

The Secrets of Christian Others: Hungarian Catholic Intellectuals Debate Ecumenism at a Transylvanian Pilgrimage Site

Marc Roscoe Loustau

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MARC LOUSTAU

The Secrets of Christian Others: Hungarian Catholic Intellectuals Debate Ecumenism at a Transylvanian Pilgrimage Site



Dr. Marc Roscoe Loustau is a cultural anthropologist and expert on Eastern European religion and politics. He is author of numerous articles and a monograph, *Hungarian Catholic Intellectuals in Contemporary Romania: Reforming Apostles* (Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2022). He has given commentary for the BBC and France 24 and has been a guest on the Fast Politics Podcast with Molly Jong-Fast. His opinion articles and essays have appeared in *America: The Jesuit Review*, *La Croix International*, *Christian Century*, and *National Catholic Reporter*.

János Zsigmond, at that time, was stylized as a symbolic figure representing 'another faith,' and between the lines everyone could understand who they should really be thinking of.¹

INTRODUCTION: INTERNALIZED EXTERNAL CENSORSHIP

When I began ethnographic fieldwork with Transylvania's ethnic-Hungarian minority in 2009, Catholic intellectuals were then debating how to respond to a controversy at the Hungarian national shrine, Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, in Transylvania. Bishop Árpád Szabó, the head of the Transylvania's ethnic-Hungarian Unitarian Church, had recently denounced a Catholic priest's newspaper article about the history of an annual pilgrimage event at Csíksomlyó. The priest claimed that the pilgrimage commemorates the Battle of Harghita in 1567, when local Catholics gathered at Csíksomlyó's Franciscan friary and then marched out to defeat the army of Unitarian nobleman János Zsigmond. In response, Bishop Szabó argued that the origin story is a "myth" (*mitosz*) with no basis in the historical record. Statements followed from scholars who had done fieldwork at Csíksomlyó, including Budapest-based ethnologist Tamás Mohay and Transylvanian Hungarians such as ethnologist Tánzos Vilmos and inculturation theologian Árpád Daczó. While they agreed with the bishop, just as intriguing were their proposals to reframe the Battle of Harghita as a public secret. Mohay noted that interwar-era Catholics had used Zsigmond to talk secretly about "another faith" in an effort to avoid offending the new Romanian government and official Romanian Orthodox Church ruling Transylvania. Today, Mohay suggested, Catholic intellectuals should write only about Csíksomlyó's documented history so as to protect the religious sensitivities of Unitarians. Knowing not to mention the Battle of Harghita, intellectuals should nevertheless find it between the lines of their public discourse.

This article about Hungarian Catholic intellectuals' efforts to resolve a controversy with Protestants over the Hungarian national shrine, Our Lady of Csíksomlyó,

1 Tamás Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó: History, Origin, Tradition* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2009), 133.

fills in two lacunae in the anthropology of Christianity in Europe. First, even as notions of a shared Christian tradition increasingly animate European Union debates on engaging religious otherness, anthropologists have only begun to study how Catholic intellectuals on Europe's near-margins understand "ecumenism," the dominant conceptual frame for imagining unity among Christian churches today.² Second, anthropologists' focus on Protestants and Catholics' grassroots or lived ecumenism has also kept attention away from ecumenism's role in contemporary Catholic thought, specifically how explicit appeals to unity among Christian churches shape Catholic intellectuals' understanding of Catholicism's dogmatic claim to be the One True Church. In this article I fill these lacunae by performing an exegesis of Hungarian Catholic ethnologists', historians', and theologians' writings on the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage's origin narrative. My first section examines Tamás Mohay's book-length history of Csíksomlyó, wherein I briefly situate Mohay's argument, that the Battle of Harghita is an eighteenth-century myth, in relation to the epistemological and methodological commitments of a "demythologizing turn" at the intersection of history, anthropology, and nationalism studies in Eastern Europe.³ Then I dive into Mohay's chapters dealing with what he calls the Csíksomlyó narrative's "afterlife" and especially his account of interwar journalists' descriptions of the Battle of Harghita. These chapters include Mohay's proposal to make the Battle of Harghita a public secret, which I claim emerges from his understanding of the political context of authors' delicate mode of speech (*ovatoskodás, beszéd mód*). I claim that Mohay's proposal ultimately rests on an analogy between the present and the 1920s with regard to the periods' characteristically careful style of public expression: namely, Mohay suggests

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- 2 Often using "grassroots ecumenism" as a paradigm, anthropologists working in North America and sub-Saharan Africa have noted that Catholics implicitly and improvisationally engage with various non-Catholic Christians at pilgrimage sites and burial grounds. See Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Richard Werbner, "Grassroots Ecumenism in Conflict – Introduction." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018): 201-219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2018.1416978>.
- 3 Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor, "Fine-tuning the Polyphonic Past: Hungarian Historical Writing in the 1990s," in *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-communist Eastern Europe*, ed. Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor, and Sorin Antohi (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 1-99.

that just as interwar authors creatively avoided national sensitivities, so should contemporaries learn to navigate Protestant sensibilities. Thus Mohay simultaneously engages debates about the cultural agency of interwar Hungarian intellectuals while developing his notion of ecumenism as internalized external censorship.

In my final section, I examine two variations on Mohay's proposal developed by ethnologist Vilmos Táncczos and inculturation theologian Árpád Daczó. Táncczos was born near Csíksomlyó, and he writes as both a Catholic and member of the Hungarian-speaking Szekler ethnic group that resides in the area. In a published commentary about Mohay's book, Táncczos agrees that intellectuals should say that the pilgrimage expresses ecumenical values. But by situating this statement in relation to Táncczos's other publications about Csíksomlyó and the mass media, I show that he believes that commodifying ecumenical values will trivialize them. Daczó is a Catholic priest known for conducting fieldwork near Csíksomlyó while serving a parish in the 1970s, and he uses his clerical experience to recommend that priests include the origin narrative in their homilies so that it aids believers' sanctification. Here priests will rely on the ability of devout Catholics to bracket questions of demythologizing scholarship within ritual contexts. For Catholic priests, the task of public secrecy emerges contingently and in practice as they discern how and when the boundary between self and other is constructed in Catholic sacramental rituals. All three authors endorse the goal of national Christian unity, but they also reconstruct Hungarian Protestants and Romanian Orthodox believers as "invading outsiders" while at the same time articulating Catholics' sense of their own otherness in relation to a tradition of Hungarian national ecumenism.

