

COLLISION OF IDENTITIES

Assimilation and Myth-making among
Hungary's Greek Catholics

BERTALAN PUSZTAI

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Hungary's Greek Catholics*



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It regularly happens that the Hungarian believer is preached to in Russian, sung to in Oláh (Romanian), and the cantor, if he feels like it, sings the “agios” in Greek with the typical nasal twang. And the poor fellow comes out of the church contentedly believing that he has satisfied his duties with God since the priest and the cantor sang to him in so many foreign languages that it would be impossible to ignore them all.

Lajos Frakas: *Egy nemzeti küzdelem története*. [History of a National Struggle.] Budapest, Kilián Frigyes, 1896. 12.

Lo and behold, dear Brethren, with these few words I have sufficiently described our bias position: we are the victims of the conceptual confusion caused by the idea of nationality, since we are renegades for most of the Ruthenians and Romanians, the intruding spies in the eyes of the Hungarians of exclusive nature, we have been given a stigma of unreliability by both sides. This is one kind of martyrdom, dear brethren, worse than antique martyrdom, because practically we have to fall prey to a mosquito bite.

Emlékkönyv a görög szert. katolikus magyarok római zarándoklatáról. [Memorial Book of the Roman Pilgrimage of the Greek Catholic Hungarians] Budapest, Hungaria, 1901. 110.

In my opinion, Greek Catholic Hungarians have a very important dual mission. The first one has to do with the Church and the Great Schism. It is well known that Greek Catholicism is the bridge schismatic Greek Orthodox believers can most easily cross to join the true Catholic Church. The second one is related to nationalities. A liturgy in Hungarian helps our non-Hungarian brethren to become Hungarian, including the language they use in their religious rite.

István Medvigy: *A görög-katolikus öntudat ébrentartása és fejlesztése*. [Animating and Developing the Greek Catholic Consciousness] *Görögkatolikus Szemle* 1931. 3(19): 2.

Preface

Greek Catholicism is a typical phenomenon of Mitteleuropa. Aside from the northeast of Hungary, the majority of Greek Catholics live in the east of Slovakia, in the Transcarpathian province and southwest of Ukraine, in the Transylvanian parts of Romania and in the southeast of Poland. For centuries, from the Greek Catholic union agreements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to this day, Greek Catholicism could be considered a precise marker of the two great European religious and cultural regions and a manifestation of the borderline between Eastern and Western European, Orthodox and Western, Latin and Protestant Christianity.

The present volume deals with aspects of the social history of Hungarian Greek Catholicism. This group came into existence as a result of the above mentioned union agreements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These agreements encouraged cohesion and created a new religious community between Roman Catholic Hungarians and other nationality groups who formerly adhered to the Orthodox faith. As a result, tens of thousands of Rusyn and Romanian Greek Catholics of the north-eastern territories of the Hungarian Kingdom went through a process of Magyarization in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, the emergence of nationalism saw the creation of a new Hungarian Greek

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Catholic cultural identity by the lay intelligentsia of this assimilated group. Enthusiastic to build a separate discourse, they confirmed both their identification with mainstream Hungarian society and their separation from other nationalities, and tried to create a sense of belonging and a unified historical consciousness. This book seeks to give an overview of the identity-shaping discursive processes and strategies of Hungarian Greek Catholics triggered by their assimilation.

Hungarian Greek Catholics are a minority in several ways. First, they practice a minority religious ritual in Hungary. Although jurisdictionally they are part of the Catholic Church, their Eastern rite is markedly different from the Latin ceremony and resembles that of Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, they are in unity with the Roman Catholic Church, not with the Orthodox Church; indeed, they are considered heretics—even traitors—by Orthodoxy. Second, their Rusyn and Romanian ethnic origins and Hungarian identity have accorded them, in the eyes of the surrounding nationalities, an ethnically intermediary position or what we might term multiple belonging, which in turn has made them the object of suspicion. This climate of suspicion was completely forgotten in Hungary during the Socialist decades and has not reappeared. Such attitudes toward the Hungarian Greek Catholic community may, however, still be encountered in Subcarpathia and in Transylvania. Hungarian Greek Catholics are a typical in-between phenomenon. The complexity of their identity is nicely illustrated by the bumper-sticker pictured on the cover of this volume. Hungarian Greek Catholics created and began using this symbol to identify themselves in the 2010s. The majority population in Hungary may be surprised to know that the sign is one of the oldest and most widely used Christograms in Eastern Christianity. As such, displayed next to the Hungarian number plate and the flag of the European Union it sheds light on the complex identificatory history of this group.

