

*KISS Réka*<sup>1</sup>:

## **Identity Building in the Hungarian Reformed Press in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Example of *Református Figyelő*<sup>2</sup>**

### *Abstract.*

In my study, I am examining a significant step in the history of the national Reformed press between the two world wars, i.e., the weekly paper *Református Figyelő* (1928–1933). It is well known that the interwar period which was also called a “religious renaissance” or the “period of the second confessionalization”, is considered to be a period of renewal of religious and ecclesiastical life, deepening of faith and strengthening of denominational identity for each historical church.

My study approaches the issue of church press between the two world wars from the perspective of the process of community identity building of the Hungarian Reformed people. On the one hand, I am looking for an answer to how the content of the Reformed identity changed during the century, which were the defining phenomena, historical experiences that decisively influenced the Reformed self-awareness, which were its main problems, the central topics of church public discourse. On the other hand, my research focuses on the role of the ecclesiastical press in shaping public discourses, in building identity, the way its organizational background and internal system of relations developed.

*Keywords:* religious identity, Reformed Church, interwar period, church press, Ravasz László.

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“The history of the church press is the spiritual history of the Hungarian Reformed Church over the last three decades.”<sup>3</sup> – quotes the early-1960 memoir of László Ravasz, the cross-denominationally influential Reformed leader of the interwar period, then bishop emeritus, set aside for political reasons. The bishop’s words, as well as the well-known aphorism of the time that “if Apostle Paul lived today, he would be a journalist”, illustrate the privileged role attributed to the modern ecclesiastical press in shaping church life, the increased expectations raised towards the denominational press by the church public opinion, which was reflecting upon its several possibilities. Nevertheless, the history of the Hungarian Reformed press is still scarcely elaborated in specialized literature. In his study on the first national Reformed press product, *Református Élet* (Reformed Life), Balázs Ablonczy rightly pointed out that the exploration of the Reformed press and the related institution-building experiments are a particularly neglected area<sup>4</sup> among many unknown aspects of the Reformed Church history. The richest material on the church press to this day can be found in István Kónya’s 1967 book, which sharply criticized the Reformed Church of the interwar period, with an ideology that was already obsolete at the time of writing.<sup>5</sup> However, due to his selective approach and tendentious-ideological interpretation, his work is ill-suited to serve as a starting point for a modern press history review. The increasing number of church history studies have not since undertaken to present regular press history or content analysis although texts and sub-studies that expose some of the particular issues very well are already available.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> RAVASZ, László (1992): *Emlékezéseim* (edited and introduction by Endre Gyököcssy). Budapest, Református Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya. 188.

<sup>4</sup> ABLONCZY, Balázs (2006): A Református Élet hetilap és a budapesti reformátusság (1934–1944). In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 1211–1229.

<sup>5</sup> Kónya, István (1967): *A magyar református egyház felső vezetésének politikai ideológiája a Horthy-korszakban*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó.

<sup>6</sup> ABLONCZY 2006. BRANDT, Juliane (1998): A protestánsok és a millennium (Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a késő 19. század nemzeti ünnepeinek tükrében). *Századvég* 1998/11. 167–193. BRANDT, Juliane (2003): Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a 19. századi Magyarországon: a protestáns egyházak. *Századvég* 2003/3. 57–93. HATOS, Pál (2005): A magyar protestantizmus és eszmei fordulata Tisza Istvántól Ravasz Lászlóig. *Múltunk* 2005/1. 89–117. GICZI, Zsolt (2009): *A katolikus-protestáns egyházi kapcsolatok fő vonásai a Horthy-korszak Magyarországon*. PhD dissertation. ELTE BTK Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola, Budapest. NAGY, Károly Zsolt (2013): *Hová lett a református öntudat? A magyar református felekezeti identitás megújulásának néhány diskurzusról*.

In line with a broader research project that is about to be launched, my study approaches the issue of church press between the two world wars from the perspective of the process of community identity building of the Hungarian Reformed people. On the one hand, I am looking for an answer as to how the content of the Reformed identity changed during the century, which were the defining phenomena, historical experiences that decisively influenced the Reformed self-awareness, and which were its main problems, the central topics of church public discourse. On the other hand, my research focuses on the role of the ecclesiastical press in shaping public discourses, in building identity, the way its organizational background and internal system of relations developed.

### *1. The Start and Development of Református Figyelő (Reformed Observer)*

The present study examines a significant step in the history of the national Reformed press between the two world wars, i.e. the weekly paper *Református Figyelő* (1928–1933). The choice of topic and the choice of the source group are justified by several considerations. It is well known that the period between the two world wars, which was also called a “religious renaissance” or the “period of the second confessionalization”, is considered to be a period of renewal of religious and ecclesiastical life, deepening of faith and strengthening of denominational identity for each historical church. In the Reformed Church, this attempt at renewal was born in response to a multifactorial crisis. Radical changes were forced by a combination of at least four factors.

a) First of all, we must refer to the well-known public historical and political events and cataclysms. The loss of the World War, the ensuing revolutions, and the trauma of the collapse of historical Hungary became a defining experience for an entire generation. The Hungarian Reformed Church experienced it as a particularly shocking fact that, barely a generation after its already belated organizational unification (1881), it

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PhD dissertation. Pécsi Tudományegyetem, Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola. RÉBAY, Magdolna (2003): A felekezeti kérdés az 1920-as, 1930-as évek fordulóján a Református Figyelő és a Magyar Kultúra írásában. *Kút* 2003/3–4. 165–175.

was scattered again in the successor states of the Trianon Treaty. As Pál Hatos exposed in a study, the “Trianon shock” is well characterized by the fact that while in 1909, on the Calvin anniversary in Geneva, the Hungarian Reformed Church represented the largest church with a unified Calvinist root in Europe, barely ten years later the same church became the largest Protestant diaspora in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

b) Meanwhile, the Hungarian Reformed Church, which has become administratively united and had full religious freedom by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, found itself in an increasingly secularized society. The mass secularization experienced from the middle of the century brought to light the crisis symptoms of faith and the social presence of Protestant churches. The spectacular decline of the traditional patterns of religious practice and church life becoming a mere formality made it increasingly clear that the framework of the people’s church was becoming empty. In the apt wording of István Bogárdi Szabó: “By the time the freedom of religion that was longed for several centuries had been completed, it was as if the practice of religion itself had become barren.”<sup>8</sup> The explosive social processes that accompanied capitalization, first and foremost the large-scale industrialization and urbanization, brought about a significant transformation of the social composition of church membership. The predominantly rural, small-town, basically lower minority Reformed identity was completed by new elements such as the metropolitan, the working class, and the intellectual church members. As a result of the migration to cities, especially to Budapest, which had become a metropolis, the number of Reformed people, who left their way of life, religion, or at least its traditional forms together with their place of residence, increased.<sup>9</sup> The Reformed Church was not prepared for the new situation and the resulting conflicts. The development of the institutional church structure could not keep up with the sudden surge in the Reformed

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<sup>7</sup> HATOS, Pál (2006): Az 1909-es Kálvin-jubileum. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 1163–1178.