Contemporary Hungarian Catholic intellectuals have a tendency to shift between contradictory statements and judgments over the goal of creating a national ecumenical culture. These are not mere inconsistencies but rather how these intellectuals tack with the global Catholic Church's own shifting position vis-à-vis the ecumenical movement and its main institutional vehicle, the Geneva-based World Council of Churches (WCC). When the WCC was founded in 1948, the Catholic Church declined membership. If the Church had joined the WCC,

Catholics would have tacitly accepted the authority of multiple churches and denominations, and therefore have denied the dogmatic belief in its own singularity, that it is “the One True Church.” But since the 1960s, the two organizations have improvised an “accredited observer” category that allows Catholics to participate in WCC events. Improvising bureaucratic categories is but one way that Catholics work with one of Catholicism’s distinctive contradictions, what Mayblin, Norget, and Napolitano call the “paradoxical capacity for singularity and multiplicity to coexist” in Catholics’ everyday experience.⁴ What follows will help us understand the cultural dimensions of this work on one of Europe’s near-margins: the ways that Catholic intellectuals engage a particular Hungarian national tradition of historical debate amid the global Catholic Church’s own debate over how to construe self and other in light of calls to unity among Christian churches.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig’s meditations on public secrecy and Beryl Bellman’s description of secrecy’s “metacommunicative practice” serve as my primary inspirations for understanding the authors’ proposal to exclude the Battle of Harghita from Hungarian public discourse.⁵ Taussig’s exegeses of the paradox of “knowing what not to know” stresses not only communicative style but also practices of intellectual representation and the historical and political contexts of knowledge production. These emphases echo Mohay’s reflections on mode of speech and his analysis of expressive delicacy found in interwar Hungarian newspaper articles about Csíksomlyó. While Bellman’s account of the “calculated concealment of information” stresses intentionality, Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó highlight Hungarian intellectuals’ awareness of the unintended consequences of speech as well as the historical and political contexts that destabilize the goals of rational argument. At different points, I weave together insights from other recent anthropological accounts probing secrecy in political culture, forms of mediation,

4 Maya Mayblin, Kristin Norget, and Valentina Napolitano. “Introduction: The Anthropology of Catholicism,” in *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, ed. Maya Mayblin, Kristin Norget, and Valentina Napolitano (Berkeley: University of California Press), 7.

5 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Beryl Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984).



and the ethics of discernment.⁶ But Mohay's ambivalent endorsement of unity, which is to say his characterization of ecumenism as internalized external censorship, is one instance of what makes Taussig's paradox-focused account an evocative catalyst for writing about Hungarian Catholic intellectual discourse.

Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó are of course not the only Hungarian intellectuals to consider the effects of origin myths within contemporary Hungarian society; their declarations that Csíksofnyó's origin narrative is a myth took shape against the backdrop of a critical "demythologizing turn" in Hungarian academic departments. Drawing on research in nationalism studies in which "myth" is also a term of art, demythologizing Hungarian historians and anthropologists often associate this concept with right-wing politics. They give voice to this association in their arguments that myths legitimate state territorial claims; help people escape conflict and misery; placate disadvantaged groups; revive the image of a national golden age; compensate for inadequate historical knowledge; and animate political contests over history.⁷ Recent Hungarian scholarship on myth has reinforced the self-confirming stereotype that right-wing nationalists are irrational monsters or deluded victims to be either despised or pitied.⁸

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- 6 Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2014); Mattijs van de Port, "Bahian White: The Dispersion of Candomblé Imagery in the Public Sphere of Bahia," *Material Religion* 3, no. 2 (2007): 242-274, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183407X219769>; David Nugent, "States, Secrecy, Subversives: APRA and Political Fantasy in mid-20th-Century Peru," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 4 (2010): 681-702, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40890781>; Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Simon Coleman and John Dulin, "Secrecy, Religion, and the Ethics of Discernment," *Ethnos* 87, no. 3 (2022): 411-424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1765831>.
- 7 László Kürti, *The Remote Borderland: Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); László Hubbes and István Povedák, *Már a múlt sem a régi: Az új magyar mitológia multidiszciplináris elemzése* (Szeged: MTA-SZTE, 2015), 135; Balázs Trencsényi, "'Imposed Authenticity': Approaching Eastern European National Characterologies in the Inter-war Period," *Central Europe* 8, no. 1 (2010): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174582110X12676382921464>.
- 8 Agnieszka Pasieka, "Taking Far-Right Claims Seriously and Literally: Anthropology and the Study of Right-Wing Radicalism," *Slavic Review* 76 (2017): S19-S29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/sir2017.154>.

When sociologist Rogers Brubaker self-reflexively examined nationalism studies' "myths and misconceptions," his claim to advance the field beyond "theoretical primitivism" only validated the latter patronizing attitude.⁹

But Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó also proposed that the mythical Battle of Harghita should live on as a public secret. Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó subtly but thoroughly refuse the demythologizing turn's parochial and self-congratulatory political imaginary in which critical scholars are opposed to despicable or pitiable right-wing nationalist intellectuals. In this article, I avoid shoehorning Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó into ill-fitting political categories. Rather, I highlight the historical and social conditions that shape Mohay's, Tánzos's, and Daczó's methods and key constructive proposal, including the political economic processes through which Mohay, in particular, came to engage positively with amateur historians. This scene-setting prepares me to set out an alternative approach to studying myth in Hungarian culture: I seek to understand intellectuals' views about how making myths into public secrets opens up diverse opportunities for cultural creativity and agency. Mohay, Tánzos, and Daczó eventually praise the moral virtues of amateur Catholic historians; redirect these historians' influence on Hungarian public opinion; agree with an influential Catholic Archbishop's exhortation; probe similarities between the expressive habits of political cultures of different historical periods; and work with the contradiction between singularity and multiplicity within the Catholic tradition. Exploring the contours of a paradox – the Battle of Harghita as public secret – will move the social analysis of myth beyond the caricatures that result from the narrow alternatives of fear or condescension.

NEW FORMS FOR CSÍKSOMLYÓ'S ORIGIN NARRATIVE

The debate about Csíksomlyó's origin narrative has been wide-ranging and multidisciplinary, bringing together professional and amateur intellectuals from diverse fields in a manner that constructs pilgrimage sites, in anthropologist Ian Read-

9 Rogers Brubaker, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism," in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. by John Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 272.



er's words, as "encompassing institutions."¹⁰ Although in 1948 Romania's socialist government banned the public performance of the annual Pentecost pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó's Franciscan friary, a later government-sponsored festival system actually set the stage for university-trained scholars to deliberate with self-taught historians, ethnologists, and Protestant and Catholic theologians over the questions of whether and how Csíksomlyó should build a national ecumenical culture. Beginning in the 1970s, the Romanian socialist regime mounted a campaign to gather ethnographic data about religion, with the goal of explaining why so many socialist subjects still participated in religious rituals despite decades of state atheist educational propaganda. Social scientific research on ritual came to inform the repertoires distributed to song and dance ensembles participating in the biannual "Sing Romania!" festival, begun in 1976 as the central socialist-era program for duplicating rituals' functionality within the framework of a national socialist culture.¹¹ The Romanian socialist government considered the system of cultural festivals so important that it mobilized intellectuals at all levels to collect material for the repertoires of performing groups. According to Romanian anthropologist Otilia Hedeşan, by the 1980s "the fever of fieldwork reached more and more people" in Romania, such that amateurs with no formal ethnographic training took leading roles in the "documentation and publication of folk traditions."¹² Studying ritual thus became part of a broad-based effort to craft a national past and tradition that would serve the goal of building late-socialist Romania's national revolutionary culture.

