outcasts; see Andrea Fehér, "The Lord My God Has Given My Wife a Child: Childbirth in 18th-century Transylvania," *Transylvanian Review* 21, supplement no. 2 (2012): 222-223.

⁴⁰ In her narrative, Beatrix finds it important to absolve her husband from the charges of influencing her in the choice of religion, emphasizing that they both reached the same decision after individual consideration, without knowing each other's intentions, but eventually embracing the Catholic faith together; see *Letter*, 23.

woman searching her soul for God's will who, having accepted that will, also acts according to it by actively seeking the truth in religion and then sharing it with others. The emphasis on the active character makes her very similar to the male converts presented in the sources of her narrative.⁴¹

Conclusions

Religious polemics and conversion are closely connected in the above presented works; in some of them the conversion account only provides the framework and the opportunity for controversy. This aspect of early modern religious controversy is related to the important role of intellect and volition in conversion, as seen by the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent.

The arguments used in the *Letter* to support the conversion of a noblewoman to Catholicism centre around several of the basic themes of Catholic-Protestant polemics: the temporal continuity of the true church and its doctrine, Holy Scripture as the basis of the church's teaching, the unity of the true church stemming from the idea of the promised one fold and one shepherd, the fallacies of the Protestant teachings, and so forth. All these topics were widely present in the polemics of the Hungarian Kingdom since the early seventeenth century.

The main sources of the *Letter* are mutually interconnected. The *Shield* drew, among several other works, on Szent-Ivany's *Four booklets*, which too served as a direct source for Beatrix's *Letter*. The *Four booklets*, in turn, relied on Pázmány's *Solid reasons* (1631) and on his famous *Kalauz*.⁴² The *Solid reasons*, identical with the *Eight reasons* used as an inspiration for the *Letter*, is considered by literary historians to be one of the few Catholic polemical works that were originally written to address, support, and offer justification to those aristocrats who were contemplating conversion to Catholicism, and to form the intellectual background for

⁴¹ Being active in matters of religion, especially participating in religious polemics, was not generally considered to be a respectable activity for a woman. Seventeenth-century Jesuit writers of Catholic-Protestant polemics condemned Protestant women for such misuse of their religious knowledge; see Keith P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early Modern France* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 200-203. In her *Letter*, Beatrix included a refutation of several theological arguments espoused by Reformed ministers, thereby aptly illustrating the adversaries' incompetence.

⁴² Péter Pázmány, *Isteni igazságra vezetleo kalavz* (Pozsony/Bratislava: [typ. Societatis Jesu], 1613).

these conversions in Royal Hungary around the mid-seventeenth century.⁴³ In the first half of the eighteenth century, these well-tested literary means were used, besides other tools, by the Catholic Church—in our case, the Jesuits—to target all levels of society, at a time when the predominantly Protestant Transylvania confronted them with the same challenges as Royal Hungary did a century earlier.

By the end of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, a different way of approaching conversion to Catholicism appeared in Hungarian-language literature. It did not dismiss polemics completely, but focused on the conversion of the soul rather than that of the mind, and on the role of piety and practical devotion in conversion and converting others.⁴⁴ One important task for future research is to explore these works in order to attain a more detailed picture of early eighteenth-century Hungarian-language conversion literature.

⁴³ Heltai, *Műfajok és művek*, 127.

⁴⁴ For example, the works of Franciscus Fóris Otrokocsi, István Mike, and the above-mentioned Joannes Berzeviczi.