<sup>8</sup> BOGÁRDI SZABÓ, István (2009): Kálvin hagyománya Dunamelléken. In: FARBAKY, Péter – KISS, Réka (ed.): *Kálvin hagyománya – Református kulturális örökség a Duna mentén. A Budapesti Történelmi Múzeum kiállítási katalógusa.* Budapest, Budapesti Történelmi Múzeum. 20.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed presentation of this issue and the individual topics, see the two-volume study edited by László Kósa – which may also function as a vast manual –, especially the introductory study of the volume. KÓSA, László (2006): Bevezetés: reformátusok kisvárosban – nagyvárosban – világvárosban. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 11–35.

population of the metropolitan area. All these deeply rooted structural issues had an important role in prompting a radical reassessment of the situation, the message, and the social presence of various groups of the Hungarian Reformed public and their search for new methods of pastoral care, among which the role of the press also increased spectacularly. János Victor described the inadequacy of the traditional, patriarchal channels of church public opinion formation and the role of the press in possible responses to the challenges the church was facing in the columns of *Református Figyelő* in the following way: “In the present conditions, neither the conversations of the brethren under the mill nor the encounters of influential lords at times of grape harvest are sufficient to form a true public opinion, as it once was; but newspapers are needed, which have a wide readership among the members of the church.”<sup>10</sup>

c) The attitude towards self-criticism was reinforced by the fact that the great spiritual trends of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the theological teachings and church images they fed proved unsuitable for dealing with the new challenges. The era brought a strong critique of the liberal theology of the optimistic 19<sup>th</sup> century, and at the same time it resulted in an attempt to create new patterns of religious behaviour, more intense religiosity, and a kind of new Reformed self-image. This is the era of the flourishing of the so-called domestic mission, the period of zealous movements of faith, which competed with each other as well and were mainly fed by international faith-awakening movements, and a period also of the search for a path full of heated debates.

d) As a fourth factor, attention should be drawn to the demographic and political strengthening of Hungarian Catholicism after the Trianon Treaty. The emergence of the highly innovative, political Catholicism, its recent and successful synthesis with the governmental neo-nationalism of the 1920s, and the Catholic-national rhetoric of the new course posed a particularly serious challenge to the Hungarian Reformed élites.

All this together: the Trianon trauma, the increasingly conspicuous signs of internal crisis and secularization trends, the weakening of liberal Protestantism, and the growing sense of the minority status together put Hungarian Protestantism at a serious crossroads. The differences between the competing tendencies of the Church divided the diverse responses of the Reformed with the same theological beliefs along different

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<sup>10</sup> VICTOR, János (1928): Az előfizető szolgálata. *Református Figyelő* 22 September. 4–5.

cultural, social, and historical components. At the same time, the strongest impulses and urges aimed at finding a path between the two world wars, at redefining the Reformed denominational identity, and at clarifying doctrinal and public life positions at this time undoubtedly came from the Dunamellék Church District, especially from Budapest. This is where the “inter-confessional” or general Christian awakening movement came from, which envisioned the renewal of the church on an associational, inter-church and over-the-church basis, and this is where the so-called historical Calvinism began, which envisaged the renewal on a strictly confessional basis.

This is also where in 1922 László Ravasz, who had an ambitious church governing programme and who called himself “the ideological exponent of Calvinism”,<sup>11</sup> was elected. He placed special emphasis on outlining a unified and outward church policy programme that would influence the entire Reformed community and strengthen the social presence of the church. As the bishop said in his inaugural address, he saw the most important task of church leadership in creating a “pure, integral Calvinism with regard to its institutions, worldview, and creed” and in developing a modern and church-building reform programme for this purpose. Ravasz was aware of the ecclesiastical potential of the modern mass media of the age and made serious efforts to ensure that, in addition to the thriving and diverse local and associational press, a nationwide Reformed newspaper is published for the protection of the Reformed faith and interests. This was long urged by church opinion shapers in order to aid the formation of a unified church public opinion.

Nevertheless, there were serious obstacles to the practical implementation of this gap-filling endeavour. The existing papers mostly tried to manoeuvre and pursue a national press policy in a network of particular interests inherited from previous relatively isolated church districts, while several church-policy and piety trends intertwined with personal conflicts. “There was a perceptible contrast between the Reformed and the Lutherans; on Reformed ground between Debrecen and Budapest, but the sharpest contrast was between the strict Reformed people standing on Dutch foundations and the representatives of universal evangelical Christianity” – this is how Ravasz described the Reformed

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<sup>11</sup> *Dr. Ravasz László dunamelléki püspök beiktatása alkalmával elhangzott beszédek és imák*. Comp. by: B. MAJOR, János. Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület, 1921. 35.

church relations of the twenties in his concise work.<sup>12</sup> The fears of his contemporaries, which also foreshadowed the horror of church division, are presented in the family chronicle of Richárd Biberauer (later) Bodoky, which is based on the diary notes of the above: “It is possible that if László Ravasz, a person blessed with a broad vision, historical responsibility, diplomatic abilities, and individual calibre, had not been the Bishop of the Dunamellék Church District, a serious schism in the Hungarian Reformed Church could have occurred by the early 1930s.”<sup>13</sup>

This sharp division naturally left its mark on the organization of the church press. In 1920, Jenő Sebestyén, the spiritual leader of historical Calvinism and one of the leading theologians of the period, launched his weekly, called *Kálvinista Szemle*, which served the purpose of strengthening denominational identity and provide strong church policy goals and which soon became the most significant church journal. On the other hand, the editorial staff of *Református Figyelő*, which was started in mid-1928, was recruited from the circle of friends of the interconfessional Hungarian Evangelical Students’ Association (HESA), which is more open to other Protestant churches. The paper was created with the support of László Ravasz; its editors were Albert Bereczky,<sup>14</sup> Gyula

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<sup>12</sup> RAVASZ 1992, 187.