These amateur and professional social scientists were joined by musicians, dancers, and tourists as well as professional anthropologists, ethnologists, and folklorists

10 Reader argues that pilgrimage as an institution breaks down conventional social boundaries and practices of distinctions between "places, behaviors, times, and specialists." Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 34.

11 Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania* (Berkeley: University of California Press., 1988).

12 Otilia Hedeşan. "Doing Fieldwork in Communist Romania," in *Studying Peoples in the People's Democracies: Socialist Era Anthropology in South-East Europe*, ed. by Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ilia Iliev & Slobodan Naumovic, (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2008), 29. Amateur and professional intellectuals from Romania's Hungarian minority were also heavily involved in this program of ethnographic collection.

from Hungary who began crossing the border to conduct fieldwork as a form of national solidarity, Catholic piety, and consumer cultural production. Mohay writes that he made the decision to study the pilgrimage in the mid-1980s when, “as a Budapest ethnologist and believer,” he visited Csíksomlyó for the first time.¹³ For some, these research trips were motivated by reports that the Romanian state was instituting assimilationist policies meant to eliminate the Transylvanian Hungarians. Others sought to introduce folk performers into Hungary’s official television and radio programming.¹⁴ When over 100,000 urban and middle-class Hungarians began attending the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage in the mid-1990s, amateur and professional scholars from both Hungary and Transylvanian Hungarian communities were ready to use their research to teach this mass of visitors to participate in rituals as a way to revive and sustain a Hungarian national tradition.

In the section of his book on Csíksomlyó’s origin narrative, Tamás Mohay explains that when he first began studying the “story’s afterlife” (*történet továbbélése*), he learned quickly that he would need to move beyond the confines of studying local oral tradition and instead focus on intellectuals’ efforts to use historical research to educate a Catholic and Hungarian public: “The story was present not only in oral culture but also in other novel forms – in ecclesiastical officials’ and intellectuals’ written production, and (as we have often experienced) quite unreflectively.”¹⁵ Mohay’s disappointed remark about intellectuals’ lack of reflectiveness also points to his embrace of a new critical “demythologizing turn” that was gaining steam in Hungarian and Romanian history departments in the 1990s.¹⁶

13 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 7.

14 Kürti, *The Remote Borderland*, 144; Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 87–88.

15 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 131.

16 Cristina Petrescu and Dragoș Petrescu, “Mastering vs. Coming to Terms with the Past: A Critical Analysis of Postcommunist Romanian Historiography,” in *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-communist Eastern Europe*, ed. by Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor, and Sorin Antohi (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 311–408. For example, the eminent Hungarian university historian Ignác Romsics and his students published volumes like *Myths, Legends, and False Beliefs about 20th Century Hungarian History* and the Romanian historian Lucian Boia used his *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* to show that basic assumptions about founding events and figures in Romanian history changed repeatedly according to the imperatives of the nation-building process. Ignác Romsics, *Trianon és a Magyar Politikai Gondolkodás, 1920-1953*.



Mohay takes over the documentary methods, epistemological reliance on facts, and basic terminology of the demythologizing turn, which offered a powerful and compelling methodological and theoretical formula for critical reflection on national history in both historical scholarship and public discourse.¹⁷

In *Making the Pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó*, Mohay accepts what Trencsényi and Apor call “the positivist consensus” of demythologizing Hungarian historical research, relying solely on archival collections to uncover objective facts about the pilgrimage’s origin.¹⁸ Although amateur and professional historians unreflectively mention the Battle of Harghita in newspaper articles as if it had actually happened, Mohay finds that the earliest documentary reference to the conflict is from the late eighteenth century: “Prior to this, we know of no document that discusses either the Battle of Hargita or refers to it as an accepted historical fact (*történelmi tény*).”¹⁹ These later records tie the origin narrative to a Catholic priest and member of the Hungarian-speaking Szekler group from around Csíksomlyó. During the 1780s, he was employed in the Habsburg Empire’s capital of Vienna, and according to Mohay, “Every sign suggests that a zealously faithful Catholic, leading devotee of Mary, and noble-born Szekler projected this story back into the past.”²⁰

Without a basis in written documents, Mohay’s ultimate conclusion is that the Battle of Harghita is a “myth” (*mitosz*). Echoing the arguments of demythologizing historians like Lucian Boia and Ignác Romsics, Mohay insists that the pilgrimage’s origin narrative was a product of a Catholic and regional ethnic Szekler

[Trianon and Hungarian Political Thought, 1920-1953] (Budapest: Osiris, 1998); Ignác Romsics, ed. *Mitoszok, Legendák, Tévhitek a 20. Századi Magyar Történelemről*. [Myths, Legends, Misbeliefs on 20th century Hungarian History] (Budapest: Osiris, 2002); Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001).

- 17 Other researchers, Mohay notes, have made the pilgrimage narrative “into an object of careful critique,” and his project takes off where these three Reformed, Catholic, and Unitarian researchers stopped. Mohay’s innovation is that he uses documentary evidence to which they did not have access. Mohay explicitly mentions the three scholars’ denominational affiliations. Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 113-4.
- 18 Rejecting the claim that all historical interpretation is personal and political, Mohay insists that “We have a realistic chance to know reality, even if we are groping around in a fog and are forced to make more or less well-founded assumptions when establishing [historical] relationships and processes.” Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 14.
- 19 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 113.
- 20 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 124.

appropriation of a “historical myth-making” process (*történeti mítoszteremtés*), which that economic and political conditions in the Habsburg Empire had made the dominant option for nationally-minded intellectuals.²¹

Nevertheless, Mohay rejects what Petrescu and Petrescu call the “deconstructivism” and “iconoclasm” of some interpretations of the demythologizing turn. Mohay states that his effort to demythologize the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage should be generative, helping to cultivate enlightenment intellectual virtues.²² These enlightenment virtues include the reflectiveness and doubt that he invoked to critique public uses of Csíksomlyó’s origin narrative, but Mohay also mentions qualities like lucidity and clear-sightedness. “My goal,” he writes, “was not some kind of myth-destruction (*mítoszrombolás*) with a deconstructive intent but rather to help us see more clearly how the stories developed in reality.”²³

These statements align Mohay with a perspective on pilgrimage sites’ origins that anthropologist Jill Dubisch calls the official discourse of “written history” and distinguishes from subaltern “oral stories.”²⁴ But Dubisch notes that at her Greek island shrine fieldsite, historians who dismiss oral stories ironically end up identifying themselves with what they renounce. Greek historians’ disavowal of oral stories only proves Greece’s ambiguous status as both part of and apart from Europe – that is, one of Europe’s near-margins.²⁵ While certainly Mohay’s demythologizing positivism is a partly self-defeating stance, contemporary European cultural power dynamics do not provide an exhaustive account of the uses to which Mohay puts his research. Ultimately, adopts a strategically critical stance toward Catholic amateur historians with the demythologizing turn’s virtues of clarity and doubt.

