



The Relations of the *Keresztény Magvető* (*Christian Sower*) and the State between 1971 and 1989

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Abstract. After the nationalization in 1948, all Transylvanian periodicals of the Hungarian historical churches were banned. Relaunched in 1971 and up until the changes in 1989, the journal *Keresztény Magvető* was bordered by ideological and editorial concepts. The analysis tracks the process of editing the journal, starting with the collection of the publications, throughout the typographic works and until distribution. The main aspect is the relationship of the editorial committee with the Department of Religious Affairs, the representative of the state, as this relation was defining the existence of the journal in the specific period. By approving the *Keresztény Magvető*, the State Security Forces had a better possibility of control, while also using the periodical for the popularization of the positive image of the country.

Keywords: press history, Hungarian, church, communism, censorship

Introduction

The issues of the *Keresztény Magvető* journal published between 1971 and 1989 represent a particular period in the 152-year-long history of the journal. Relaunched in 1971 and up until the changes in 1989, the journal was bordered by ideological and editorial concepts which it had not been faced with before. In Transylvania, during the studied period, the Hungarian clerical press was represented by only two publications: *Keresztény Magvető* and *Református Szemle*.

In 1968, the Unitarian Church organized in Cluj its memorial synod to celebrate 400 years of existence. In preparation for the event, the leaders of the Church expressed their desire to request the relaunch of a church journal from the Council of Religious Affairs of Romania. The frequent discussions and agreements in this period wanted to benefit from the relatively favourable period regarding the Hungarian community at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Nevertheless, the relaunch of the journal was a difficult process.

As we know, the communist regime was an anticlerical, anti-church regime. Church persecution was not directed against certain denominations or ideologies but generally against faith and believing. Every Church and denomination had to suffer. The system of state power made every effort on the spiritual and material levels to control the Churches. In the new political context, the Church, recognizing the inequalities in position and force, tried to reposition itself in the social, political and economic system, so that in the period of 1970–1980 it became entirely subordinated to the nationalist communist power, automatically acting upon all of its orders.

Being integrated into the system manifested itself by the development of self-censorship. Starting with the 1960s, the church journals, authorized with difficulty, tried to offer contents that distanced itself from the favourite topic of the totalitarian system, which did not accept former institutions and organizations that had been banned since 1948.

In the mid 1970s, the system was characterized by an inflexible and hostile attitude towards the issue of minorities. The aim was the homogenization of society, a purpose masked by emphasizing total equality and peaceful coexistence. In the 1980s, the term ‘coexisting nationalities’ was already replaced by ‘Romanians of Hungarian nationality’.

The Department of Religious Affairs controlled the Churches, and thus all problems regarding the two church journals – among which, that of the censorship – were resolved by the staff of this department. However, after approving the printing, distribution and the control of the typographical works, the requirements the church was faced with were the same as those regarding the daily newspapers – an issue discussed in detail in the thesis.

Along with self-censorship and censorship, under the communist regime, the informal practice also had an important role, interweaving all institutions and organizations. The informal relations completed and, in some cases, replaced the means of official, formal censorship.

Historical Context

The *Keresztény Magvető* was first published at the middle of the 19th century as a theological-scientific journal, preserving its aims in the 20th century as well; starting from 1861 until WWI, the journal underwent an important period of development, of appreciation in church life but also in the history of the journal. In the historical and political situation following 1921, the Church and the *Keresztény Magvető* journal had to take on the spiritual strengthening of the Hungarians in Transylvania, now in minority fate. After the political changes in 1944, the Unitarian Literary Society was reorganized, but it could not take on

the publication of the *Keresztény Magvető*. After the nationalization of 1948, all minority organizations and associations were banned and abolished, and so were church publications.

In 1968, the Unitarian Church celebrated 400 years of its existence, but at the time of the commemoration – due to the suppression in 1949 – it did not have its own written press. Thus, church leaders, preparing for the commemorative synod, formulated the necessity and the proposal for the relaunch of a Unitarian journal in order to mark the 400-year anniversary of the existence of the Church. Based on the editorial plan, elaborated by János Erdő, they came to the decision to relaunch the journal *Keresztény Magvető*, as the need for such a publication was great. The Church needed a journal through which it could keep the relationship – even unilaterally – with the believers, inform them about church events and, last but not least, publish theological articles and sermons in order to improve the knowledge of priests and theologians. The historical importance of the journal was considered a defining argument in the relaunching process, in the request addressed to the Department of Religious Affairs.