<sup>13</sup> BODOKY, Richárd (2001): *Aranyhíd. Családtörténeti töredékek (1926–1928) személyes emlékek és naplójegyzetek alapján*. V. Budapest, private edition. 242.

<sup>14</sup> Bereczky Albert (1893–1966) was an assistant pastor and full-time pastor in Salgótarján from 1916 to 1919, in Dunabogdány from 1919 to 1924, and from 1924 to 1927 in Pécel. From 1927 to 1929, he was the pastor and secretary general of the *Hit és Szolgálat* (Faith and Service) movement initiated by Sándor Czeglédy. In the second half of the twenties, he founded *Sylvester Irodalmi Nyomdai Intézet Rt* (Sylvester Printing House – translator’s note) together with Zoltán Tildy and moved to Tahitótfalu. From 1927, he was the editor and issuer of the pastoral journal *Református Igebírdető* (Reformed Preacher), from 1928 the editor of *Református Figyelő*, and then the co-editor of *Kereszttyén Család* (Christian Family) and *Református Élet* (Reformed Life). After relocating the Sylvester Printing House, he moved to Budapest. Following the liquidation of the printing house and the publisher, he was the pastor of Tutaj Street Külsőlipót and Terézváros congregation. *Hálaadás-templom* (Church of Thanksgiving) was built in 1940 in the Pozsonyi Street thanks to the collection he organized. From 1948, he succeeded László Ravasz – who had resigned due to open political pressure – in the episcopal seat of the Reformed Church District of Dunamellék. See: KISS, Réka (2006): Bereczky Albert lelkipásztori, püspöki működése. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten*. I. Budapest, Argumentum. 601–620.

Muraközy,<sup>15</sup> János Victor,<sup>16</sup> and its permanent contributors, such as Sándor Czeglédy,<sup>17</sup> Imre Szabó,<sup>18</sup> and Richárd Biberauer,<sup>19</sup> were considered the bishop's closest co-workers, and, according to his memoirs, he himself felt closest to this forum.<sup>20</sup> In fact, *Reformed Observer* was the first newspaper in which the bishop could regularly express his

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<sup>15</sup> Gyula Muraközy (1892–1961) was the pastor of Kecskemét as of 1918, assistant pastor of the Kálvin tér congregation in Budapest under László Ravasz as of 1932, and editor-in-chief of *Református Élet* as of 1934. He was made to retire in 1955, but from 1957 he again served as pastor of the congregation until his death. See: KISS, Réka (2006): Társadalmi kérdések – egyházi válaszok: Muraközy Gyula lelkipásztori tevékenysége. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 591–600.

<sup>16</sup> János Victor (1888–1954) was the travelling secretary of the Christian Youth Association (CYA) in 1906 and of the Hungarian Evangelical Christian Student Association (HECSA), founded in 1910. From 1913, he worked as a religion teacher in Budapest, while in 1924 he obtained a PhD degree and became a professor of theology. As of 1925, he was professor of theology at Budapest Theological Academy, but he left due to his conflict with Jenő Sebestyén. For two years, he was the assistant pastor of the Kálvin tér congregation next to László Ravasz, and between 1932 and 1949 he was the pastor of the Szabadság tér parish, which he himself organized. As of 1949 (from Sebestyén's retirement) until his death, he worked again as a professor of theology in Budapest. As of 1945, he was the chief notary of the Dunamellék Church District, i.e. its deputy bishop. See: OSZTOVITSNÉ BERECSKY, Noémi (2006): A Victor család története 1825-től napjainkig. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 725–728.

<sup>17</sup> Sándor Czeglédy (1883–1944) was a professor of theology in Pápa and then a pastor in Győr and Cegléd. He was a prolific author, a distinguished Bible translator.

<sup>18</sup> Imre Szabó (1891–1955) was the pastor of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Association from 1918–20 and then the organizing pastor of the Budapest Tisztviselőtelep Parish; from 1923, the regular pastor of the Budapest-Fasor congregation and from 1932 the organizer and the first Dean of the Budapest Diocese. In 1951, he was made to retire as dean and pastor of the Fasor congregation, and the village of Buj in Szabolcs County was appointed as his forced residence. He served there as a pastor until his death. See: NAGY, Zsombor (2006): Szabó Imre, a budapesti református egyházmegye megszervezője és első esperese. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 579–590; his diary: SZABÓ, Imre (2001): *Ég, de meg nem emésztetik. Szabó Imre a Budapesti Református Egyházmegye első esperese. Naplók 1914–1954* (ed. by ERŐS, Zsuzsa – SZABÓ, Julianna). Budapest, Budahegyvidéki Református Egyházközség.

<sup>19</sup> Richárd Biberauer, Sr. (1879–1939) was the founder of *Filadelfia Diakonissza Egylet* (Filadelfia Deaconess Association) and the head pastor of Bethesda Hospital. See KOVÁCS, Ábrahám: A Biberauer (Bodoky) család története. In Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 695–702.

<sup>20</sup> RAVASZ 1992, 188.



pastoral, church-government-related and church policy views. Indeed, Ravasz consciously used the columns of *Református Figyelő* to present his viewpoints. His voluminous editorials that were published regularly in the paper discussed basic worldview, church policy, and church social issues.

The aim of *Református Figyelő* was the old/new intention of church public opinion unification. The bishop greeted the new enterprise in the editorial of the paper's first issue as follows:

“One of the old needs of our Reformed public life is to create the desired unity in the extremely fragmented and shattered ecclesiastical press. Therefore, I welcome any undertaking that aims to summarize existing church press organs that serve partial interests in a common, unitary newspaper (...). The official unity of our Church is fully established and institutionalized within the synod and the church district. However, we cannot claim the same of unity in our church society and public perception.”

This is how the bishop exposed the issue.<sup>21</sup> For the desired unity, in the year after *Református Figyelő* was established, i.e. in 1929, a plan emerged to concentrate and integrate intellectual resources within the framework of a central Reformed and Protestant press company, following the Catholic model.<sup>22</sup> The initiative, however, soon failed due to the competition between *Kálvinista Szemle* and *Református Figyelő* as well as the personal conflicts in their background.<sup>23</sup> The two weekly papers openly defined themselves as each other's rivals, and this even left its mark on the establishment of *Református Figyelő*.<sup>24</sup> The relationship became so tense that on 1 January 1929, after several days of conciliating negotiations in the office of Bishop Ravasz, the two editorial staffs bound themselves in statements of the same content, published in their papers, to respect each other's reputations and smooth out their differences. Frictions, minor or major conflicts, mistrust due to personal prejudices, fiery attacks, in the words of Ravasz, “the shallow and annoying dregs of the couch suits” came up regularly and undisguised not only

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<sup>21</sup> RAVASZ, László (1928): Életkérdéseink. In: *Református Figyelő* 22 September. 1–3.

