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HUNGARIAN CATHOLICISM

Living Faith across Diverse
Social and Intellectual Contexts

ARTICLES

- Mathew N. Schmalz / Overview & Acknowledgements
- Marc Roscoe Loustau / Introduction: Consumer Contexts and Divine Presences in Hungarian Catholicism
- Krisztina Frauhammer / Longings, Letters and Prayers: Visitor's Books at Hungarian Marian Shrines
- Kinga Povedák / Rockin' the Church: Vernacular Catholic Musical Practices
- Cecília Sándor / The Interwoven Existence of Official Catholicism and Magical Practice in the Lived Religiosity of a Transylvanian Hungarian Village

MARC ROSCOE LOUSTAU

Introduction: Consumer Contexts and Divine Presences in Hungarian Catholicism

Marc Roscoe Loustau is Managing Editor of the *Journal of Global Catholicism* and a Catholics & Cultures contributor. As a scholar of religious studies in the context of personal, social, and economic change, his research has focused on Catholicism in Eastern Europe where, after decades of official state atheism, there has been a prominent resurgence of religion in public life. Loustau has taught courses at the College of the Holy Cross on contemporary global Catholicism. He holds a Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School.

The articles in this edition of the *Journal of Global Catholicism* were originally presented at a conference held in Budapest, Hungary through a partnership between the [Catholics & Cultures](#) program of the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, MA, USA) and the Pázmány Péter Catholic University of Hungary (PPCU). Along with the McFarland Center's staff, the event was organized with special assistance from Dr. Máté Botos and Dr. Katya Dunajeva of the PPCU's Department of International Studies. This Special Issue has the title, "Hungarian Catholicism: Living Faith across Diverse Social and Intellectual Contexts." The original conference was titled, "Lived Catholicism from the Balkans to the Baltics," and included papers on this theme from scholars doing fieldwork at sites in Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Macedonia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania. Given the conference's site in Budapest, Hungary, the schedule also included a substantial group of presenters who focus their research in areas where Hungarian-speaking Catholics live and worship. As the editorial team of the *Journal of Global Catholicism* reviewed the presentations, we decided that several of the presentations could come together in these pages to form a portrait of contemporary Hungarian Catholicism, a phrase we have also decided to use for the title of this Special Issue.

I mention the articles' original context—a conference on Catholicism in the broad and internally diverse region evoked by the title, "From the Baltics to the Balkans"—so as to immediately question any assumptions that Hungarian Catholicism is a self-enclosed, self-explanatory phenomenon or an internally-oriented national concept and territorial trope. In the context of the conference at PPCU, discussions about the papers on Hungarian Catholicism took shape against the backdrop of a broader regional conversation and became a mode for evoking a process of historical and cultural formation that emerged in engagement with multiple centers of political, economic, and religious power. In this region that was dominated by state-socialist regimes for large parts of the twentieth century, presenters foregrounded the forms of intellectual control of religious practice that emanated from and sometimes exerted a reciprocal influence on centers of political and economic control situated in state capitals like Budapest, Bucharest, Prague, and Vilnius. But an overall picture also emerged in which Catholic ecclesiastical

officials' own work and practice was and continues to be caught between an emerging Catholic consumer culture and efforts to both preserve and renew the faith at local and regional levels. The Catholic Church's centers of power, influence, and direction—in the view of multiple conference presenters—were caught up in local and national social dynamics emanating from Catholics' engagement in and enthusiasm for lived religious practice in these near-margins of the European sphere.

Although the articles in this Special Issue are focused on Hungarian Catholicism, conference participants originally heard them in relation to and refracted through papers about the broad historical and social context of the near-margin region “from the Baltics to the Balkans.” In this Introduction, I will try to recreate that same context by discussing the articles in relation to three historical and social trajectories that have shaped the study of lived Catholicism in this region:

- The integration of the study of lived Catholicism into the academic fields of scientific ethnology and folklorism—a process through which key individuals collaborated to establish canonical theoretical concepts, define the parameters of research methodology, and project the discipline's ultimate place within and influence on society.
- The emergence of a Catholic consumer culture that both supported Hungary's socialist-era consumer culture but also used it to expand the range of possibilities for mediating divine presence.
- The simultaneous and conjoined expansion of literacy and consumer citizenship in contemporary Hungary.

In the case of the three articles we feature in this edition of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, context is the key to proper understanding and effective interpretation.