The years of the formation and establishment of the Hungarian Greek Catholic identity between 1850 and 1950 were a highly intensive period of identity construction which offers a unique opportunity of studying the processes of identity-creation. The Central Europe of the last hundred years has produced conditions in which communities of ethnic minorities almost as a rule attempt to define themselves vis-à-vis the majority. This book presents a context wherein a minority community has to define itself facing several relevant “majorities”. It hopes to demonstrate how decisive the image of the majority a minority creates for its own members is and to what extent its self-definition adapts to this concept. As all concepts, this, too, is a product of consciousness and does not necessarily reflect the actual situation. Those who design the self-representations of a minority community try, as it were, to gather the concepts the majority or majorities have constructed of them. Their aim is to adapt their self-representations through the developing mass media of the time to the images the majorities have constructed of them. Such self-representations are characterized by fears from the stereotypes of the majority, hopes to be accepted by the majority and overcompensations to prove the loyalty to the Hungarian nation. Moreover, Greek Catholics made strenuous efforts in offering to act as intermediaries in the Magyarization of national minorities. These offers were never seriously considered by the majority.

A number of contexts and personal experiences have inspired the creation of this book. Being born and raised in the north-eastern region of Hungary gave me a thorough everyday knowledge about the community under examination. Studying at the University of Debrecen, where my university professor, Elek Bartha, dedicated his scholarly activity to the Greek Catholics spurred my interest in them as a research topic. The fall of the Soviet Union made it possible for me to start ethnographic fieldwork among the Hungarian Greek Catholics of Subcarpathian Ukraine soon after the po-

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litical changes. I am deeply indebted to my informants, friends, first of all László Molnár and his family in western Subcarpathia, who helped me in the field during those turbulent years. Also I owe a debt of gratitude to the editors of scholarly media, among them *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, where my first studies on this matter were published. While still engaged in my university studies, I began field research in eastern Transylvania, in Romania, among Hungarian Greek Catholics with my friend, the prominent geographer and anthropologist, the late Zoltán Illyés. Róbert Keményfi, also from the University of Debrecen, dedicated inspirational studies to the analyses of the spatial processes of the Greek Catholics. My early field projects resulted in a focus on the identification processes of the Hungarian Greek Catholics, which I continued to study at the University of Szeged as an assistant professor. The study of an extraordinarily intensive century of identity building between 1850–1950 was supported by a young researchers' grant from the prestigious Hungarian OTKA funding agency. The results of these research projects were shared with the international scholarly community when I was invited by Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) and Paul Robert Magocsi (University of Toronto) to join a research group and the book project "Churches In-between" (Berlin, LIT Verlag, 2008). To be among the best of this research node helped me to widen the interpretative frames of my research. Similarly inspiring was the invitation of Marko Lamberg (University of Stockholm) and Anssi Halmesvirta (University of Jyväskylä) to join the book project "Shaping Ethnic Identities" (Helsinki, East-West Books, 2007). The publication of this book would have been impossible without the help of Elisabeta Molnár (University of Szeged). I owe a debt of gratitude to Andrea and Ádám Bánkfalvi in Wien for providing a quiet shelter and a friendly environment to work on this and other projects. All of these projects were continuously helped as first readers and careful commentators by my sister, Gabriella Pusztai (Universi-

PREFACE

ty of Debrecen), my colleague and friend, Neill Martin (University of Edinburgh) and my wife, Ildikó Pusztai-Varga (University of Szeged).

This book uses a specific focus on analyzing the history of Hungarian Greek Catholics. It puts the large-scale identity building processes into the center and frames them with local empirical studies. Analyses of ethnic demography and lessons from ethnographic field research are contextualized by discourse analyses of the emerging press and ethnography supported by anthropological and media theories. With this it aims to provide an interpretation of the identificatory processes of a specific religious community and at the same time an example of the role of history-making in the stabilizing of a group undergoing the process of assimilation.