<sup>22</sup> KLESTENITZ, Tibor (2013): *A katolikus sajtómozgalom Magyarországon 1896–1932*. Budapest, CompLex.

<sup>23</sup> [no author] (1929): Jellemző dokumentum *Református Figyelő* 1929/46 (16 November). 554–555.

<sup>24</sup> Synod Archives of the Reformed Church in Hungary (in the following as: SARCH) 41. f. 1. db. 2.

behind the scenes but also in the columns of the papers. “Since the establishment of our paper, there was no issue of *Kálvinista Szemle* that has not dealt with *Református Figyelő* in more than one article. However, it did so in a way to which, to our sincere regret, we were unable to respond.”<sup>25</sup> – complained the staff of *Figyelő* in their editorial about the fellow paper’s attacks.

*Református Figyelő* primarily sought to address secular Reformed intellectuals, the lay intelligentsia – with the words of the era –, and to develop a self-conscious, committed readership, organized around the paper. “For a decade or two, church newspapers have only been written and sent to pastors. Laymen reading church papers were extremely rare,” said Imre Szabó, pastor of the Budapest-Fasor congregation about the inherited press relations. The pastor compared modern journalism to the modern sermon: “we can essentially see no difference [between the two], only the difference between the spoken and the written word”.<sup>26</sup> According to János Victor, the possibilities in editing a paper for lay church members were almost infinite. It was estimated that, based on their education and material possibilities, out of the one and a half million Reformed people who remained in Hungary after the consequences of the Trianon Treaty, 1.5%, i.e. about 22,500 people were the potential subscribers for a church newspaper. In comparison, he estimated the total number of readers of the various Reformed newspapers at around 5,000, of which the new newspaper managed to win over about a thousand subscribers in the months following its launch. “If our fellow papers were to double this number, i.e. raise it to a total of 10,000, as we wholeheartedly wish they do in order to revive our church, there would still be 12,500 intelligent Reformed people living their lives without a Reformed weekly.”<sup>27</sup>

The profile and style of *Református Figyelő* were determined according to the presupposed needs of these 12,500 people, in the spirit of pioneering a change of direction towards the lay church members, as opposed to the previous Reformed papers: As Imre Szabó put it: “The paper should not be written in a sermon style, especially not in a majestic and anointed form, but it should discuss current issues and give freshness to religious and ethical fundamental truths.”<sup>28</sup> Half a year after the launch of the weekly,

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<sup>25</sup> Editorial. *Kálvinista Szemle és Református Figyelő*. *Református Figyelő* 8 December 1928. 137.

<sup>26</sup> SZABÓ, Imre (1931): Fontos statisztikai adat. *Református Figyelő* 21 January. 49.

<sup>27</sup> V. J. (1928): Valamit magunkról. *Református Figyelő* 10 November. 85.

<sup>28</sup> SZABÓ, Imre (1931): Fontos statisztikai adat. *Református Figyelő* 21 January. 49.

Szabó – who regularly published articles in it – was already celebrating a new, understandable style of church journalism: “In the columns of *Figyelő*, what was incomprehensible or cumbersome elsewhere became clear, the church became attractive and valuable, and its issues became the focus of interest, attention, and responsibility. (These issues were previously considered only matters of the priests.)”<sup>29</sup> However, after a vigorous and confident start, difficulties soon arose due to the weaknesses of the paper’s organization. Recruiting subscribers was always problematic and keeping them during the economic crisis was even more so. János Victor’s ambitious dreams soon dissipated, and he later warned in vain of the duty to support the church press: “if one forms an opinion on church public affairs but is not a subscriber to any church paper, it means that s/he is looking at the fate of our church from afar. They miss out on the important service they could perform as ‘subscribers’ in aiding the true formation of church public opinion.”<sup>30</sup>

About two thousand people subscribed to the weekly. However, the issue was not only that the hoped-for ten thousand secular church members did not subscribe to church papers, but church statistics showed that only one-third of the Reformed pastors “subscribed to a church paper at their own cost”.

In researching the possible reasons, Ödön Miklós,<sup>31</sup> a church historian drawn to the trend of historical Calvinism, the pastor of Nagycsepely at the time, criticized the staff and the editorial principles of both *Református Figyelő* in particular and the church press in general in a sharp-worded article. According to him, the root of the problem was the “currently widening gap between the ideas of our church press leaders in Hungary and the ideas of the workers of actual church life”. There were hardly any village pastors among the staff of the papers, which, he argued, led to “our ecclesiastical press actually losing contact with a significant, larger part of church life in the strict sense”. The other direction of his criticism was of church policy nature. He criticized the overly hierarchical

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<sup>29</sup> SZABÓ, Imre (1929): Egyházi újságírás. *Református Figyelő* 11 May. 223–224.

<sup>30</sup> VICTOR, János (1928): Az előfizető szolgálata. *Református Figyelő* 2 September.

<sup>31</sup> Ödön Miklós was a church historian and a Reformed pastor. He studied theology in Pápa and Utrecht. Between 1921 and 1922, he was a professor of theology in Pápa and then a pastor in Nagycsepely. He obtained his PhD degree in theology in Debrecen in 1932. In 1944, he habilitated at the University of Debrecen. His church history works mainly deal with Dutch–Hungarian cultural relations and the 16<sup>th</sup>-century church constitution issues of the Hungarian Protestant churches.

and centralized church government structure, which, in contrast to the traditional church model organized on a diocesan basis, ousted local congregations and pastors from decision-making processes. Concerning the synod, which acted as the legislative body of the church and was then in session, he noted that “village pastors are now indifferent to how decisions are made without them as well as about them”. Added to this, he noted that “financial difficulties have given the formerly independent church press an official nature, which resulted in criticism losing ground”.