Mohay’s tactical awareness is especially evident when he uses a subtle formal device in his text to highlight the skepticism of Transylvanian Catholic priest and amateur

21 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 123.

22 Petrescu and Petrescu write that “The de-mythologizing turn could be seen as blending a strain of radical historical relativism with some drops of deconstructionism.” Petrescu and Petrescu, “Mastering vs. Coming to Terms,” 370.

23 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 253.

24 Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 139.

25 Dubisch, *In a Different Place*, 200.



historian Ferenc Léstyán. Léstyán is one of the amateur scholars who took advantage of Romania's socialist-era government initiatives to study religious practices, and in 1996 he published a photographic collection of rural Catholic architecture, entitled *Sanctified Stones*, which he began while serving a Transylvanian Catholic village parish.²⁶ Léstyán includes thumbnail sketches of the structures' roles in important events throughout Hungarian national history. Although Mohay uses footnotes to quote the specific authors who demonstrate a disappointing lack of reflectiveness, he includes excerpts from *Sanctified Stones* in the main body of his book, noting in Léstyán a key textual addition and revision that newly conveys a commendable skepticism.

After *Sanctified Stones* became popular with tourists and visitors to Transylvania, the book appeared in a second printing with changes to a passage describing the Battle of Harghita. In the first edition Léstyán refers to eighteenth-century documents that helped invent the pilgrimage's origin narrative, but the revised version includes a note that draws attention to doubts surrounding this event. "In the book's second edition," Mohay writes, "[Léstyán] attaches a sentence (without citation): 'According to later opinion, the battle itself did not take place. All that was needed for defense was for the soldiers to gather and march.'"²⁷ Léstyán certainly does not go as far as Mohay himself in demythologizing the history of the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage. Léstyán also reveals his amateurism by failing to follow the typical scholarly practice of citing sources of new information. But Mohay also highlights the good he sees in the priest's book: the priest's relative embrace of historical reflectiveness and willingness to doubt the pilgrimage's historical origin. Mohay's approach is therefore tactical, and demonstrates his awareness of various social conditions that govern his efforts to reshape Hungarian public discourse. He is aware that, as a legacy of socialist-era national

26 After 1989, he reimagined his research as a form of tourism and an alternative to international leisure travel: "I was not allowed to leave the country, but later on when I could have gone abroad I did not want to. I went on trips of discovery here at home." Ferenc Léstyán, *Megszentelt kövek: A középkori erdélyi püspökség templomai* (Alba Iulia, RO: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, 2000), 4.

27 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 132.

cultural revivals in Romania and Hungary, contemporary Catholic amateur historians significantly influence the Hungarian public's historical consciousness. He is also sensitive to the etiquette governing devout Catholics' approach to critique that focuses on leading each other toward the good, highlighting and nurturing what is virtuous in each other's research.

What happened between 1996 and 2000 to prompt Léstyán's new expression of doubt? Mohay neither explains why Léstyán changes this passage nor presents any documentary evidence on Léstyán's behalf in reference to this decision. But Mohay gets around the methodological strictures of positivistic demythologization by placing this summary immediately before a description of an epistolary exchange between top officials of Transylvania's Unitarian and Catholic churches. During archival research at the Transylvanian Catholic Archdiocese in Alba Iulia, Mohay found a 1998 letter from the Unitarian bishop, Reverend Árpád Szabó, complaining about Catholic priests' references to the Battle of Harghita in newspapers and other public venues. Mohay then summarizes Transylvanian Catholic Archbishop Jakubinyi's response:

In his answer, the Archbishop diplomatically expressed his sorrow that certain representatives of our churches consider our historical traditions, including the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage, to be manifestations of anti-ecumenical sentiment. He assured the [Unitarian] Bishop that the pilgrimage will not be exploited for the purpose of denominational squabbling, and he asked forgiveness for offenses emerging from human failings.²⁸

Mohay's summary has the Archbishop tacitly recognize the authority of multiple Christian churches. Beyond simply apologizing to Szabó and implying that the Catholic Church has a special moral obligation to the Unitarian Church, Mohay has Jakubinyi call the conflict a "denominational squabble" (*félekezeti torzsalkodás*). He therefore implies that Catholicism and Unitarianism are both "denominations," with equal authority as Christian churches. But this endorsement of multiplicity remains tacit, and therefore pragmatic. Mohay does not quote Jakubinyi's letter,

²⁸ Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 132.

which might then be used to say that the Archbishop has officially come down against Catholicism's singularity and the dogma of the "One True Church." Finally, by placing the bishops' exchange next to Léstyán's revision in his account of the origin narrative's public afterlife, Mohay suggests – but does not explicitly state – that the latter is a result of the Archbishop Jakubinyi's apology.

As Mohay was finishing his book in the late 2000s, he was aware not only that Unitarian Church leaders remained unsatisfied with the Archbishop's response but also that they had cited his own research to express their grievances publicly. After reviewing the exchange between Szabó and Jakubinyi, Mohay turns to the Unitarian bishop's 2007 follow-up complaint, an indignant open letter that appeared in a major Transylvanian Hungarian newspaper in response to a Catholic priest's article about the Battle of Harghita.²⁹ Although Unitarians are known for their patience, Szabó writes, this was the straw that broke the camel's back. He refers to the origin narrative as a "myth" (*mítosz*) and, clearly outraged, declares, "We can no longer tolerate this intentional distortion of history."³⁰

Szabó then adopts a frequent trope of demythologizing historians – ridiculing other scholars' basic factual incompetence.³¹ Although the article was titled "The Csíksomlyó Pilgrimage is 440 Years Old," in the subsequent sentence the author states that the earliest documented reference to Csíksomlyó is a papal bull from Pope Eugene IV dated 1444. "Math was never my strong suit," Szabó writes, "but I believe that the difference between the two numbers is not 440 but rather 563." Csíksomlyó's documented history makes it old enough to be one of Europe's most long-lasting shrines. This fact alone should make Catholics proud of Csíksomlyó, Szabó declares, "so then why this measly 440-year anniversary?"

But actually, pride should not be the reason they attend the pilgrimage. Csíksomlyó must ultimately be about a national ecumenical virtue, love:

29 Árpád Szabó, "Mindenben szeretet," *Szabadság*. May 12, 2007, <http://tudastar.unitarius.hu/Csik-somlyoi-bucsu/SZaboArpad-Mindenben-szeretet.html>.

30 Szabó, "Mindenben szeretet."

31 See Petrescu and Petrescu's comment that, "completely ignoring the complexities of the particular historical contexts, some of the authors did nothing more than ridicule traditional reconstructions of the past." Petrescu and Petrescu, "Mastering vs. Coming to Terms," 324.