Both Krisztina Frauhammer's and Cecilia Sándor's articles takes shape in relation to a long-standing tradition of ethnological and folklorism research in Hungary and Hungarian-speaking villages in Transylvania. Like traditions of research on national folklore in Germany, Poland, and other nearby countries, the Hungarian tradition goes back to the mid-19th century and drew a wide variety of intellectuals

to conduct research on every kind of cultural product imaginable, from music, to the visual arts, to architecture, and literature.¹ In the post-World War II period, this tradition of folkloristic research underwent significant changes as it was integrated into the state-driven emerging “national science” of ethnological research.² Around the same time, Hungarian ethnologists began attending to specifically religious content by collecting rituals, magical spells, and prayers in villages and rural areas like Cecilia Sándor’s fieldsite, the village of Csíkszentsimon (San Simion, in Romanian) in eastern Transylvania. Ethnological researchers encountered communities in which Catholicism provided a hegemonic and near-universal official religious background to everyday life.

Unlike in Western Europe and North America, the study of lived Catholicism in Hungary, Romania, and other socialist countries became integrated into an academic disciplinary framework with a commitment to systematic description and rigorous testing and close ties to the official atheist state. In Romania, the late socialist state saw religion as a ritual system that could be harnessed for the purpose of fostering social solidarity and belonging, and the government began encouraging intellectuals at all levels—from official state research institutes down to local elementary schools—to conduct research on rituals, songs, dance, and other cultural forms.³ The most prominent product of the resulting “fever of fieldwork” was the state’s nation-wide “Sing Romania” festival, in which workplace-based song and dance groups gathered for competitions at local, county, and national venues.⁴

- 1 Cătălin Cotoi, “Sociology and Ethnology in Romania: The Avatars of Social Sciences in Socialist Romania,” in *Sociology and Ethnography in East-Central and South-East Europe: Scientific Self-Description in State Socialist Countries*, eds. Ulf Brunnbauer, Claudia Kraft & Martin Schulze Wessel (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2011), 130–155. This tradition of research on folk culture includes luminaries like the internationally renowned early twentieth century classical composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály who both traveled to Transylvania and recorded folk songs they later used in their own compositions.
- 2 James Kapaló, *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1086/491088>.
- 3 Zsuzsánna Magdó, “Romanian Spirituality in Ceaușescu’s ‘Golden Epoch’: Social Scientists Reconsider Atheism, Religion, and Ritual Culture,” in *Science, Religion and Communism in Cold War Europe*, eds. Paul Betts and Stephen A. Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54639-5>.
- 4 Otilia Hedeșan, “Doing Fieldwork in Communist Romania,” in *Studying Peoples in the People’s Democracies: Socialist Era Anthropology in South-East Europe*, eds. Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ilia Iliev and

The official atheist ideology of socialist state ethnology also took up and reinforced a preexisting notion that the Church's ecclesiastical dogma was opposed to and sought to stamp out heretical aspects of popular religious practice. Many of the distinguished Hungarian and Transylvanian Hungarian ethnologists of the 1970s and 80s used this broad theoretical framework of opposed and antagonistic "folk belief" and "Church doctrine." Sándor and Frauhammer count some of these scholars as teachers; works by Éva Pócs, Gábor Barna, Vilmos Tánzos, and Vilmos Keszeg appear in Sándor's and Frauhammer's bibliographies, demonstrating the continuing influence of the intellectual generation that came of age in the late socialist period. Pócs, Barna, Tánzos, Keszeg, and others were and still are leading figures of the national scientific discipline of Hungarian ethnology that blended nineteenth century folklorism's aspiration to assemble a complete repository of national cultural artefacts with the post-World War II socialist state's goal of using the latest scientific ethnographic methods to build a revolutionary atheist and communist culture.

Sándor's and Frauhammer's articles in this collection are snapshots from this moment in time when a young generation of Hungarian scholars are grappling with the conceptual and methodological legacies of their teachers, some like Sándor are refracting them through other types, styles, and approaches to ethnographic research on religion. Sándor's article, "The Interwoven Existence of Official Catholicism and Magical Practice in the Lived Religiosity of a Transylvanian Hungarian Village," bears the marks of this struggle most clearly in her attempt to collate her teachers' ethnological research with Harvey Whitehouse's cognitive science of religion, Charles Stewart's adaptation of Saussurean linguistic theory, and William Christian's historical research on Spanish Catholic pilgrimage.⁵ Sándor sees

Slobodan Naumovic (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2008), 21–41. Vintilă Mihăilescu, "A New Festival for the New Man: The Socialist Market of Folk Experts During the 'Singing Romania' National Festival," in *Studying Peoples in the People's Democracies: Socialist era Anthropology in South-East Europe*, eds. Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ilia Iliev and Slobodan Naumovic (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008), 55–80.