Imre Szabó was the one to reply to Miklós’s criticism. He said that if the author’s diagnosis “was correct, then the Reformed Church was more and more resembling a ship that ran aground, in which some people are consoling themselves with the illusion that the ship is advancing, but the vast majority already knows that the ship came to a halt”. Hence, Szabó invited the readers of *Református Figyelő* to a public exchange of views. In addition to the obvious exaggerations of the extremely pessimistic article, it contained many truths and sensitively shed light on the structural troubles and one-sidedness of the church press. At the same time, the publication of the article and Szabó’s response indicate an openness to self-criticism and an editorial attitude ready for debates during the search for a path.

Nevertheless, in addition to the difficulties in promoting the paper and expanding its readership, there were also serious problems in running the weekly. *Református Figyelő Társaság*, which issued the paper, Zoltán Tildy, the pastor of Tahitótfalu at the time, and Sylvester Printing House founded by Albert Bereczky, which carried out the printing work, were all enterprises of Reformed interest. By the end of 1931, however, there were serious difficulties in operating both the paper and the printing house. Due to the shortage of financial resources and the lack of financial expertise, *Református Figyelő* not only generated losses but also accumulated a significant deficit. The legal auditor, who was asked to review the management of the business, found such serious deficiencies in business policy and accounting that he was forced to warn the owners of the danger of total material and moral liability. “Issuing a newspaper, even if it serves spiritual purposes, cannot be sustained without a commercial professional who extends his practical management work to these issues”<sup>32</sup> – said Béla Novoth. The financial administration of the paper and the repayment of the debts of the bankrupt Sylvester Printing House

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<sup>32</sup> Report of legal auditor Béla Novoth, 12 December 1931. SARCH 41. f. 1. db. 2.

were ultimately entrusted to *Filadelfia Diakonissza Egylet* led by Richárd Biberauer, on the site of which Sylvester Printing House operated after moving from Tahitótfalu to Budapest.

*Református Figyelő* was issued up to the end of 1933. By this time, the old plans of coordinating and balancing the rival views within the church, of organizing a unified Reformed press policy, and of having a press body with a stable economic basis had been accomplished. Upon the initiative of László Ravasz, with his significant contribution and his functioning as editor-in-chief, the new, now national weekly church society and church policy paper, the most successful and influential Reformed press enterprise of the era, *Református Élet* was launched from the merger of *Református Figyelő* and *Kálvinista Szemle* in early 1934.<sup>33</sup>

## *2. Shaping of the Public Law and Denominational Discourse in Református Figyelő*

After summarizing the press organization surrounding *Református Figyelő*, in the second part of the study we would like to briefly outline the thematic categories in the six and a half years of *Református Figyelő*, and then we would like to provide more detail on several aspects of the debates around the topic of public law and denominations, which was among the most significant identity builder discourses. In a 1929, in his editorial written for *Figyelő*, László Ravasz named three fundamentally important duties for the Reformed who were seeking ways of renewal. In the first place, he listed the clarification and settlement of long-standing disputes arising from the position of the churches in public law and the public sphere. Secondly, he identified the church's modern social programme, the outline of a unified Reformed social programme, the development of an action plan summarizing what the church had to do, its role in solving social problems, and its service of "major agricultural issues". "There is no doubt that the rural parishes and consistories do not have a new programme for agriculture in the novel circumstances, just as the workers' congregation has no programme as to what to do with the greatest question of our time, i.e. socialism." – said Ravasz in his programmatic

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<sup>33</sup> See ABLONCZY 2006.

writing listing the fundamental duties. Finally, as the hottest task regarding the issue of inner renewal in the Reformed Church, in ecclesiastical parlance, he drew the attention of the ecclesiastical public opinion on the issue of the so-called Reformed revival and domestic mission.<sup>34</sup>

According to the order of the article, the development of the state–church relationship was perhaps the most engaging issue in the period, causing the most controversy, and thus recurring regularly in the columns of the paper. The ecclesiastical political relations of secular Hungary were set by Law XX/1848 declaring legal equality among religions. However, the proclamation of equality under public law was not accompanied by the economic equalization of denominations, i.e. the termination of the Catholic Church’s status as the state church was not followed by the secularization of ecclesiastical property, the enormous Catholic ecclesiastical property remaining almost untouched.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the problems arising from the state–church relationship were closely intertwined with the issue of church management. The fulfilment of the increased responsibilities of the church and the maintenance of its institutional system caused an unresolved problem throughout the period. The most serious problem was the maintenance and development of the Reformed schools. Although the church received regular support from the state, it covered only a fraction of their expenditures, and the level of state aid became the subject of constantly renewing debates. The lack of complete separation posed an insoluble dilemma for the Protestant churches: the Catholic model of the church–state relationship and the Reformed Church’s lack of assets led Protestants to accept the promised state aid but at the same time forced them to gradually give up their long-standing and cherished Protestant autonomy.<sup>36</sup>

The shaping of the church–state relationship and the search for an acceptable model for Hungarian Protestantism were also defining topics for Ravasz and the authors of *Református Figyelő* identifying with the bishop’s concept of church leadership, whose articles sought the idea of a financially independent, self-sustained church, the so-called

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<sup>34</sup> RAVASZ, László (1929): Fontos és nem fontos dolgok. *Református Figyelő* II. 97–98.

<sup>35</sup> BOLYKI, János – LADÁNYI, Sándor (1987): A magyar református egyház. In: Lendvai, L. Ferenc (ed.): *A magyar protestantizmus 1918–1948*. Budapest, Kossuth. 57.

<sup>36</sup> See: KISS, Réka (2006): Ravasz László püspöki működése. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten. I.* Budapest, Argumentum. 537–578.

“free church in a free state” in opposition with the traditional trend in church policy. “If by a ‘free church’ we understand an institution independent from the state which would not have to expect aid from governments’ and legislators’ benevolence to ensure its living, then it is obvious that the ideal of the Reformed faithful can only be such a ‘free church’”<sup>37</sup> – said János Victor in his editorial.

In the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the church leaders devoted most of their energy to religious political struggles, the negative effects of which became more and more visible in the public life of the church.

“There is no doubt that the most embarrassing confusion prevails in the relations of church and state. It is largely because evangelical churches represent a transitional type between public and free churches. They are burdened with all the disadvantages, but none of them fully enjoys the benefits. That is why one of the main pillars of our church is state aid (...) and our power is eaten up by the struggle for state aid (...)” – said Bishop Ravasz in the first number of *Református Figyelő* in 1928.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it was clear that the “free church in a free state” principle, seen as an ideal, the transition to independent management could not become an ecclesiastical reality in the era. After all, even with state subsidies granted on various legal bases, the church could hardly raise the resources required to carry out its own duties, and, on the other hand, the framework of the state’s ecclesiastical policy, the predominance of the Catholic Church, limited the scope of the Protestants. Changing the church tax system, launching economic and financial reforms, and creating a church operation based on self-sufficiency and not state aid remained an urgent but still unsolved problem of the time.