“In our journey to God and in the search for God’s will, we are all one. Therefore, let our churches and our nation be one in loving service [*szeretetteljes szolgálatában*].” In conclusion, Szabó suggests that his readers learn about the shrine’s real documented history by reading Mohay’s publication in the official Unitarian Church theological journal, the *Christian Sower (Keresztény Magvető)*.³² Thus, Mohay’s own publications substantiated the Unitarian Church’s grievance against Transylvanian Catholics and Archbishop Jakubinyi’s tentative commitment to national ecumenism. For Bishop Szabó, the consequences of demythologizing the origin narrative were clear. In their public discourse, Catholic intellectuals would now begin saying that the meaning of this national and ecumenical event is loving service.

PROPOSING A PUBLIC SECRET

After summarizing Bishop Szabó’s letter, Mohay concludes this section of his book with a proposal of his own that differs from the Unitarian leader’s suggestion. My close reading of *Making the Pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó* exposed the conflicting obligations within both the Catholic tradition and the demythologizing turn that mutually shaped Mohay’s answer to the question of what consequences must be drawn from his research. As a devout Catholic, Mohay signaled that he felt obliged to agree with the position of the influential Catholic leader Archbishop Jakubinyi, who had stated that Csíksomlyó should not be exploited to foment denominational discord. Yet following Archbishop Jakubinyi’s lead would also require Mohay to offer only tentative and careful praise for national ecumenism. As a demythologizing historian he has declared his allegiance to historical objectivity, which had provided the basis for Bishop Szabó’s proposal that intellectuals use Csíksomlyó’s documented history to make loving service the meaning of the event. But Mohay’s ethnological expertise makes him skeptical: “Perhaps the hypothesis is not baseless,” he observes, “that the strong and intimate connection between ‘folklore and history,’ will persist for a good while longer at least in the case examined here.”³³

32 Tamás Mohay, “Egy ünnep alapjai: a csíksomlyói pünkösdi búcsú új megvilágításban.” *Keresztény Magvető* 111, no. 2 (2005): 107-134.

33 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 133. Mohay also writes, “It is clear that the power of a shared belief – one that goes back hundreds of years and contributes to communal solidarity – is greater



Bishop Szabó's proposal is a plausible conclusion to draw from the principles of demythologization. But based on his knowledge of the dynamics of Hungarian oral tradition, Mohay believes it is unrealistic for intellectuals to use Csíksomlyó's documented history to replace anti-ecumenical pride as the event's meaning. Mohay is therefore caught between a second set of competing demands.

Mohay instead proposes that intellectuals recover and develop the interwar practice of public secrecy, a paradoxical way of handling information "which is generally known but cannot be spoken" such that it becomes "permanently partial in its exposure."³⁴ Referring to his historical research on 1920s newspaper reports covering the pilgrimage, Mohay notes that during the post-World War I period Transylvanian Hungarian confronted a radically different political context for describing Csíksomlyó's origin.³⁵ When the Budapest-based administration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire controlled Transylvania, Hungarian newspaper writers "generally said what they thought and thought what they said."³⁶ Before 1918, they were "more naïve" (*még naivabb*) and therefore more confident that they could reach their intended goal of winning others to their side by way of public persuasion.³⁷ Hungarian journalists and their editors were also more ignorant about the unintended consequences of what they said. As a result, "delicacy and tiptoeing around were much rarer" when they expressed their opinions.³⁸

than the power of doubt." Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 239-40.

34 Taussig, *Public Secrecy*, 50, 139.

35 Of course, these changes were not limited to the origin narrative. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire set in motion widespread changes in all aspects of Hungarian cultural life.

36 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 81.

37 Mohay is referring to debates over legal recognition for Transylvania's nationalities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Mohay's view, because Romanian intellectuals did not contribute to these newspapers and Hungarian authors never actually tested their arguments in real debate with outsiders, Hungarian intellectuals naively believed that their arguments would persuade Romanians to accept Hungarian rule in Transylvania. see Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic and Ethnic Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). See also Brubaker et al, *Nationalist Politics*.

38 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 81.

After Romanian authorities gained control of Transylvania, Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals embraced the habit of expressive delicacy as they became aware that officials in this new government and its authorized Romanian Orthodox Church read their public discourse with suspicion.

In illustrating this claim, Mohay repeatedly mentions that a 1920 edition of the *Transylvanian Correspondent* failed to print an account of the pilgrimage listed in the newspaper's table of contents, which he attributes to government censorship.³⁹ Subsequently, Mohay observes, it became "necessary to entrust more to messages that appear between the lines [*a sorok közötti üzenetek*], and to occasionally express oneself more carefully and covertly."⁴⁰ In general, during the interwar period pilgrimage organizers strove to "to create an external frame [for the pilgrimage] that would be acceptable for the [Romanian] authorities."⁴¹

For Mohay, a Catholic priest's newspaper article inviting pilgrims to the 1920 event illustrates how interwar intellectuals used public secrecy to construct Romanian government officials as others. The author referred obliquely to the Battle of Harghita's alternative name, the Battle of the Great Forest, as he called on readers to gather in defense of Our Lady of Csíksomlyó:

In the great forest, among the fir trees' long shadows, the bells sound out from the two-towered church for the Pentecost pilgrimage: Szeklers, my blood family, will you gather one and all? Our Lady of Csíksomlyó understands our grief. And as she has defended our nation for so many centuries, so she will be with us and never abandon us."⁴²

In the wake of the Romanian army's post-War occupation of the region surrounding Csíksomlyó, the author's message about defending the nation against invading outsiders was clear for being so thinly obscured: "Between the lines, everyone could understand the barely hidden messages."⁴³ Transylvanian Hungarians "knew not to

39 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 82, 86, 161, 206.

40 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 82.

41 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 160.

42 Quoted in Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 160.

43 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 160.



know” that the author was using a surreptitious reference to the Battle of Harghita to construct Romanian government officials as invading outsiders.

Mohay situates his analysis of Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals’ post-War expressive sensitivity in relation to a core debate in Hungarian historical scholarship, the question of Hungarians’ cultural agency during the interwar period. The practice of public secrecy, which emerged within Transylvanian Hungarian intellectual culture during this time and opened up new avenues for limited maneuvering and creativity, destabilizes the conventional view that Hungarians were the helpless victims of outside powers.⁴⁴ Mohay’s analysis also overlaps with that of Katherine Verdery and Paul Nugent, whose anthropological accounts emphasize public secrecy’s role as the guiding operating principle of a broader political culture.⁴⁵ While anthropologists vacillate between treating public secrecy as an outgrowth of the Christian theological belief in the mystery of God or mundane social patterns of colonial-era governance, Mohay appears to favor the latter. He highlights the political and historical context of interwar Transylvania in which Hungarian intellectuals struggled to find a workable relationship with a new Romanian government bureaucracy while developing an appreciation for public secrecy, or what Mohay calls “delicate reasoning” (*ovatoskodás*).

