

Book review

MÁTÉ-TÓTH ANDRÁS: *AZ IRGALOM KULTÚRÁJA. KONVIVENCIA KELET-KÖZÉP-EURÓPÁBAN* [THE CULTURE OF MERCY. CONVIVENCE IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE], BUDAPEST: GONDOLAT, 2024, ISBN 9789635565573.

Reviewed by Richard Tinca¹

As a Hungarian from Transylvania, I am a member of a minority shaped by a wounded historical consciousness, by the inner compulsion of cultural self-preservation, and by the persistent experience of social and institutional dependency. Certain components of the ontological insecurity intrinsic to minority existence resonate with the affective legacy of East-Central Europe – an inheritance that András Máté-Tóth, scholar of religion and theologian, comprehensively interprets in *Az irgalom kultúrája. Konvivencia Kelet-Közép-Európában* [*The Culture of Mercy. Convivence in East-Central Europe*], (Budapest: Gondolat, 2024). According to his central thesis, the social and religious dynamics of the region can be adequately understood only if wounded collective identity is placed at the core of the analytical framework. Such wounds, he argues, cannot be erased, yet they may be transformed: the path toward healing is convivence, the cultivated quality of coexistence that transcends the logic of retribution and mere tolerance and locates the social possibility of shared restoration within the culture of mercy.

One of the central questions animating the work of András Máté-Tóth concerns how the social transformations of post-socialist East-Central Europe can be rendered analytically intelligible through the methodological apparatus of religious studies. The volume under review serves as the concluding part of a comprehensive trilogy. The first volume examined the applicability of Western secularisation paradigms, arguing that these models fail to capture the historical experiences and deeply embedded collective dispositions of the region. Continuing this line of thought,

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the second volume placed the concept of wounded collective identity at its centre, – a notion that reappears in the present work as a fundamental organising principle.

This volume seeks to steer the interpretation of the past, present, and prospective trajectories of East-Central Europe by integrating sociological, religious studies, and literary perspectives. Its stated aim is to render the interpretation of social reality accessible beyond a narrowly defined academic community, making its analyses intelligible to non-specialists as well. Nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary is consistent and transparent throughout, and the structure of the volume is clear. The argument proceeds from reframing the role of the intellectual through the culture of mercy, toward the vision of convivence.

The paradoxical title of one of the chapters, “The usefulness of the useless intellectual”, points to the idea that the now marginalised role of the intellectual needs to be rethought. In this spirit, the author reimagines an intellectual archetype that may appear anachronistic: that of the intellectual who lives in the moral realm of “eternal values” and communal responsibility, caught in the tension of a twofold commitment to ideas and to the community.

As a literary illustration, the first chapter is framed by the ethical tendency novel of Ferenc Sánta, *Az ötödik pecsét* [*The Fifth Seal*], whose storyline stretches from the exchange of ideas at the table to the brutal imagery of torture. The closing episode of *The Fifth Seal*, in which an apparent act of betrayal becomes an allegory for saving another human being, seems to subtly emphasise the responsibility of the intellectual. Could this reading unintentionally relativise Julien Benda’s cautioning against the *Treason of the Intellectuals* (*La Trahison des Clercs*, 1927), in which detachment from public life no longer embodies freedom but rather an aestheticised form of indifference?

András Máté-Tóth locates Europe’s historical self-understanding in the spiritual legacy of the Christian tradition. He describes Europe as “irreversibly Christian”, an evocative way of articulating its cultural continuity, though such exclusivity is difficult to sustain today. In his interpretation, the future of Europe and the renewal of Christianity presuppose one another: the continent continues to draw its identity from the Christian tradition, while the credible renewal of the Church may offer guidance amid contemporary crises.

While a homogeneous framing of East-Central Europe would at times benefit from greater differentiation, the author’s paradigms of security-seeking and vulnerability may still provide a coherent structuring logic for the region. As he argues, despite its historically compromised position, the Church remains a decisive

actor in the identity discourses of the region. By reinforcing its credibility, it could make a substantive contribution to strengthening social resilience. A persistent challenge in this process is the traditional coalescing of national ideology and the Church. The author rightly cautions that the emotionally charged atmosphere of the region can easily generate a form of patriotism infused with religious overtones, that becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile with the Gospel's universal commandment of love.

