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Oppression of religions and policy toward churches, atheist  
propaganda and the peace movement by the Kádár régime during  
the period of 1957-1964

ABSTRACT OF THE PHD-THESIS

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# **I. The antecedents of the research raising the subject and methodology**

After the downfall of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the historical churches were also subject to retaliations including purges and imprisonment. While reorganising itself, the communist régime had one priority related to the Christian churches: to re-establish the same political circumstances that existed before the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1956.

1957 was a pivotal year in returning to the preceding status quo. By the end of the year, the results and attempts, which appeared in the democratic milieu of the revolution, were abolished. Besides this, by re-establishing the collaborative units, which proved to be trustworthy towards the régime, the state ensured its own agenda in all of the churches until the end of the communist era.

After successfully regaining its power among the churches, the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party formed a declaration which stated their position towards churches and religion. In this declaration, the political fights against the clergy and the ideological fights against the people who believed in religious ideas were separated.

This paper examines the ideological foundation which served as a base for the political decisions affecting the churches during the period of 1957-1964. Besides this, I would like to analyse the propaganda tools of the régime which aimed to create the “archetypical socialist citizen”. A significant part of this paper deals with the role of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party and the State Office for Church Affairs.

In the course of my work, within the framework of an analysis of the history of ideas, I wanted to present the ideological foundations of the church policy of the communist dictatorship of the period 1957–1964. Within this, I analyzed the theoretical issues, methodology and forums of atheist and materialist propaganda, which is the most important tool of the “worldview struggle” aimed at creating the so-called “socialist type of man”.

## II. The followed methodology

The guideline of my work was to show how the Catholic and Protestant churches operating within the framework of the Kádár socialist political-social system tried to resolve the contradictions between the atheist dictatorship and to support the dictatorship from the perspective of Christianity.

During the Analyzes, I relied on the extremely rich documents of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist People's Party and the State Office for Church Affairs.

The other main unit of the examined topics was an important review of the history of ideas. Within the framework of this outlook, I examined the ideological background of the atheist church policy of the communist dictatorship. Here I also summarized the content elements and effects of the church policy of the dictatorship. In this regard, I paid special attention to the theoretical background and practical methodology of the “atheist and materialist propaganda” of the communist state, with a special focus on youth policy and the topic of anti-church and anti-religious propaganda which was the main tool of creating the ‘socialist type of man’.

In this dissertation, the primary sources are the “State Office for Church Affairs Database” in the Hungarian National Archives, which contains both “presidential” and “top secret” documents of the AEH archives from 1951–1989 and the organization’s library material, as well as the so-called ‘TÜK documents’, which provide insight into the specific church policy strategy of the State Ecclesiastical Office. The dissertation relies on the Hungarian church press products of the examined period as a source material. (Katolikus Szó, Vigilia, Theologiai Szemle, Reformátusok Lapja, Evangélikus Élet) My work also analyzes the journals and newspapers that presented the official position of the communist dictatorship on churches and religiosity. (Világosság, Valóság, Pártélet, Társadalmi Szemle Fiatalok kérdezik). The most important archival source base for the study of anti-church and anti-religious propaganda was the material of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist People's Party.

At the beginning of my dissertation, in the introductory part of the methodology, I tried to characterize the natural history of communist dictatorships in general. In the introductory part, I also tried to shed light on the defining characteristics that were present in all the communist dictatorships in the world.

Within the framework of the interpretation developed in the introductory part, I continued the examination of the years of the Kádár system, the analysis of the formation and ideological peculiarities of the system, which is covered in the first chapter discussing the ideological conditions

of contemporary Hungary. The concepts that are based on the phraseology of the contemporary church politics in the examined documents, I tried to define them in each case on the basis of the literature and to clarify their meaning. In my work, I have presented in detail the propagandistic state and church resolutions and declarations that the dictatorship intended for the public. In each case, I compared these statements and resolutions with the internal documents from which we can learn the real church policy plans and goals of the dictatorship.

Overall, I tried to give a complex picture to those interested (researchers and other interested persons) in the subject of the short-term and long-term goals of church policy in the period under discussion, the ideological life of the period, and the relationship between religion and communism.

### **III. The new results**

#### ***1.) The "genesis" of the church policy of the Kádár regime***

After 1956, the dictatorship continued to regard Christian churches and religious life, as well as religious values, as the number one enemy. After 1956, the dictatorship continued to regard Christian churches and religious life, as well as religious values, as “the number one enemy” in the process of developing a ‘socialist type of people’ in the field of social policy (education, youth, cultural policy, federal policy, women’s policy) started. Therefore, after the defeat of the 1956 revolution, the communist power placed much more emphasis on increasing the effectiveness of propaganda with religion and anti-church ideology than before 1956.