As he reflects on the consequences of his effort to demythologize Csíksomlyó, Mohay urges his readers to probe the similarities between the expressive habits of different historical periods’ political cultures. He suggests contemporary intellectuals adopt a version of post-World War I public secrecy – that is, interwar newspaper writers’ careful tiptoeing around Romanian national sensitivities. In fact, he writes, this was the initial outline of a strategy extended and developed during later totalitarian systems, a tactic that in Mohay’s words eventually turned “external censorship” into an “internal practice” in which written words meant precisely the

44 See, for instance, diplomatic historian András D. Bán who questioned the narrative of interwar victimhood by “pointing out both the hitherto invisible zones of maneuver, the failed opportunities, and also the uncontrollable and external factors that determined the movement of Hungarian diplomacy, especially during World War II.” Trencsényi and Apor, “Fine-tuning the Polyphonic Past,” 43.

45 Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*. Nugent, “States, Secrecy, Subversives.”

opposite of what they expressed semantically.⁴⁶ Today, Hungarians must tailor their public discourse to avoid “religious sensitivities:”

At that time, it was interpreted less within the framework of a ‘triumphant’ relation between denominations. János Zsigmond, at that time, was stylized as a symbolic figure representing ‘another faith,’ and between the lines everyone could understand who they should really be thinking of. As a result of their new awareness of shared difficulties, it was more about the unification of Hungariandom. The [pilgrimage’s] current development, perhaps now with the intention of avoiding religious sensibilities, can also go in this direction – even to the point of completely avoiding mention of the name and concrete historical situation.⁴⁷

According to Mohay, ecumenism is internalized external censorship. Protecting religious sensibilities is reason for contemporary Hungarian Catholics to develop and even perfect interwar Hungarian intellectuals’ wary expressive habits. Urging his readers to become aware of the consequences of incautious speech, Mohay argues that Bishop Szabó’s grievances came as a result of Catholics’ failure to tiptoe around a watchfully suspicious Protestant religious other. Thus, yesterday’s Romanian government censorship becomes today’s Unitarian public indignation and outrage. The final sentence in this excerpt implies that discursive expression is the social domain where intellectuals feel most acutely the competing demands that constitute contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian political culture: Szekler regional pride, Hungarian national unity, Catholic faith, and ecumenical sensitivity.

The ability to mediate between these demands, Mohay suggests, lies in taking up and perfecting interwar Transylvanian Hungarians’ expressive delicacy on the far side of revealing the secret of the Battle of Harghita. As such, Mohay’s proposal to redevelop an ethically fraught practice of public secrecy construes resonances between historical periods’ political cultures to be a source of potentiality and creativity, an approach that anthropologists Simon Coleman and John Dulin also highlight when they write, “Secrecy, like the sacred, might appear to be ‘kept apart’

46 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 161.

47 Mohay, *Making the Pilgrimage*, 133.



but that does not mean it is shielded from transformation and historical contingency.”⁴⁸ Mohay concludes the section of his book on the origin narrative’s afterlife by sketching out the kind of image intellectuals should use to link the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage’s history to the theme of resistance, defense, and unity: The crowds massing each year around the site’s Franciscan friary should symbolize the renewal of their commitment to an institution which past generations – especially the generation that came of age after the violence of World War I – made it a priority to rebuild.

Intellectuals can honor these themes without mentioning Unitarianism and János Zsigmond. If they can learn to read the Battle of Harghita into and between the lines of Mohay’s proposed version of the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage’s historical meaning, there will be no need to mention this story in the future.

HOLLOWING OUT ECUMENISM

A year after *Making the Pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó* was published, the influential Transylvanian Hungarian ethnologist Vilmos Tánzos wrote a ten-page commentary on Mohay’s book in which he commended Mohay’s proposal to make the Battle of Harghita a public secret. While Tánzos seems to urge Catholics to endorse national ecumenism, this interpretation changes if we read the article in relation to a second publication about intellectuals’ public discourse on the event. In fact, Tánzos implies that by heeding Mohay’s call Catholics will hollow out national ecumenical values. Even though Tánzos conducted fieldwork about oral culture at Csíksomlyó and, growing up in a Hungarian and Catholic village less than ten kilometers to Csíksomlyó’s north, he had been personally involved in preserving storytelling traditions about the shrine, still he praises Mohay’s diligent and detailed documentary historical research.⁴⁹

48 Coleman and Dulin, “Secrecy, Religion, and the Ethics of Discernment,” 7.

49 See, for instance, Tánzos’s 2008 ethnographic memoir. Vilmos Tánzos, *Elejtett Szavak: Egy Csíki Székely Ember Nyelve és Világképe* [Words on the Edge of the Tongue: The Language and World-view of a Szekler Man from Ciuc] (Miercurea Ciuc: Bookart Kiadó, 2008).

Towards the end of his review, Tánczos also quotes from Mohay's section on the origin narrative's afterlife, and full-throatedly endorses the project of emphasizing Csíksomlyó's national ecumenical meaning:

'The goal of and reason for the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage can be the defense of faith, understood in the general and abstract sense as much as in the concrete religious meaning of the phrase,' writes Tamás Mohay, and we can all agree with this regardless of denomination.⁵⁰

Tánczos then offers the concrete suggestion that amateur and professional historians, priests, and other intellectuals should stop referring to the Battle of Harghita as real, especially when they are "in front of a large public (in homilies, in the media, and so-called 'scholarly' works of history and church history)."⁵¹ Tánczos and Mohay have the same response to the question of Csíksomlyó's historical meaning. The need to honor national ecumenical values justifies replacing the Battle of Harghita with the pilgrimage's documented history in public reflection on the event's significance.

Several years after his review, Tánczos published a melancholy and angry dirge about the dissolution of Csíksomlyó pilgrimage's rural ritual practices, "The New Cultural Economy and the Ideologies of the Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) Pilgrimage Feast."⁵² Tánczos neither presents new ethnographic material nor offers a systematic analysis, but rather denounces the marketing of cultural commodities in tourism-oriented dance and music festivals. He calls this a new form of colonial cultural imperialism and laments how Csíksomlyó's authentic village rituals are being destroyed.⁵³ Comparing the festivals to Disney-type theme parks and Las

50 Vilmos Tánczos, "Kitalált hagyomány?" [Invented tradition?] *Erdélyi Múzeum* 72, no. 1-2 (2010): 142.

51 Tánczos, "Kitalált hagyomány?", 142.

52 Vilmos Tánczos, "The New Cultural Economy and the Ideologies of the Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu Ciuc) Pilgrimage Feast," in *Cultural Heritage and Cultural Politics in Minority Conditions*, ed. by Árpád Töhötöm Szabó and Mária Szikszai (Cluj-Napoca: Kriza János Ethnographic Society – Intervention Press, 2018), 145-178.