One of the principal merits of András Máté-Tóth's latest volume is that it develops and applies new theoretical approaches grounded in the distinctive identity patterns of the region. He proceeds in the same manner when he examines religious and social transformations not through the paradigms of modernity and secularisation, but from the vantage point of securitisation and wounded collective identity. The latter points to a trauma-centred form of collective memory rooted in historical and existential wounds, traceable to the loyalty pressures generated by the intermediary geopolitical status of the region. For centuries, the region has been a buffer zone between great powers, producing a persistent sense of threat and, through the resulting lack of autonomy, a profound longing for sovereignty. Thus, the securitising function of religion in the region can serve as both a source and an instrument of security.

A distinctive merit of the book is that the author goes beyond diagnostic analysis, articulating an incipient form of a utopian vision of a "good society." He does so while drawing on the theories of major international thinkers. He refers, for instance, to the concept of "good society" proposed by sociologist of religion Robert Bellah, envisioning the cultivation of attentiveness and the common good as an alternative to the erosion of social cohesion brought about by individualisation. He also reinterprets the health paradox formulated by Kopp and Skrabski, arguing that a healthy society requires an integrated anthropological view of the person, coupled with the strengthening of cultural factors and solidarity.

The creation of a good society may begin with a process of collective healing, which requires not only a cultural memory capable of a nuanced interpretation of past wounds and a practice of critical self-reflection, but also the uncovering of the affective heritage of the region. This affective heritage is expressed in recurring emotional patterns that bolster collective narratives of victimisation woven into social and political debates.

Grief work can become productive only when societies are able to step out of the emotional spiral attached to their losses and to transcend the region's characteristic

regressive debates about the past. At that point, collective resilience can give rise to a forward-looking paradigm shift that transcends interpretive schemes rooted in historical injuries. This process may also be nourished by the macro-level resources of religious heritage. The process finds its proper frame in the notion of convivence: a culture of coexistence defined by mutual responsibility, commitment to the common good, and recognition-based social practices.

The restoration of wounded collective identity can thus be sought in the culture of mercy. Mercy, as both a universal concept and an existential experience, is capable of transcending the perpetrator-victim dichotomy, rehabilitating the norms of forgiveness and repentance, and creating space for communal reconciliation. The Christian norms of repentance offer ethical patterns that can be secularised and may still provide meaningful social orientation today.

This perspective may become a defining organising principle for the future of the region, serving as a normative condition for the strengthening of resilience and the practice of convivence. In response to deeply embedded structural sin, the author opens the possibility of structural grace, urging the creation of institutions that replace the logic of structural sin with institutions of structural grace. In this way, the ethos of mercy may become the normative framework for both convivence and resilience.

The concluding chapter, drawing on the analogy of Damascus, illustrates the post-socialist region's search for direction. After the regime change, in East-Central Europe, the myth of Western European prosperity did not produce a sense of fulfilment but a prolonged state of being on the road. The measure of a good society lies not in indicators of success but rather in its willingness and ability to attend to the vulnerable. By creating the culture and structures of mercy, the region may move beyond a paradigm of catching up with the West and instead draw upon its own experiences and vulnerabilities to imagine the possibility of a more merciful society.

The volume is not merely an intellectual manifesto but, by stepping beyond the structured reality of academia, the author charts practical directions that go beyond mere diagnostic description. The timeliness of the work is indisputable, appearing as it does in a perilous historical moment when war in the immediate neighbourhood, the rise of populism, and growing social inequalities are reshaping the affective structures of everyday life. All indications suggest that social tensions will continue to intensify in the near future. Yet this should not discourage us from setting out on the path of mercy and moving toward the possibility of a more peaceful social coexistence. As an attempt to answer the question of how, this volume serves as a compass that invites further reflection.