It is important to note that between 1957 and 1959, the revival of the so-called “peace priest movement” ended with breakthroughs and clear successes for the dictatorship. However, there were significant differences between Catholic and Protestant relations. The Catholic Episcopacy established two different bodies for the cultivation of “peace work”. The Catholic Committee of the Hungarian Peace Council and Opus Pacis. The latter was directly under the control of Episcopacy, so the bishops did not have to participate in the ‘work’ of the secular Hungarian Peace Council.

I presented the process of formation of church and anti-religious propaganda by analyzing new sources. From these documents we can learn that the system has already marked the “path of the future” in its church policy at the ‘starting line’ (1957). Instead of administrative measures, anti - church and anti - religious propaganda activities gave the essence of church policy. The reason for this is twofold. Kádár's dictatorship largely blamed churches and religiosity because the Hungarian people rose up against the communist dictatorship. Communist leaders were frustrated that there was a greater social demand for Christianity in Hungary than for communist ideology. Therefore, after 1956, the communist leaders wanted to take revenge on the churches primarily in the ‘field of ideology’. On the other hand, the theses of the XXI. Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union theses precisely foresaw the intensification of the ‘struggle of ideology’, which gave strong impetus for this intention.

## ***2.) Churches and dictatorship, religiosity and communism (Cooperation and survival)***

In our work, I tried to present the topic of co-operation and “survival strategies” in churches by analyzing unpublished sources and shedding light on new contexts. After 1956, the Catholic and Protestant churches were united on the need for “cooperation” with the state and active participation in so-called ‘peace work’. This, given the brutal suppression of the 1956 revolution which was led by the reorganizing communist dictatorship, could not have been avoided. According to some interpretations, the behavior of the exposed ‘peace priests’ of the era and their manifestations can be considered a survival strategy. They were the ones who believed that the only chance of survival for their church could only be to maximize the expectations of the dictatorship. Their manifestations were often characterized by exaggerated and unconditional servility towards dictatorship. Illuminating this phenomenon, I often cited the Catholic Miklós Beresztóczy and Richárd Horváth in my work. Miklós Beresztóczy defended the openly anti-church statements of the communist state minister Gyula Kállai in the pages of the contemporary Catholic press. While Richárd Horváth wrote about the Soviet occupation in his book as if it had saved the church from persecution.

I pointed out that on the Protestant side, this attitude of cooperating with the dictatorship was in many cases even stronger. For example, in my work I quote Elemér Győry, a Reformed bishop from Transdanubia, who derived the agreement between the state and the church in 1948

from the recognition of “faith in God” and “souls enlightened by the Holy Spirit”. We tried to nuance and enrich this image with several new components. I drew attention to the fact that the Hungarian Protestant churches also sought to extend their cooperation with the dictatorship to theological dimensions. I quoted Dr. J.L., who visited Budapest in 1957. Hromádka, who already emphasized at that time that "churches must also theologially process the issues raised by the new social order." As an important connection, I show that both Hungarian and foreign Protestantism pastors who have sympathized with the communist idea without any coercion. Such were the Hungarian Reformed Bishop Albert Bereczky and the German Dr. Martin Niemöller. They both correctly recognized the human and anti-Christian nature of National Socialism, but ignored the same in the case of communist regimes.) An interesting phenomenon is that church policy after 1956 was also able to win over pastors to the ‘cause’ of church-state cooperation whose previous careers would suggest the exact opposite. For example, András Keken was a Lutheran pastor who was fired from the Rákosi dictatorship and imprisoned in an internment camp, and he greeted the 1956 war of independence in the columns of the Lutheran press. Yet as early as the end of 1957, he gave a lecture on the new type of pastor loyal to socialism.

It is an undoubted fact that the dictatorship sought to present manifestations in its favor as if they existed exclusively in the churches. At the same time, we do not get a different picture from the documents that are not made public. From these we learn that, in both Catholic and Protestant relations, they only wanted to “survive” the obligatory manifestations of cooperation. (Or, as we pointed out earlier: it did not perform as expected by the dictatorship.). The highest level of the Hungarian hierarchy of the Catholic Church tried awkwardly to make sure that their statements did not compromise either the church or their own personal authority. So they did not make statements like the ‘peace priests’ presented earlier.

The highest level of the Hungarian hierarchy of the Catholic Church tried awkwardly to make sure that their statements did not compromise either the church or their own personal authority. So they did not make statements like the "peace priests" presented earlier. In *Opus Pacis*, we could not encounter the open communist friendship experienced in the Protestant churches and especially in the Christian Peace Conference, and the resulting distorted and detailed political-theological system. Moreover, *Opus Pacis* and the communist state power watched each other with suspicion throughout, and the organization’s socio-political resolutions were also very moderate in the vast majority. Members of the Episcopacy often used a specific strategy to weaken the anti-religious propaganda. This strategy meant that the bishops seemed to argue in favor of socialism, but in fact defended the interests of their own church.