53 Tánczos's tone is melancholic as he evokes the "sentimental pessimism" that, according to Marshall Sahlins, was once a typical anthropological response to "ethnography in the wake of

Vegas casinos, Tánczos disparages performance groups' presentations as "illusory," "dissolved," and "disintegrated" versions of rural ritual forms.⁵⁴ The expansion of media consumption through personal computing has only sped up this process:

The production of such new landscapes and illusory worlds that have no relationship with reality do not even need any local traditions, since these worlds can be created from nothing and disseminated electronically with great effect throughout the contemporary computerized world.⁵⁵

For Tánczos, the mass media both "promotes and generates these illusory images" of rural ritual practices.

Tánczos's lament ultimately grafts the notion of the cultural market as neocolonial cultural imperialism onto the widespread idea within the anthropology of religion that sacred power is lost in the commodification process. Throughout, he complains about profane consumption practices replacing sacred rituals, a process cultural "liquidation" currently afflicting the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage.⁵⁶ Echoing the views of midcentury French and German sociologists and philosophers on the mass reproduction of art and experience – including Walter Benjamin's argument that mass reproduction robs rituals of their aura and Jean Baudrillard's claim that commodified rituals are simulacra of social relations – Tánczos concludes that commodified replication and circulation in the media has robbed the locally rooted pilgrimage of its sacredness.⁵⁷ He complains that the mass reproduction of the pilgrimage in the media has caused the "emptying out and the disintegration of ritual time [that] are also characteristic of the contemporary pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó."⁵⁸

colonialism" (2000, 6).

54 Tánczos, "New Cultural Economy," 156.

55 Tánczos, "New Cultural Economy," 155-6.

56 Tánczos, "New Cultural Economy," 150-2.

57 Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt. Trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*. Trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

58 Tánczos, "New Cultural Economy," 154.

Tánczos's account calls to mind the dilemmas that many practitioners of secrecy-oriented religious traditions confront in the current age of mass mediation.⁵⁹ For instance, Mattijs van der Port notes that while Afro-Brazilian practitioners of candomblé, a hybrid Catholic-West African Yoruba religious tradition, increasingly allow cameras to portray toned-down versions of animal sacrifices, they are divided within themselves about this process and often contradict themselves when speaking about candomblé's emerging non-violent "televsual style."⁶⁰ Similarly, in the name of national ecumenism, Tánczos had suggested cutting references to the Battle of Harghita from Hungarian media representations of Csíksomlyó's history. But he also contradicts this endorsement of national ecumenism insofar as he believes that images of the pilgrimage circulating in the media are already illusory. Tánczos seems to suggest that allowing Catholic intellectuals to trumpet Csíksomlyó's documented history in this manner may actually speed the trivialization of national ecumenical values. In the short term, Catholics will gather at Csíksomlyó to foster national ecumenism. But he also imagines a hollowed-out future for national ecumenism, perhaps so that his readers can maintain a sense of prideful otherness over and against this tradition of working for unity among Hungarian churches.

In 2010, Catholic priest and ethnologist Árpád Daczó published a slim volume of ethnographic material and homiletic exhortations called *The Glory of Csíksomlyó*, which also includes a response to Mohay's proposal.⁶¹ *The Glory of Csíksomlyó* is a sequel to Daczó's bestselling ethnographic memoir, *The Secret of Csíksomlyó*, that describes how in the 1970s Daczó took a position as a priest in a small Ciuc Valley village where he began studying local Marian devotional practices.⁶² In *The Glory of Csíksomlyó*, Daczó affirms Mohay's demythologizing interpretation of the pilgrim-

59 Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*.

60 Mattijs van der Port, "Visualizing the Sacred: Video Technology, "Televsual" Style, and the Religious Imagination in Bahian Candomblé," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 3 (2006): 444-461, DOI:10.1525/AE.206.33.3.444; van der Port, "Bahian White."

61 Árpád Daczó, *Csíksomlyó ragyogása* [The Glory of Csíksomlyó] (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania: Pallas-Akadémia, 2010).

62 Árpád Daczó, *Csíksomlyó titka: Mária-tisztelet a néphagyományban* [The Secret of Csíksomlyó: Marian Devotionalism in Folk Tradition] (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania: Pallas-Akadémia, 2000).



age's history: "Among Csíkssomlyó's truths is the fact that the Battle of Harghita did not take place."⁶³ He has allied himself with the demythologizing turn for the sake of national ecumenism. Not only is demythologization factual, he writes, but it is also "in the interest of the ecumenical movement...We should neither search for nor hold onto that which divides us from each other."⁶⁴

However, in response to Táncczos's suggestion that Catholic priests should strike the story from their homilies, Daczó explains that, as a theological and ethical allegory, the narrative should continue to play a crucial role in this discursive devotional context. "For the purpose of exemplification," Daczó writes,

a priest is allowed to talk about events the essence of which is not that they really happened. Examples make a teaching understandable so that they can rouse the faithful. Especially when it comes to simple and uneducated believers, no one wonders, well, did this event really take place? Believers pass it along as a very interesting story, especially if they sense that it affects deeply the eternal holiness of them and their kin.⁶⁵

Allegorical representation, according to Walter Benjamin's study of the Baroque-era German theater of mourning (*trauerspiel*), is often dismissed by both realist and Romanticist forms of interpretation when it is defined in these terms – as argumentation that chooses the example solely to express a general principle like Daczó's abstract dogma (*tanítás*).⁶⁶ Daczó casts the entire practice of Catholic homiletics as a form of allegorical storytelling akin to the Baroque allegorical theater. Philosopher Samuel Weber explains Benjamin's point about allegory's offense of Romantic and realist interpretive scruples as a result of its condescending attitude toward "the people." Unlike realists and Romanticists, allegorists speak *to* rather than speaks *on behalf of* the people. Like Catholic priests who devise stories to conform their flock to the principles of proper Catholic teaching, "Everything [is] for, nothing [is] by the people."⁶⁷ Daczó commits this offense to the sensibili-

63 Daczó, *Csíkssomlyó titka*, 122.

64 Daczó, *Csíkssomlyó titka*, 122.

65 Daczó, *Csíkssomlyó titka*, 121.

66 Benjamin, *Origin*, 167-9.

67 Benjamin, *Origin*, 28.

ties of Romantic interpretation when he writes about teaching “simple” Catholics about proper belief. Second, allegory confuses the modern tradition of positivist realism with its refusal to address the question of “how things really were.”⁶⁸

Both Benjamin and Daczó are pointing to the fact that allegorical storytelling, whether in the Baroque theater or in Catholic homilies, belongs to a special epistemological category. People steeped in the tradition of Catholic homiletic allegorical storytelling can acknowledge, as Daczó does, that an event like the Battle of Harghita never took place. But they can also simply bracket the questions of critical historical demythologizing scholarship, refusing to ask the question of how things really were since the question seems irrelevant to the task at hand. When the priest steps to the lectern for Mass, Catholics simply do not need to ask whether the historical events he describes actually happened. In this sense, Daczó takes the opportunity of debating the Battle of Harghita to reaffirm Catholic homiletics as a form of ritually embedded play, whose social role is akin to the ethical allegorizing that anthropologist Michael D. Jackson analyzes in his book *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives*.⁶⁹ Jackson writes that Kuranko ritual storytelling sessions always take place at night, a time bracketed off from the tasks and responsibilities of everyday life. The allegories that people craft are therefore a form of “other-discourse,” a way of reconsidering the community’s dominant ethical code in an attitude of playful license and creative make-believe.⁷⁰