Szeged, 2019
Bertalan Pusztai

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The Hungarian Greek Catholics: Identity and Historical Consciousness

Not only in Central Europe, but throughout the continent, *historical awareness* plays an important role in shaping national identity. If we compare the various national historiographies of Central Europe, it is obvious that they differ greatly, despite the fact that they concern ethnic groups that have been living side by side for centuries. Local bonding that underlies larger group identity(ies) requires a local sense of the past. The canonical historiography over the past two hundred years has successfully created this kind of local past, a history in which it rarely appears that people of different cultures lived side by side.¹

All historiography is *culturally constructed*, that is, selective, restructured, generalizing. The history thus written then taught and popularized can be one of the most stable foundations of an important bond, of national identity. Having revealed the structured, dynamic and situational nature of identity, the process of creating and managing local, group or national identities can be a natural topic of research today. The exploration of this process saw

¹ Smith, in writing about the relationship between nationalism and historians, naturally indicates that history was at the forefront not only in the creation of nationalism but a century later also in understanding the phenomenon (Smith 1972: 58).

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history and European ethnology increasingly focused on the phenomenon of tradition-making and tradition-building in the 1980's.

One of the first and still fundamental results of this research direction is the collection of studies by Hobsbawm and Ranger called *The Invention of Tradition*, in which the authors, who were historians, present the process of creating tradition through several case studies. Hobsbawm sums up his research findings in the final study of the book. According to his analysis, the creation of traditions or the use of fictional traditions are typical in periods when, due to a rapid change in society, the sense of continuity underlying the identity may disappear and old traditions, symbols and customs no longer fulfil their former function. Fictitious traditions of a symbolic or ritual nature can provide a link with the past and thus offer a sense of security in the form of a familiar past, engendering cohesion within a wide range of social groups.

The success of the mass production of tradition at the end of the 19th century, naturally, also depended on the extent to which the inventions captivated the targeted masses. Therefore, not only symbols but also ceremonies and heroes were used to create identity. New elements of identity were popularized by the unifying effects of public education.² It is not difficult to recognize that not only was the end of the 19th century an important tradition-making era, but that Central as well as Eastern Europe were experiencing another tradition-building momentum after the fall of Communism. In many areas of the continent, new traditions and the legitimacy of new coun-

2 Hobsbawm 1987: 127–128. In addition to studies examining the phenomenon of tradition-making following this book, *The Invention of Tradition* has been the subject of many robust criticisms. Studies of this kind, written from a constructivist perspective, are attacked most aggressively by those whose traditions are under scrutiny. This is the so-called “native” criticism. Knowing the criticisms of scholarly authority against native authority, it is no accident that Briggs asks: “Is there a way to talk about Making Culture without Making Enemies?” (Briggs 1996: 435).

tries have to be created today, as the former identity frames were destroyed as a result of profoundly rapid societal change.

Fictional traditions and the myths that underlie them are important for community-building because people use them to map and interpret the past. For ordinary people, history is a matter that has been selectively inherited and selectively recalled for the purposes of the present. History is a source of material for historians and lay people alike. It is always based on interpretive *reconstructions*, even without the intention of alteration. And this does not mean that there are no objective historical facts. This so-called “folk” or “popular” use of history would not alienate it from the present, but on the contrary, the past would often fuse with the present. In everyday discourse, the past is symbolically recalled.

This volume examines the relationship between the creation of historical consciousness and identity within a particular religious community, the Hungarian Greek Catholics. My primary source is the analysis of the press, which became a source of power and played a key role in the age of modernity. During the course of my research I focused mainly on the content analysis of Greek Catholic self-representations, especially in the mass media. In order to properly interpret the popularized ideas and facts, it was necessary to review the Greek Catholic historiography of the time.

Being a Bridge or a Wall – the Greek Catholics between the East and the West

Both Western and Eastern missionaries started their activity in the Carpathian Basin before the tenth century. A hundred years later the Hungarian Kingdom, now a Christianized country, joined the Latin rite, and

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brought its constituent dioceses under the jurisdiction of Rome. No sooner had the country opted for Rome did the centuries-long diversification of Christianity come to a head in the Great Schism of 1054. The mutual excommunications by Western and Eastern ecclesiarches resulted in a separate development of Orthodox and Latin Christianity.

In the feudal states of the West, the Roman Catholic Church became an important power structure and successfully reached the position of becoming the established church. Thus, in the period of the Schism in the eleventh century, the eastern borders of Western Christianity coincided with the eastern borders of the Catholic Kingdoms of Hungary and Poland. The two halves of Europe, the Orthodox East and the Latin West, embarked on a road of different and independent development, and, in the course of the centuries, different dogmas, saints and customs came to be adopted by the two great Christian Churches. During the centuries following the Schism, in the twelfth century, Eastern Christianity gradually withdrew and disappeared from the Hungarian Kingdom.