Despite the tensions stemming from the inherited ecclesiastical political features, the relationship between Ravasz’s church leadership and the state was harmonious, based on acknowledging the interdependence of the church and the counter-revolutionary system and the preservation of the status quo in the relationship between the state and the church instead of polarizing the issue and renewing the ecclesiastical polity-related debates. This was also reflected in the tone of *Református Figyelő*. While

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<sup>37</sup> VICTOR, János (1928): Egyház és állam szétválasztása. *Református Figyelő* 15 December. 145; see also: BERCZKY, Albert (1929): Egyházunk és az állam. *Református Figyelő* 28 September. 463–464.

<sup>38</sup> RAVASZ, László (1928): Életkérdéseink. *Református Figyelő* 22 September. 1–3.

the senior Transilvian bishop, Dezső Baltazár, as the liberal political opposition of István Bethlen, openly attacked the government several times, *Figyelő* tried to deal with the differences between the Bishop of Debrecen and the Prime Minister as a political and not as an ecclesiastical debate.

“The circles around Dezső Baltazár classified István Bethlen’s attack against Dr Dezső Baltazár as an ecclesiastical matter and, consequently, started the mobilization of our church’s public life in order to prevent the attack: *Református Figyelő* was the only press organ that told the truth openly and firmly on the delicate issue that, being a political clash, the bitterness and excitement of our church should not be transplanted. This has been called by some a ‘betrayal of Reformed interests’ (...)” – said János Victor drawing the conclusions of the debate rising in the Senate in 1930.<sup>39</sup> The paper struck a rather sharp chord only when the Jesuit magazine *Magyar Kultúra* no longer placed only Baltazár but also all the Reformed faithful as a whole, and László Ravasz personally, in the crossfire of attacks in connection with the debate.<sup>40</sup> Although until his death in 1936, Baltazár was the head of the national ecclesiastical bodies, the pastoral President of the Synod and the Convention, and thus the first man in the Reformed Church, Ravasz’s actual influence on the shaping of church life grew stronger from the mid-1920s. The Bishop of Dunamellék deliberately broke with the tradition of church leadership, which puts public law and political issues at the forefront, placed significantly less emphasis on voicing Protestant grievances arising from the peculiarities of the state–church relationship, and tried to avoid direct political conflicts.

In the light of this attitude based on political balance but fundamentally loyal to government policy, Ravasz’s determined, alternative-seeking position on the church–state relationship is particularly remarkable. The bishop had reckoned in good time with the fact that the state-dependent position of the church posed serious structural dangers, of which he and at the zenith of the Bethlen government consolidation, in 1928, in the columns of *Figyelő*: “This duality of our economic policy can be a great danger to us if we do not take care of the factors that resolve the tension between the two and, in due course, shift the burden of the whole building from one pillar to another.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> VICTOR, János (1931): Tanulságul a jövőre. Utóhang a Baltazár-Bethlen üggyhez. *Református Figyelő* 17 January. 25–26.

<sup>40</sup> MAGYAR, Illés (1930): Sakálók. *Református Figyelő* 26 July. 360.

<sup>41</sup> RAVASZ, László (1928): Életkérdéseink. *Református Figyelő* 22 September. 1–3.



Ravasz saw the loss of church autonomy not only as an internal ecclesiastical problem and a source of denominational conflict but also in a broader context, as a phenomenon detrimental to society as a whole. His image of society is well characterized by an excerpt from a speech given in the Senate during the budget debate of 1932–33.

“By the nature of consolidation, it is easily transformed into statism. I see the greatest danger of the last twelve years – perhaps I am not using the best word – as the greatest temptation in statism. For the last ten years, the Hungarian nation has always been politically in control, as one man behind its leaders. (...) But in the meantime, what has happened and is happening is that state functions are slowly fading social autonomies and healthy, autonomous, resilient, self-conscious, social, and economic developments. (...) a similar danger is that the entire future of the nation is staked on one chance. How many times in the course of Hungarian history has a healthy developed autonomy, the ancient power of various bodies resisted against a government hostile to the national and the nation’s instinct for life and saved the continuity of national life (...) But this is no longer the case. (...) and the factors that have glorified their place so many times in the past – and among these I am thinking primarily of my church – have come into contact with the state through which autonomy can now only be spoken about in theory. And this, in my view, is not only to the detriment of this church, but it is a great national danger, a lack of a great constitutional guarantee because it is perfectly exposed to any political turn (...) and there will no longer be an Archimedean point where it would stop and where it would save its historical structure and continuity.”<sup>42</sup>

The reform-conservative bishop, sticking to constitutionality and liberties, pointed out very vividly that in a temporary, uncertain political climate following the fall of the Bethlen government, state dominance posed dangers far beyond the life of the church.

The state–church relationship also fundamentally defined the evolution of Catholic–Protestant relations between the two wars as the ecclesiastical conception that prevailed in the period continued to be fundamentally a matter of ecclesiastical policy. “The idea that the Roman Catholic religion is a state religion, and besides that

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<sup>42</sup> RAVASZ, László (1932): Az 1932/32. évi állami költségvetésről szóló törvényjavaslat tárgyalása. 24 June. *Felsőházi Napló* 1932–35/1. 357–358.

we can only be a tolerated religion, is roaring louder and louder in the forum of public life.” – concluded Ravasz summing up one of the fundamental topoi of the Reformed grievances and the culture of the minority fate of the time in connection with the interdenominational relations.<sup>43</sup>

Tensions between the denominations recurring from time to time culminated in issues regarding: the extent and distribution of state aid to churches; the mandatory reversal set forth by Canon Iuris Canonici for marriages (1918); the christenings; debates about the opportunities for success of certain faithful belonging to certain denominations, considered as a hidden or open *numerus clausus*<sup>44</sup> hidden by Gyula Muraközy in the columns of the paper; the state-sponsored great Catholic holidays, interpreted by the Reformed as a symbolic defiance (in our age, the 1930 Saint Emery jubilee was such a celebration). The interfaith relationship was significantly impaired by XI. Pius’s *Mortalium animos* encyclical published in 1928, in which the pope withdrew from the Protestant ecumenical movement, which sought to create the unity of Christian churches through the cooperation of equal parties. The relationship between the denominations reached its lowest point in the Horthy era. *Református Figyelő* regularly mediated and articulated the Protestants’ sense of threat, describing their grievances in detail, broken down into individual cases. It devoted ample space to a strong criticism and refutation of the militant, intransigent Catholic position of attacking Protestantism. The *Gáton* column regularly published the occasionally sharp polemics conducted with the Catholics and their press organs (first of all, with the Jesuit *Magyar Kultúra*, *Nemzeti Újság*, and *Új Nemzedék*).