On receiving the approval, the Church leadership accepted the censorship of the totalitarian regime as well as the continuous confrontations with the Department of Religious affairs, a department which – through the authorization of the relaunch – could control part of the Church's activity and claim the uncontrolled distribution of the collections of sermons circulating informally. At the same time, they used the journal's distribution abroad in order to strengthen and remedy the image of the state. The Romanian communist regime considered it very important to continuously remedy the image of the Romanian state on the international level, and for this they used the promotion of the ideal situation of coexisting minorities; thus, the Unitarian journal came to be presented at international exhibitions. Thus, the decision to relaunch the journal was not made by the Church – it only expressed an opinion.

The Role and Importance of the *Keresztény Magvető*

Between 1970 and 1980, the *Keresztény Magvető* fulfilled its purpose only partially. The first part of the thesis deals with the detailed presentation of the contents of the journal, which helps in understanding the editorial process as well as in sketching the relationship with the Department of Religious Affairs and in presenting the socio-political system of the era. The actual role of the editorial board was a formal one: on the one hand, the existence of the board was a requirement in the case of every journal, while, on the other, in the relationship with the Department of Religious Affairs, the staff, who took responsibility regarding the contents published in the journal, was clearly defined.

The writings published in the headings *Tanulmányok* (Studies) and *Szószerék – Úrasztala* (The Pulpit – the Lord's Table) had an important role in the training of the priests; nevertheless, they did not offer the possibility to discuss the issues of the Hungarian community in Transylvania.

Censoring the journal led to the situation in which its pages presented church and social life in general and in a euphemistic way. The important social changes – problems caused by the swift increase in urban population and emigration – hardly ever appeared in the journal. But the annual reports of the bishops include allusions to these subjects.

The basic articles with a political-ideological content were compulsory, being present in every issue of the journal. The editing of these articles was constrained; they were published without the name of the author, thus signalling to the readers that they were mandatory; nevertheless, responsibility is collectively borne by the editorial board, as they could not be linked to individuals. The annual reports of the bishops contain the description of their visits abroad, the programmes of the guests arriving from other countries. It is a matter of course that these writings were in the focus of the secret police.

In this period, the news regarding international peace movements were also mandatory, mainly because of state propaganda, but not only in this journal but in all periodicals published in the country. The basic articles with political content were full of positive thoughts of a happy future, very distant from the everyday social reality. International peace, social equality, the economic prosperity were put in the service of the faith of the common building of socialism. The bishop's reports told about the activities within the Social Unity Front, the peace movements, and at each meeting church councils sent reverential telegrams to the president of the country, the texts of which had to be published in the *Keresztény Magvető*. The interfaith theological conferences were events organized under the forced pressure of the Department of Religious Affairs, the presence being mandatory and the reports of the events being published in the journal.

In the late 1970s, the rupture between reality and the image presented by the propaganda became even larger, so that it signalled the decline of the ideology. The myths, such as international peace, the international determining role of the country, economic well-being and the active role of the church in the state, became parts of the totalitarian propaganda.

The thematic and formal frame of the journal *Keresztény Magvető* was a very rigid one, as the system of headings, the features of the cover set during relaunch did not change over the 18 years. The editorial board was also changed due to merely objective reasons. The form and aspect of the journal *Keresztény Magvető* was simple, specific of the era. Issues that were sent abroad were to be printed on a better-quality paper. The thin and low-quality paper, the lines printed very close to each other made reading the journal difficult. Nevertheless, there was

no other possibility, and with the lack of paper the editorial boards were happy that the journal was published at all. The writings presented in this chapter were published on the first pages of the journal: the New Year's pastoral letter, the political editorial, the occasional writings are the ones featured on these pages, all being means of the propaganda. The total control offered the power the possibility to launch the process of indoctrination with only one aim: the emphasis and the generalization of the perfect character of the system and the reality of its historical role.

This chapter also includes how the Department of Religious Affairs appears and is represented on the pages of the journal. The readers of the *Keresztény Magvető* were informed about this institution only through the bishops' reports. In every episcopal report, Bishop Lajos Kovács addressed in a few lines the relationship of the Church with this department, praising and thanking the department and its staff on every occasion for the given support.

The external relations of the Church – similar to other activities – were closely controlled by the state in the studied period. Bishop Lajos Kovács travelled a lot abroad, not only due to the fact that he was the only one among the official representatives of the Church who had a diplomatic passport, but also because between 1975 and 1978 he was the President of IARE, a title that made these trips necessary. In his reports published in the *Keresztény Magvető*, he presented every foreign visit with great detail.

Work in the Editorial Board

This chapter of the thesis deals with the process of editing the journal. The censorship characterized by severity, a rigid framework and extenuating bureaucracy made the process of publishing every issue extremely difficult. Very few priests assumed the authorship of their writings as, after passing self-censorship, it went under the censorship of the Department of Religious Affairs – being modified by the latter. Collecting the texts represented a very challenging task, undertaken by only one person, the responsible editor, János Erdő. His relentless work and attention made the publishing of the journal possible in this period. Severe even to himself, the editor defined a level of quality which became another factor hindering publishing. He frequently put aside writings about which he considered that they did not reach this level.