As far back as the thirteenth century, the idea of uniting Christianity under the jurisdiction of the Pope had of course widespread currency throughout Western Christendom. Simultaneously, the ethnic composition of the Catholic-Orthodox contact zone changed. From the thirteenth century, Orthodox Slavic- and Romanian-speaking groups of people came to settle in the northern and eastern territories, initially in the Carpathian Mountains. Over the centuries, Orthodox believers settling in the country naturally became the subject of church-unifying efforts.

As it would be many centuries before ecclesiarches were able to achieve Church unification, temporal powers came to the help of the Latin Church in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in the Catholic Hungarian and Polish-Lithuanian Kingdoms. As a result, these Orthodox believers were more

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or less forcefully brought under the jurisdiction of Rome and into what was referred to as the “Union”; they were summarily called “Uniates”. The first Union agreement was concluded in Brest (now in Belarus) in 1596 in the Poland–Lithuania Commonwealth.

The main targets of the Union movement in the Hungarian Kingdom (with the support of the Habsburgs and under the leadership of the Jesuits) were the eastern Slavic Ruthenians or Rusyns³ in the north-eastern highlands and north-eastern parts of the Great Plain and the Romanians in Transylvania. In the eighteenth century, Catholic Habsburgs extended their rule to territories that had been occupied by the Ottoman Empire and to the relatively independent Transylvania. These regions had become religiously diverse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: strong Protestant communities developed among the Hungarians, and, as a result of centuries of Rusyn and Romanian immigration, a significant Orthodox population appeared. The Counter-reformation and the Union movement in the 17th and 18th century attempted to eliminate this religious diversity in the Habsburg Empire.

The Greek Catholic denomination was formed as a result of the 1646 union of Uzhhorod in historical Hungary. In the Central European region, which was already religiously divided, at the meeting point of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Islam, another denomination appeared, completing the diversity of our region. The Union of Uzhhorod targeted the predominantly Rusyn group living in the north-east part of the country, with complete success, as within two or three decades all Rusyn parishes became part of the Greek Catholic Church. The union process continued in the early 18th century by bringing the Romanians in Transylvania under the jurisdiction of Rome (Pirigyi 1990).

³ Rusyn history and the role of religion in Rusyn culture is discussed by Paul Robert Magocsi in numerous books and articles. For a comprehensive study see Magocsi 1999.

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The re-occupation and reunification of the country led to mass migration after the Ottoman occupation. Not only did the descendants of the once-fleeing inhabitants return to the Great Plain, but large numbers of the nationalities living in the Carpathian Basin also moved further south and west.⁴ Thus, in parallel with the conversion to Greek Catholicism, the Rusyns and Romanians were introduced into the Hungarian language environment at the same time as their religious differences were reduced (from Orthodox to Greek Catholic). The Greek Catholic group of different nationalities and cultures living in the Hungarian Roman Catholic (and Protestant) environment gradually changed over the centuries. By the beginning of the 19th century, the use of the Hungarian language in preaching was becoming more and more common, even though the ceremony was, due to liturgical restrictions, Slavonic or Romanian. We have descriptions from around the period of the *fin de siècle* in which Greek Catholics in the provinces of the Plains complain that they do not understand the ceremony.

The fact that the Greek and Roman Catholics belonged to the same (Catholic) Church in the predominantly Roman Catholic Habsburg Empire facilitated the acceptance of different Roman Catholic rites and forms of worship. Thus, a process of *Latinization* also occurred—that is, where forms of Eastern spirituality, art and worship slowly died out and Roman Catholic forms took their place (Bilaniuk 1993: 318–20; Pusztai 1998: 66–7). The popular piety of Hungarian Greek Catholics with their Eastern roots (primarily in liturgy) influenced by Roman Catholic devotion is a unique phenomenon in all of Europe.⁵

4 On the spatial processes of the Greek Catholics see Keményfi 2000.

5 Ethnographic research in the 1980s and 1990s revealed the religious ethnographic features of this group, its sacred folklore, and its religious use of space and time. For this see Cserbák 1986: 293–4; Bartha 1986: 322–5.