

## Reformed Piety in Hungary in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

The aim of the present work is to examine the characteristic features of individual religious thought and life, and of personal piety in a certain historic situation, in our case, the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We are not primarily interested in the sermons typical of the era, although their analysis is inevitable, but rather in the effect of these sermons on the lives, thinking and various expressions of church going people. Our main question is: in what features of practical piety and religious thinking was the reformed theology of the era expressed?

We see that the theology and the religious thinking of the era in question, namely the second half, and especially the last third part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were in organic unity. The living conditions of the Reformed Church had radically changed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The opportunity for inner and spiritual accommodation to newer and outer conditions was established by the piety-forming sermons of the decades of bloody persecution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, hand in hand with the products of devotionals and prayer books essential in deepening personal piety.

We make special mention of the fact that sermons preached at funerals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are indispensable in order to become acquainted with the content of piety of the era. Since only such sermons could be published – due to the fact of being preached at the graves of family members belonging to influential noble dynasties – and sermons preached from the pulpit could not be published because of the Roman Catholic censorship, preachers elaborated their theological views within the frames of this genre. At the same time, these sermons contain numerous references to the religious attitude of the individual.

Our research is completed by the analysis of three groups of sources: 1) private handwritten notes found in devotionals that were essential for leading a pious life; 2) last wills and testaments born at the ultimate end of earthly life; 3) hand-written prayer books. The first comprehends the wider strata of society, the second grants information on the nobility and the middle classes of country towns, whereas the third mainly, but not solely, gives an insight into the realm of prayers within the church community.

The reformed theological thinking of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was deeply rooted in the theology that had crystallised in the second half of the previous century. This theology was that of synthetic character. The two opposing sides, Reformed orthodoxy and Puritanism, strangely made peace with each other. The former was determined to hold back the attacks that aimed at changing the structure, that is, the “frameworks” that had been rooted in a century-long tradition, yet it gave way to efforts that aimed at deepening the “content”, that is, the ministry and personal piety. Works of theologians, with outstanding talents and significant influence, which had been left to the following generation reflect this special synthesis.

Theology – as we have already pointed it out referring to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – continued to be characterised by the merging of various influences. Orthodoxy, emphasising Reformed heritage, bore Puritan marks, and as a fruit of Pietism it was not averse to expressions of emotional identification. This special alloy kept its strength even when rationalism started to spread in Hungary.

Rationalism appeared in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Hungarian Reformed Church. In Transylvania already from the 1730s several college professors taught in the spirit of the German Christian Wolff. However, this trend was not determinative for the era in question. At the same time it was not as sharp and intolerant as it was abroad, but rather intended to harmonise “common reasoning with faith and Christian scholarship”. It

started to spread in a wider circle only at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a volume of sermons was published whose author was the first to adopt Bible-criticism.

The following is typical of Hungarian Reformed piety in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Christ-mysticism and deep affection for Jesus. This passionate love for Jesus is connected with self-torturing penitence. The repentance of a pious man arises from being shocked by contemplating the cross. However, this does not become a life denying religious sorrow, for the cross is not only a shocking experience, but the assurance of salvation as well. Sincere repentance was not a simple ritual act, since it was penetrated by a passionate desire for redemption. Thus, it could work out the joyous experience of redemption.

The teaching of predestination, the consciousness of being elected, lived on untouched as still part of the heritage of orthodoxy in the religious thinking. It was in this that the strength of Reformed doctrine, redemption by grace and faith alone, was expressed most clearly. The pious individual of the 18<sup>th</sup> century looks up with courage and comfort from the depths of personal fate. For on the one hand, the fulfilment, that is, the salvation of his life does not depend on his own possibilities; on the other hand, his earthly life full of failures and sinking into death is raised into the infinity of eternity.

Among the elements of private piety that were stressed we hardly meet the emphasis on the conversion experience, even less the demand of providing details of this event, which is well known from the piety of Halle and Herrnhut. The circumstances of conversions are not significant. The emphasis is on God's elective work, and on a life of thanksgiving and devotion, that is, sanctification following from conversion. Instead of the mystic experience of conversion, the practical reality of being converted is important. In the modesty about sharing the personal experience of conversion with others, we can discover the rejection of the idea of trusting one's own strength. For all merit is found only in God's elective work in Jesus Christ. The Reformed pious individual of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has assurance in Him and not in his own "praxis pietatis".

Church services, family devotions and private prayer life were mutually strengthening and complementary elements that were necessarily contingent upon one another. The means are the same everywhere: the Bible, hymnbook, prayer book. Due to the political situation, the public practice of piety became difficult at places, and indeed impossible for several communities. Thus the value of services held in homes and personal prayer life were raised. This had a good influence on the lives of communities living within traditional frameworks.

Besides national authors, German Pietists (J. Gerhardt, J. Arndt) and English Puritans (L. Bayly) were widely read. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century single writings of the Swiss Pictet, the French Moulin and Osterwald, and the English Doddridge and Bunyan were published in the Hungarian language. Hungarian Reformed believers read the same prayers and tracts (that is, born in the same spirit) as the Swiss free citizens, the persecuted French Huguenots, the Dutch Reformed believers, the English non-conformists, and the Danish or German Lutherans. The Hungarian spiritual-intellectual life did not break away from that of the European in the 18<sup>th</sup> century either, while it continued to deepen and strengthen its own sanctified traditions.