- 5 Charles Stewart, *Demons and the Devil. Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400884391>. Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Alta Mira Press: Walnut Creek, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1086/491088>. William A Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

parallels between the methodological and conceptual assumptions of Transylvania's most prominent Hungarian ethnologist of religion, Vilmos Tánzos, and William Christian's notion that official and popular practice are actually ways of imagining and constructing culture in time. Official Catholic doctrine is better viewed as "religion as prescribed" while popular religiosity is "religion as it is practiced," or a community's substantive ritual life. Dissatisfied with both oppositions, she calls for and effects in her own participant observational and engaged interview methodology a return to the existential and practical dimension of human existence, or in her words the realm of local religiosity, where she found that her informants in the Transylvanian Hungarian village of Csíkszentsimon adopted a pragmatic and improvisational approach to aspects of folk belief and Church dogma, which her teachers had sometimes portrayed as isolated and self-subsistent realms. Sándor's most striking departure from her teachers comes at the very end of her article when she discusses the future of agricultural magic at her fieldsite.

The question of magic's futures was raised throughout her article by virtue of her description of diverse didactic methods—both formal and informal—through which subjects learn ritual practices, forms of pedagogy that Sándor glosses with the term "religious transmission" adopted from anthropologists like Naumescu and others. In her discussion of religious transmission once again we see Sándor grappling with complex legacies and imagining a future for the practices she has tracked during her first experiences of fieldwork. Initially, she affects a dire assessment of the mediatization of agricultural magic that is strongly reminiscent of her teacher, Vilmos Tánzos, who wrote as recently as 2018 about the dire effects of mediatization on another ritual practice centered in the region where Sándor conducted fieldwork: the annual pilgrimage procession to the Catholic shrine at Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, a village about fifteen kilometers from Csíkszentsimon.⁶ Tánzos noted how the consumption of Csíksomlyó's rural landscapes and symbols of agricultural magic in photographs, videos, newspaper articles, television programs, and documentaries effected a distinction between foreground and background spaces

6 Vilmos Tánzos, "The New Cultural Economy and the Ideologies of the Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) Pilgrimage Feast," in *Cultural Heritage and Cultural Politics in Minority Conditions*, eds. Töhötöm A. Szabó and Mária Szikszai (Cluj-Napoca: Kriza János Ethnographic Society, 2018), 145–178.

of the shrine and pilgrimage ritual. “In other words,” Tánzos wrote, “the scene has a clearly visible, strongly ideologized and mediatized part, but also an invisible, ‘secondary’ or ‘rear’ section, which is not planned and remains outside the space of the events taking place in the foreground.”⁷ From this distinction, he draws the gloomy conclusion that, “it is more characteristic for the older popular traditions to fall into oblivion from their peripheral position and then to disappear completely.”⁸

Sándor’s decision to note the mediatization’s role in the “decline of traditional farming and related practices of agrarian magic” is thus only partly an example of the theoretical perspective that anthropologists involved in the new study of religion as mediation have held up as prototypically old-fashioned and deserving of critique.⁹ Sándor certainly affects Tánzos’s argument that modern and capitalist social relations necessarily act like solvents on religious formation. But she takes up this perspective also to distance herself from this eminent and influential figure in Hungarian ethnological research and project a more complex and unstable view of magic’s futures based on a view that “change is disappearance and reproduction at the same time.” Any argument can generate multiple interpretations. In this case, reading Sándor’s statements about religious transmission as purely theoretical claims would be reductive and miss an equally important alternative reading that emerges from situating her article in the intellectual and historical context of twentieth century Hungarian ethnological and folklorism research.

Kinga Povedák’s article breaks new ground by tracking the Catholic dimensions of socialist-era Hungarian consumer culture. Povedák’s research is part of an emerging body of historical and anthropological literature that questions the assumption that the state socialist political economic systems of the twentieth century were defined by shortages of consumer goods. Until recently, scholars and general observers assumed that images of grocery stores with bare shelves and drably gray concrete apartment blocks told the whole story about consumption under

7 Tánzos, “The New Cultural Economy,” 151.

8 Tánzos, “The New Cultural Economy,” 151.

9 The most prominent proponent of this view is Birgit Meyer. See Birgit Meyer, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision and Christianity in Ghana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520962651-004>.

socialism.¹⁰ Krisztina Fehérváry's study of the history of Hungarian home construction has done much to make Hungary the paradigmatic case study for research about socialist-era consumer culture, showing how Hungary's socialist government went to great lengths to cultivate consumer desires in urban subjects who in turn came to view the West as an idealized land of abundant consumer pleasures and ease.¹¹ Povedák takes up this theme to show how socialist-era Catholics stood within and without this socialist consumer culture to create new opportunities for materializing divine presence in consumer cultural forms. Members of the Catholic Charismatic movement in Hungary in the 1970s and 80s were present and active at large music festivals and gatherings of hippies and other counter-cultural movements, and they enthusiastically adopted the emerging style of guitar-centered popular devotional music for the purpose of religious renewal and evangelization. These phenomena lead Povedák to conclude that, "The baby boomer generation on both sides of the Iron Curtain viewed popular music as something akin to a confession of faith." Christian popular music and the Catholic Charismatic movement went hand-in-hand in Hungary, the former's new musical language was a natural fit to aid the latter's search for a new self-centered mode of religious experience.