This delayed publishing could not be remedied. János Erdő fulfilled his task of editing the journal; nevertheless, his preoccupations as a professor and a scholar, respectively the hampered collecting of the writings did not allow keeping deadlines. The delays were due both to the editorial committee – through the editing of the issues on time –, which was also dealing with church affairs, as

well as to the Department of Religious Affairs – through the delay of approvals and overloaded printing.

Starting with 1977 – by the order of the Department of Religious Affairs –, systematic editorial meetings were introduced. At these meetings, usually János Erdő held a presentation on the situation of the issue in the process of being authorized, and then they discussed the editing of the next issue. The meetings were formal – this fact was confirmed by our researches. The majority of the editorial tasks were fulfilled and performed by János Erdő, and on the occasion of these meetings he presented his colleagues everything the Department of Religious Affairs pointed out.

The modalities of the contact between the Church and the Department of Religious Affairs regarding the *Keresztény Magvető* are important. The informal relations, also included in the system, strengthened the existing frames of the contact, but they also made solving the problems possible.

The publishing of every issue of the *Keresztény Magvető* depended on the publishing and distribution authorization on behalf of the Department of Religious Affairs. Most of the time, these authorizations could be urged by telephone. After the printing command, the employees of the Church used various methods to expedite the printing of the journal but also to ensure the amount of paper needed for the issue. Due to the fact that, during the studied period, the Department of Religious Affairs decided upon the amount of paper the Church would get based on its publications every year, the Church had to buy this amount from a certain deposit; however – especially in the 80s –, they found themselves in the situation in which they did not find paper in the deposit and had to purchase it elsewhere. The paper was then sold to the printing house for the publications of the Church. These being done, the issues of the journal were distributed: out of the 500 copies, 100 were sent abroad, the rest in the country. The parishes and most priests received one copy for free. Less than 100 copies were left to subscribe for the lay readers. We can thus state that the distribution of the journal was very restricted, as it reached only a limited group of readers, which was determined by the totalitarian regime.

The relationship of the journal with the Unitarian Church in Hungary was a restricted one because of the distant relationship between the two countries and the Churches. Here are presented the writings that refer to the Unitarian Church in Hungary, but the thesis contains details regarding the opposite pole of the relationship: the church forums in Hungary, the Unitarian journal *Unitárius Élet* and its reports with *Keresztény Magvető*. Regardless of the common institutional past, the relationship of the two Churches in the years between 1970 and 1980 only survived at the protocol level. Only this was possible in the conditions of totalitarian socialism through the journal *Keresztény Magvető* or through the contents and possibilities of reciprocal visits.

The Regime Change in the Issues of the Journal after 1989

Under the influence of the 1989 social and political events, at the beginning of 1990, the Church faced new challenges from several directions, among which, the fate of the journal became a minor problem for a given period.

Today, *Keresztény Magvető* is part of the national heritage, included in a theoretical framework, where the form of memory has become a means of historical and historiographical problematizing. According to Pierre Nora, the present is predisposed to auto-historicizing, and in my opinion this is true in the case of the Church as well. The journal was preserved up until the present day thanks to responsibility and precaution. We may ask what the future brings. Faith in progress today is replaced with keeping and salvaging values. The *Keresztény Magvető* needs to find its way to the future in this social context.

We consider that the hypotheses of the research are valid; nevertheless, the thesis has not exhausted the subject: for the imaging of the recent part, there is need for the document of the Department of Religious Affairs, still unexplored. At the same time, the documents in the archives of the secret police are being processed; their contents will complete the interpretation of the *Keresztény Magvető*. The thesis refers to these studies, but these analyses are very important. The approach of the topic does not contain a detailed information regarding the perception of the readers. The research is based on the issues of the journal published in the studied period, the documentary sources of the central archives of the Unitarian Church, of the Church in Hungary, the texts of the interviews conducted with individuals who have information on the editing of the journal. In a following stage of the research, I consider it important to study the circle of subscribers to the *Keresztény Magvető*, among which, the priests who published rarely or were not at all present in the highlights of the journal, as well as the simple readers.

The importance of the thesis lies in the presentation of the history of a Hungarian clerical journal from Transylvania from the recent past. The scholarly literature does not contain data regarding such research, the study of the clerical press from this period.

The present thesis can complete the history of the Unitarian press in Transylvania by bringing facts and new information for the history of the Hungarian press in Transylvania in the recent past.

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