When Daczó notes that Catholics know enough not to ask if their priests’ stories actually happened, he names a crucial element of play evident in many cultures and contexts. Those who engage in play do not confuse their imaginary constructions with reality. Anthropologist T. M. Luhmann concludes her psychosocial analysis of children’s “transitional objects,” for instance stuffed animals that children talk to and play with, by noting that, “children do not confuse these imaginary companions with real people.”⁷¹ A child may set a place at the dinner table for a teddy

68 Benjamin, *Origin*, 20.

69 Michael D. Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

70 Jackson, *Allegories*, 114-8.

71 Tanya Luhmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the Evangelical Experience of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 79.



bear and pretend to feed it, but when asked by a parent will say incredulously that, of course, the stuffed animal is not real. Daczó attributes the same attitude to Catholics who hear and repeat the story of the Battle of Harghita in homilies. On the one hand, when an advocate of critical historical demythologization like Unitarian Bishop Szabó asks him if the Battle of Harghita actually happened, he freely agrees that this is not true. On the other, he also points out that Catholics would find it beside the point to ask this question when they hear a priest talk about the Battle of Harghita.

In the ritual context of Mass, the questions forwarded by the dominant demythologizing turn are not eliminated but rather bracketed. Advocates of the demythologizing turn, according to Daczó, are unable to grasp this aspect of Catholic homiletics' interpretive attitude toward the past. "All those people nowadays studying the Battle of Harghita story," he muses,

they all get stuck somewhere right around here, including Tamás Mohay. Instead, this should be a vivid example of how a legend, tradition, or perhaps even a nice instructive fable (*tanulságos mese*) can be made out of some kind of true or even made-up event.⁷²

Finally, Daczó also imagines situations in which pilgrims to Csíksomlyó may continue to hear people talk about the Battle of Harghita. Even though he agrees that in the name of national ecumenism people should stop telling this story to avoid offending Unitarians, he writes that believers will still recite it if they sense that it will deepen their sanctification toward salvation. For some, Daczó argues, national ecumenism might require forgoing this narrative. But clergy can invoke it in homiletic discourse as an allegorical emblem of Catholic theological teaching.

CONCLUSION: FROM PROTESTANT TO CATHOLIC AMBIVALENCE

As several historians of early twentieth-century Eastern Europe have noted,

⁷² Daczó, *Secret of Csíksomlyó*, 121.

interwar Hungarian Protestant intellectuals were of two minds when it came to an emerging “national ecumenism,” a movement intended to foster unity among Hungary’s Christian churches. This interwar national ecumenism was produced through mass religio-political gatherings centered on Catholic ritual practices such as devotion to the Right Hand of Saint István of Hungary.⁷³ Hungary’s elite Protestant intellectuals – many of whom moved between high-level positions in ecclesiastical and political institutions – heeded calls for Hungary’s churches to participate in these events and generally unite “in defense of Christian Hungary.”⁷⁴ But as historian Paul Hanebrink notes, in their own journals Protestants warned one another against confusing István’s achievements with “Catholic idolatry of his body as a holy relic.”⁷⁵ Certainly this ambivalence toward manifestly Catholic practices within Hungarian national ecumenical tradition informs Unitarian Bishop Szabó’s complaints about the Csíksomlyó origin narrative. Interwar Hungary’s Catholic-based national ecumenism also helped set the stage for contemporary Protestants and Catholics, many of them from cities in Hungary, to begin making what anthropologist Anne-Marie Losonczy calls “a pilgrimage to the fatherland” at Our Lady of Csíksomlyó in the 1990s.⁷⁶

To Hanebrink’s groundbreaking research, I have added an account of contemporary Hungarian Catholics’ own ambivalence toward national ecumenism. Once again a Catholic ritual, namely pilgrimage, stands at the center of a large gathering some believe will foster unity among Hungarian Christian churches. But just because Catholicism is at the heart of a reconstructed Hungarian national ecumenical culture does not mean that Hungarian Catholic intellectuals like Mohay, Tánczos, or Daczó are fully in the driver’s seat for this process, completely determining the consequences of this act of national cultural creation. Indeed, these scholars seem to tuck with the global Catholic Church’s own shifting position vis-à-vis the

73 Paul Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890-1944* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3. See also Trencsényi, “Imposed Authenticity.”

74 Hanebrink, *In Defense*, 3.

75 Hanebrink, *In Defense*, 113.

76 Anne-Marie Losonczy, “Pilgrims of the “Fatherland”: Emblems and Religious Rituals in the Construction of an Inter-Patriotic Space between Hungary and Transylvania,” *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2009): 265-280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200903112602>.



ecumenical movement and its main institutional vehicle, the Geneva-based World Council of Churches. Contemporary Hungarian Catholic intellectuals also express their hesitations differently from interwar Protestants, who recast theological debates about idolatry to articulate their sense of otherness from Hungary's emerging national ecumenical culture. Hungarian Catholics, in contrast, use the origin narrative account of János Zsigmond's Reformation-era invasion to reintroduce images of Hungarian Protestants and the Romanian government as violent outsiders.

For Tamás Mohay, it does not necessarily follow that if interwar Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals portrayed Romanian officials as aggressive outsiders, these same intellectuals were helpless victims of the Romanian state. Public secrecy was the expressive form of their cultural creativity. In the 1920s, Transylvanian Hungarians intellectuals' desire to mobilize against the Romanian government was a public secret, and everyone knew not to know this when they read stories about the Battle of Harghita. No longer lacking agency, here was an act of creativity in this period that opened up avenues for limited maneuvering. To paraphrase Mohay's words from the epigraph, János Zsigmond was stylized as a symbolic figure representing another faith, while between the lines everyone understood who they should really be thinking of. By treating the origin narrative once again as a public secret, Mohay urges today's Hungarian Catholics to take pride in their faith over and against Unitarianism, but without upsetting their fellow Hungarian Christians' religious sensitivities. For Vilmos Tánzos, explicit endorsement of Csíksomlyó's national ecumenical purpose hides an implicit alternative meaning. He implicitly welcomes the trivialization of the pilgrimage's recast meaning that will come about as it circulates through mass media. Finally, Árpád Daczó adopts the positivist language of the demythologizing turn by declaring, in agreement with Mohay, that the Battle of Harghita never took place. But he further imagines a thriving allegorical practice of narrating this event in priests' homilies, a practice that depends on the ability of Catholics to bracket the epistemological demands of demythologizing historical research and engage an origin story within a special mood, that formed by the Catholic ritual process of sanctification.

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