Povedák's article tells the fascinating story of how Christian rock music created unexpected ecumenical exchanges between Catholics and Protestant Charismatics and Pentecostals. Even more surprisingly, given socialist-era Hungary's highly racialized and segregated society, guitar-centered masses and rituals created a platform for Catholics to worship alongside the growing numbers of Roma who were converting to Charismatic and Pentecostal forms of Christianity. In the 1970s, Povedák writes, both the government and the Church acted to suppress Christian rock groups, Catholic renewal movements, and their new modes of cultivating divine presence. In the end, though, these efforts backfired. Arrests, public denunciations, and stricter police surveillance led to a stronger sense of counter-cultural opposition among Catholics who continued to consume Christian rock music.

10 The paradigmatic political economic analysis of shortage economies is by Katherine Verdery. See Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400821990>.

11 Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

Povedák writes that, “Charismatic renewal groups appealed to individuals with an injured religious identity who then felt an even greater urge to protect and maintain their particular style of religiosity.”

Povedák’s story is not confined to the past, though. The movements that she tracks in her research continue to act in generative ways to shape contemporary the soundscapes and forms of religious experiencing that mobilize and move and Hungarian Catholics today. On the Catholics & Cultures website, there is a video I recorded during my fieldwork at Hungary’s national shrine of Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, the same shrine that Tánczos wrote about in his pessimistic review of mediated forms of agricultural magic.¹² I filmed a group of Charismatic Catholic Roma performers play a set on the side of the road in front of the shrine’s main church. Bending their knees with each line so as to call out with greater strength, they sang the Kyrie, “God have mercy, Christ have mercy, God have mercy.” Of course, they sang accompanied by acoustic guitar. They seem less bothered and more at home with and energized by the cars whizzing by on the road in front of them.

Finally, Krisztina Frauhammer’s article uses a triadic comparison of three Catholic shrines to shatter expectations and force us to situate Catholic practice in broader horizons of interpretation and understanding. Máriakálnok is now in Hungary but before World War II it was inhabited mostly by Germans. Egyházasbást-Vecseklő (in Slovakian, Večelkov) is in Slovakia but inhabited mostly by Hungarians. Finally, Mátraverebély-Szentkút, Máriagyűd, and Máriapócs are all prominent shrines in Hungary whose constituency consists mostly of Hungarians living within Hungary’s contemporary borders. Prayer at all three sites is, today, mostly a matter of leaving handwritten notes to divine figures like the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and God. Frauhammer describes these prayers as encounters with the Transcendent by means of sacred communication—communication that is actualized through the written word. Frauhammer uses her finely-tuned eye for different types of prayers and different *habitués*, or habitual attitudes, toward the sacred to situate the written messages in relation to the broad array of communicative practices that

12 See <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/romania-charismatics-blend-music-festivals-and-church-engage-youth>.

middle-class Hungarians are comfortable using in contemporary society. Individuals who arrive at the shrine as tourists tend to use these books as they would at other similar sites such as museums, galleries, hotels and restaurants. Visitors are even self-conscious about this comparison. “In a number of cases,” Frauhammer writes, “visitors said: ‘we write in it the way we do in a museum visitor’s book.’” Frauhammer is sufficiently sensitive and creative to listen more closely to the Máriapócs shrine priest than to the majority of anthropologists who often assume that shrine officials always seek to control, discipline, or limit consumer culturally-mediated popular practice. In fact, the parish priest praises the practice of leaving written “shrine reviews” as a means to contact the transcendent, showing how even Catholic clergy are at the forefront of efforts to use consumer culture to develop new means for materializing divine presence.

Hungarian-speaking Catholics live in the kinds of communities that can be found in the other countries of the area from the Baltics to the Balkans as a whole. The essays in this edition shine a light onto Hungarian Catholicism’s complex interweaving with the region’s urban and rural social, economic, political, ethnic and racial diversity. More importantly, these articles about agricultural magic, Catholic rock festivals, the Catholic Charismatic movement, and written prayers that double as consumer demands hint at the ways in which Hungarian Catholicism and Hungarians’ practice reflect, challenge, support, and sometimes uncomfortably coexist with these social formations.

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