At the same time, a kind of division of labour developed between the newspaper’s authors and the bishop. While there has traditionally been a large category of faithful within the Reformed Church in favour of a more militant, confrontational church policy, and *Református Figyelő* has been especially vigilant over the representation of Reformed interests in debates on financial and school-related matters, the paper’s editorials on ecclesiastical policy sought to strike a more peaceful voice, to take a consensus-seeking position. Ravasz’s more tolerant position on the denominational issue stemmed not only from his conflict-avoiding, compromise-seeking structure. The bishop had to take into

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<sup>43</sup> RAVASZ, László (1926): Egyházpolitika – viszonyunk a római katolikusokhoz. In: Ravasz, László: *Korbán II. Beszédék, írások*. Budapest. 485–486.

<sup>44</sup> M. GY. (1929): Egy kezdődő per, amely évek óta tart. *Református Figyelő* 7 September. 425.

account that, although the bishop ranked the denominational opposition among the most serious divergences dividing the national unity,<sup>45</sup> in the spiritual environment around him, similarly to the famous historian of the age, Gyula Szekfű, they seemed more peripheral, rather uninteresting in the eyes of contemporaries turning away from the churches.

“If there is a denominational struggle today: it is also a neo-baroque symptom. This is a sign of the external formal needs of the churches and not of the religious renewal taking place within.”<sup>46</sup> – wrote one of the most significant thinkers of the period, László Németh – who otherwise had a Reformed root – in his study titled *Magyar élet antinómiái*. As explained by Németh, Gyula Szekfű in his commentary on the epilogue of *Három nemzedékének*, like many of his contemporaries, did not feel the denominational contradictions at all as a tense problem in Hungarian society, a “delicate rather than serious” antinomy, a barren denominational competition.

At the same time, Ravasz’s consensus-seeking behaviour was not independent from the government’s expectations either as the requirement of denominational peace was paramount to building and consolidating the Christian-national system. The bishop was ready to resolve the denominational relationship in the name of the desired national unity, but he made the Reformed behaviour in fact dependent on Catholic behaviour, acknowledging the right of initiative of the majority church.

“Greater Hungary came a cropper with the issue of nationality; truncated Hungary will perish if the churches become spiritual nationalities. That is why we must state that the key to all ethnic policy is primarily in the hands of the government and secondarily in the hands of the majority. A minority is normally what these other two turn it into.”<sup>47</sup> – he said.

However, the Reformed Church between the two World Wars survived its acute minority situation not only because of the more favourable public law positions of the

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<sup>45</sup> RAVASZ, László (1932): *A nemzet lelki egysége* (1928). In: Ravasz, László: *Alfa és Ómega. Prédikációk, beszédek, cikkek*. Budapest, Franklin. 218–224.

<sup>46</sup> NÉMETH, László (1992): *A magyar élet antinómiái* (1934). Németh, László: *A minőség forradalma. Kisebbségben. Politikai és irodalmi tanulmányok, beszédek, vitairatok I*. Budapest, Püski. 594; KÓSA, László (1993): Németh László protestantizmusa. Kósa, László: *Egyház, társadalom, hagyomány* Debrecen, Ethnica. 175–188.

<sup>47</sup> Ravasz László püspöki jelentéséből. *Református Figyelő* 30 November 1929. 557.

majority denomination but also because the rapidly renewing Catholicism took a significant lead by the use of modern pastoral methods and new forms of religion. *Református Figyelő*, devoting room to the presentation of Catholic renewal efforts, was quite ambivalent about the spectacular achievements of the Catholic Renaissance, at the same time criticizing and setting an example for the denomination it represented. This duality of the Reformed discourse on contemporary Catholicism is well represented by the writing presenting *Manréza*, the new house of retreat of the Jesuit order and the methods of Jesuit spiritual retreat.

“It must be clearly seen that in the Catholic Church the Jesuit order is the inner assault team for Catholic evangelism, more precisely for the reformation of Catholicism (not in the evangelical sense, of course). Jesuitism is the nerve of the domestic missions and foreign missions as well as the diplomatic activities of Catholicism. On the inside, Jesuitism has a very different face than it features towards Protestantism.”

At the same time, the writer of the article called the Jesuit retreats “one of the most purposeful psychological spiritual preparation and training schools of all time” and classified them in the same category as the “socialist agitators” and preachers of sects as being the rivals of the Reformed ministers.<sup>48</sup> The image of enemies associated with Jesuit assault troops and socialist agitators actually reflected the official Reformed ecclesiastical policy of the age, meaning their simplified “squandering”, their translation into everyday language. By the end of the 1920s, Bishop Ravasz usually defined Reformed positions in opposition with two great spiritual aspirations. One was the ultramontane Catholicism and the other the radical left-wing Marxism and Bolshevism, which revived the anti-religious traditions of the Enlightenment. According to Ravasz’s definition of the situation, the aforesaid dual aspirations in the early 1930s were joined by another direction, i.e. the secular threat to Christianity, which was nationalism working as a religious substitute or a political religion, taking the most threatening shape in Nazi neo-paganism. This realization is noticeable very early in Ravasz. As he put it in a 1931 speech:

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<sup>48</sup> [no author] (1928): A versenyfutók. *Református Figyelő* 6 October. 20.