Of the sources examined and cited, the argument of József Grósz, which was uttered in a conversation with the chief foreman of the State Office for Church Affairs in 1960, is particularly important in this respect. 'I think and we think the construction of socialism would go much faster, the economic construction would be much more effective if you did not continue to fight ideologically. Workers, peasants, intellectuals would do their work with a bigger heart, and they would not have such problems in educating the youth in particular, they would not have to fight hooliganism if they gave more to the teachings of the church.'

I consider it an important result to clarify the concept of 'peace' as a defining problem of interpretation in the examined topic. (And its interpretation by contemporary documents.) The spiritual and ideological foundations of the so-called peace movement were laid in the 'peace theses' of the World Intellectual Meeting held in Wroclav on August 24, 1948. The meeting was largely attended by left-wing intellectuals who identified with the Soviet Union and the goals of the 'international labor movement'. These 'peace-fighting' intellectuals were unaware of the Stalinist terror responsible for the deaths of millions. In contrast, the wars and strife in the world were blamed solely on the 'imperialist' policy of the United States. In their view, the only hope for humanity can only be the communist idea and communist countries, under the control of the Soviet Union, of course.

In conclusion, with regard to the ecclesiastical peace movement, I clarified that the concept of 'peace' found in the narrative of the communist dictatorship was based on total absurdity. Peace can only be achieved if the opposing parties recognize each other as partners. It cannot be called peace if the stronger party - in this case the communist dictatorship - does not consider the existence of the other, weaker party - in this case the churches and the religiosity they convey - justified and seeks to eliminate them with full openness. Just as it is an impossibility that those involved in church 'peace work' were expected to support the political methods, actions, and ideology of the Soviet Union and the countries in its sphere of interest.

### ***3.) The issue of contradiction and self-contradiction in contemporary church politics***

I also presented the concept of a 'socialist peace priest' as such a controversial phenomenon. In this respect, the statement Károly Olt (President of State Office of Church Affairs), quoted in my work, is key. Olt noted that they were willing to tolerate churches and

religiosity only as a temporary phenomenon. It precludes reconciliation between churches and socialism. "But that does not mean that churches can survive the period of socialism or 'get into' the socialist system." At the same time, the dictatorship nurtured the vain hope that a compromise between the churches and the socialist system could be reached. According to this, by fulfilling the peace work required by the socialist state, the churches can quasi 'live together in peace' with the socialist system, and the state does not want to destroy them either.

An example of this was the reception of the 'Czechoslovak Peace Priest Delegation' analyzed in my work. Their visit was intended to reinforce the opposite of what Károly Olt said, for example. (According to Jan Mara, head of the delegation, published in the Catholic press of the time: Our clergy have a great understanding of the nature of social change in our society and do not confront it, but support our state in building a new social order. 'They understood that socialism did not want them to abandon their faith.'

Of these, they are usually those in which the persecution of religion operated more efficiently than in Hungary, and the secularization of society was significantly more "effective" than in Hungary. Returning home from these 'study tours' the peace priest press praised in long reports the "advanced church policy model" of the given socialist country, the 'communist friend' behavior of church leaders, and the 'freedom of religion' within the socialist camp.

In the processed topic, we present the expectations of the dictatorship towards the churches as another significant contradiction within the church policy. We quoted the 1959 statement of Minister of State Gyula Kállai, according to which the cooperation between the state and the church is based only on temporary necessity. I pointed out that a church policy laden with self-contradictions necessarily strengthened the sense of secondaryism of priests, pastors, and believers. This was because the 'patience' and 'tolerance' publicly voiced by leading politicians and ideologues was much less prevalent in practice.

I also point out that the coexistence of these self-contradictions was not accidentally tolerated by dictatorial church policy. Their intended purpose was to nurture vain hopes and confuse the churches. Overall, the communist dictatorship which unfolded after 1956 achieved important results in terms of short-term goals, but the ultimate goal of creating a "socialist type of man" was unsuccessful. However, atheist propaganda and the 'peace movement' have caused damage to the churches to this day.

## IV. Publishing activity in the subject

- Katolikus és protestáns békeszervezetek és béketevékenység a Kádár-korszakban. In: Török József, Tusor Péter, Tóth Krisztina: *Katolicizmus Magyarországon a II. Vatikáni Zsinat korában*. (Tanulmányok és inventárium) Kiadja az MTA-PPKE „Lendület” Egyháztörténeti kutatócsoport, Budapest, 2015. 195-213 pp.
- A reakció letörése és az együttműködő vonal újjászervezése a Magyarországi Református és Evangélikus Egyházakban 1956 után. In: *Egyháztörténeti Szemle*, 2016. XVII. évf. 1. szám
- A „szocialista embertípus nyomában: vallásellenesség, ateizmus és egyházpolitika a kádári megtorlás éveiben 1957 és 1964 között. In: *Történettudományi Doktori Iskola „Élelmódtörténeti Pillanatképek” konferenciakötete* (Sajtó alatt!)