“It should come as no surprise that the totalitarian state, especially if it was created through revolution, puts its will in the hands of a man who thinks and wants on its behalf. Let us not be surprised if this will places itself as a legislator above the church as well, and it wants to tell the church what to believe and what to do. A secular copy of the Catholic Church concept, based on some volatile racial biological theories. This perception shatters the concept of the church.”<sup>49</sup>

The denominational topos system mobilized by *Református Figyelő* was mostly inspired by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century interpretation of history, rooted in Romanticism and liberal traditions. The structure of ideas that connected the source of liberal and democratic traditions to the Reformation remained a determining element of the self-determination of the Reformed faithful, just as the topos of Protestantism, which plays a powerful role in the creation of national culture, and an interpretation of history that makes Protestantism the custodian of the struggle for religious freedom and the fight for national independence.<sup>50</sup> One of the most quoted stereotype-generating topoi was Protestantism, more specifically the Reformed Church’s role of cultural creator and its overwhelming role in national culture. This element was regularly recurring between the two World Wars in the Reformed press as well as in the columns of *Református Figyelő* aimed at strengthening denominational identity: “Our national culture was created by Calvinism” or “The history of our national culture starts with Protestantism” and, finally, “Thus, for centuries, the concepts learned and Calvinist will bear the same meaning in Hungary.” The link between education and Protestantism has a long historiographical background. It was most strongly expressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the influential German historian, Leopold Ranke, who explained his theory on the cultural benefits of the Reformation, which has since been the subject of novel debates. In any case, he testified about the role of Protestants as mediators of culture, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century perception rooted in Hungarian liberal historiography deeply penetrated the identity of the Hungarian Reformed faithful.

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<sup>49</sup> RAVASZ, László (1931): Egyház és állam – nemzet és emberiség. *Protestáns Szemle* November. 243.

<sup>50</sup> See: KÓSA, László (2008): Felekezeti és nemzetiségi azonosságtudat kapcsolódása. A magyar protestáns példa. In: Papp, Richárd – Szarka, László (eds.): *Bennünk élő múltjaink. Történelmi tudat – kulturális emlékezet*. Zenta, Vajdasági Magyar Művelődési Intézet. 391–400.

At the same time, the Reformed identity-building discourses between the two World Wars modified the relevant fields of interpretation of earlier topoi in important points. The essence of the paradigm shift called *an ideological turn of Protestantism* by Pál Hatos, attributed partly to Bishop Ravasz, was that the new Reformed self-interpretation sought *sui juris* identity in the Reformation as opposed to worn-out apology and self-abandonment. And he has found this, above all, in the religious nature thereof.<sup>51</sup> The interpretive framework, which originally and, above all, saw the Reformation as a religious renewal, also provided an opportunity to portray the performance of the Reformation and Hungarian Protestantism as a universal Christian and universal Hungarian interest transcending denominational boundaries.

“Protestantism awoke and knocked out Catholicism in the late Middle Ages from a degenerate, secularized Christianity that sank back into the paganism of the Renaissance. The salvation of Christianity took place through Protestantism for mankind, the renaissance of biblical Christianity flourished in Wittenberg and Geneva against the Roman Church celebrating the renaissance of the Greek world.”<sup>52</sup> – Imre Szabó indicated the new emphases in his editorial in *Református Figyelő*. In this interpretation, Protestantism was constituted not merely as a historical episode of ideas, a cultural episode, but as a manifestation of divine providence in history. “We enter the world today with this belief in the divine mission. We are not Protestants because we accidentally became one but because we cannot be anything else as this is how we were meant to be.” In this context, the Reformation, embedded in the universal context of ecclesiastical history, could also be interpreted as a pledge of Catholic renewal: “Even today, wherever Protestant churches can normally exert their inner strengths, where the Protestant type of man matures in his original purity, his biblical freedom of conscience rooted in Bible, based on the authority of Scripture, there is also a strong kind of Catholicism far-reaching and exceeding in activity the Catholicism of Protestant-free countries.”

Another element of Szabó’s set of arguments, the sacrifice of Protestantism for national independence, was also an old topos of Reformed self-interpretation. “Put his/her hand on the heart s/he who has a Hungarian soul! Well, the soul of national independence, the racial instinct for life that the Hungarian wanted to remain Hun-

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<sup>51</sup> HATOS 2005, 108.

<sup>52</sup> SZABÓ, Imre (1929): Vagy mindnyájan protestánsok, vagy mindnyájan katolikusok? *Református Figyelő* 9 November. 535.

garian on this very land, is it not the fruit that this poor Hungarian Protestantism watered with blood?” However, the nationalist role of the Reformed Church was not only appreciated after Trianon but also gained new content. The Reformed evangelization programme proclaiming the Trianon Revision on the ground of spiritual renewal aimed to create the spiritual unity of the reborn Hungarians based on the Gospel.<sup>53</sup> The historical dimensions of the Reformed identity, the oeuvre of the great Reformed personalities, also received new meanings and topicality in this context. This is exemplified by the writings made in connection with the Gábor Bethlen Jubilee in 1929, including the eulogy by László Ravasz, who said that the prince’s greatest merit was that “He not only held this nation together politically but also forged it into spiritual unity.”<sup>54</sup>

Imre Szabó’s article evoking the Reformed stereotype of the Bible reader also stated that empty forms of religious practice and identity topoi should be filled with awakening missionary content, and the signs of renewal in the life of the church in the past two decades was “preceded by the discovery of the Gospel, which tended to grow yellow as the sacred book used only during the services or got covered by dust on the master beam or the long-read leather-bound Bibles were displayed (...) only as expensive family relics.” The strong identity-forming element existing among the Reformed, referring to the cultural mediating role of Protestantism, appears in Szabó as a stereotype that was received as such from the past but had already lost its validity. The purpose of faith-strengthening writing was precisely to motivate and force the Reformed community to change its religious behaviour by reviving and questioning one of the positive identity elements of the Reformed church. Rethinking the established stereotype and filling it with new content was motivated by the internal church-critical aspects and the need for religious renewal.

### *Conclusions*

The key concept of the church reformation ideas conveyed by *Református Figyelő* became *the mission, the programme of a new Reformation pervading the entire Hungarian society*. László Ravasz’s episcopal agenda proclaimed the creation of a “pure, upright Calvinism in terms of its institutions, worldview, and creed, whose “first and foremost

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<sup>53</sup> MURAKÖZY, Gyula (1929): Küzdelem Trianon ellen. *Református Figyelő* 10 August. 379.

<sup>54</sup> RAVASZ, László (1929): Bethlen Gábor nagysága. *Református Figyelő* 16 November. 547–548.

duty is to preserve its essence: evangelical Christianity”. For Ravasz, therefore, the starting point for the spiritual renewal of Protestantism was a return to biblical origins and undertaking the Lutheran and Calvinist heritage that laid the foundations of Protestant theology – in other words: setting the primacy of the religious roots of the Reformation and the Reformed identity and placing its *religious* nature in the focus. And to understand the identity-building discourses of *Református Figyelő* coming from among the bishop’s staff, this characteristic religious renewal proclaimed based on the gospel may provide the primary framework for interpretation.

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