

# THE PROTESTANT REVIEW: ITS PAST AND PRESENT

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In 1888 a Literary Association of Hungarian Protestants was created in Budapest. The following year *The Protestant Review* was launched as the main organ of this Association. In 1889 it was published biannually, between 1890 and 1894 on a quarterly basis, and between 1895 and 1919 it appeared ten times a year. In 1930 the journal became a monthly. After the end of World War II *The Protestant Review* ceased to appear. In 1989, the year of the collapse of Communism in Hungary, a Protestant Association of Public Education was organized. One of its aims was to reestablish continuity with the past and publish *The Protestant Review* as a quarterly. In 1991 I was invited to edit *The Review* and we published our first four issues the following year.

Four periods can be distinguished in the history of this prestigious journal. The first lasted until the end of 1913. In the early years its editor was Béla Kenessey, a professor of theology in Kolozsvár. When he became the director of the theological faculty in Kolozsvár, he was replaced by Farkas Szóts (1851–1918). Born in Maros-Torda county, Szóts studied at the universities of Budapest, Marburg, and Utrecht. In 1879 he was appointed professor of theology in Budapest. Although he published relatively few articles of his own in *The Review*, he was largely responsible for the general character of the journal from the sixth issue of 1895 until the end of 1913.<sup>1</sup>

Szóts was a follower of Liberal theology and decided to make his review cover a wide range of topics. Each issue contained longer essays as well as review articles on intellectual trends in Hungary and in other countries, in addition to shorter reviews. Since the editor's intention was to make the journal the organ of all Hungarian Protestants, particular attention was afforded to American congregations. For example in 1912, Sándor Harsányi, a clergyman in Homestead (Pennsylvania), summarized the principles underlying the presidential election in the U.S., and drew a portrait of Woodrow Wilson.

Although religion was the subject of most of the essays, and the majority of the books reviewed were published in German, several contributors focused

on the philosophy, science, literature, and history of all the important cultures of the Western world. In 1913, for instance, the philosophical journal *A Szellem* (The Spirit), edited by Lajos Fülep, and the first Hungarian translation of Dewey were among the publications analysed.

While during the first decades the main principles of Positivism were respected by most of the contributors, around 1910 a new orientation made its influence felt. Philological articles about the history of Protestantism were replaced by essays on philosophical subjects. In 1911 József Nagy, one of the most important historians of Western philosophy in Hungary, examined the fundamental questions asked by Pascal, and others described the role of Christianity in the works of Madách, Károly Böhm, Lev Tolstoy, and Gerhart Hauptmann.

Undoubtedly, *The Protestant Review* supported the Neoconservatism of István Tisza, who was the Prime Minister of Hungary between 1913 and 1916. In November 1911 Tisza gave a lecture at a meeting of the Association of Social Sciences. The text, entitled *Nation and Society*, was published in *The Protestant Review*.

While the majority of the contributors were members of the Hungarian Reformed Church, they often had no ecclesiastical affiliation. Catholics and Socialists were frequently criticized from the perspective of bourgeois Liberalism, but the legitimacy of science was never questioned. Knowledge and belief were regarded as two autonomous spheres of intellectual life. It should come as no surprise that Calvinist authors preferred to comment on social conflicts, whereas Lutherans were less reluctant to examine ethnic tensions. State and church were viewed as independent institutions. Most of the essayists agreed that the gap was widening between secular and religious life and preferred to see education as independent of the churches.

There was only one Catholic leader who was praised in the pages of the main journal of the Hungarian Protestants. Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927), who became bishop of Székesfehérvár in 1905, was undoubtedly the most controversial figure in the history of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church. Although he was a harsh critic of Marxism, he called for some kind of Christian Socialism. The short article summarizing the lecture he gave at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is marked by an inferiority complex. Drawing on the philosophical works of Nietzsche and Bergson, the author of the article argued, Prohászka set an example for Protestants on how to reinterpret Christianity in the light of contemporary thinking.

Unlike some Hungarian journals of the period, in this first phase of its history *The Protestant Review* never published any anti-Semitic material. In 1913 one of the longest essays contained a historical analysis of anti-Jewish

attitudes. Its author, István Hamar, asked all Protestants to reject anti-Semitism and urged them to enlighten uneducated people who were inclined to make "unfounded and unjust charges" against Jews.<sup>2</sup> The editor's position was unambiguous: he considered anti-Semitism a superstition, and condemned it in any form.

After the resignation of Szóts, László Ravasz became the editor of *The Review*. Like his predecessor, Ravasz was a Transylvanian. Born in 1882, he studied at the universities of Kolozsvár and Berlin. In Kolozsvár he studied under Húgó Meltzl, an outstanding early scholar of Comparative Literature, and the philosopher Károly Böhm (1846–1911). In 1905–1906 he had such illustrious professors as the philosopher Georg Simmel, the classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, and the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. In 1907, after his return to Kolozsvár, he received a doctorate for his book *The Aesthetics of Schopenhauer*. At the age of 25 he became a professor at the theological faculty in Kolozsvár.

Although he never aspired to become a professional philosopher, the impact of Böhm was so strong on him that he never lost his interest in such fields as ethics, aesthetics, and even ontology. Böhm, a Lutheran who had studied in Göttingen, Tübingen, and Berlin, became the most influential Hungarian philosopher at the end of the 19th century. He urged his students to take a serious interest in axiology. Under his influence Ravasz focused on the theory of moral and aesthetic values. Without a doubt, this education prepared Ravasz for the important role he played in the intellectual life of Hungary between the two wars.

I am not in the position to assess the significance of Ravasz in Hungarian culture. Let it suffice to say that no other Hungarian religious leader had a more far-reaching influence on intellectual life in the 20th century. Although since his death in 1975 and especially since the end of Communism several of the works he wrote after World War II have appeared, some texts still remain unpublished.

In his early years Ravasz was a Freemason and sympathized with social Radicalism. When it became clear that the Radicals could not tolerate any kind of Christianity and their intention was not to transform but to demolish the edifice of the Dual Monarchy, he felt compelled to change his orientation. The goal he set himself as editor of *The Review* was to transform Protestantism. Since he lived in Kolozsvár, the editorial office moved to that city, but *The Review* itself was printed in Budapest.

The second stage in the history of the journal started with the introduction Ravasz wrote for the first issue to appear under his editorship. What was the meaning of Protestantism in the past? he asked. In the 16th and 17th centuries

Protestantism stood for a belief in the letter of the Bible, whereas in the 18th and 19th centuries it became synonymous with the legacy of the Enlightenment and the cult of tolerance which characterized Liberalism. Rejecting the tradition of Liberal theology, Ravasz urged his readers to adjust their interpretation of Protestantism. Opposed to both Conservatism and revolutionary utopia, he refused to view Protestantism in ecclesiastical terms and harshly criticized those for whom Protestantism was comparable to a political party. Although he insisted that "in the 20th century Protestantism was the only way of being Christian without any reservation", he criticized any form of fanaticism. "When the representatives of one theological trend regard those of another trend as non-Christian, it is very likely that those who are attacked are still Christian, while those who condemn others in the name of Christ have nothing to do with his teaching."<sup>3</sup>

From January 1914 every issue of *The Protestant Review* had a clearcut structure, which Ravasz described in the following way: "The first item was a meditation on one of the fundamental principles of personal Christianity. This was followed by articles dealing with the widest possible range of subjects. (Before my editorship *The Review* had focused on ecclesiastical history.) In the next section topical issues and recent publications were discussed both in an international and in a national context. 'Signs and Interpretations' was my invention. This part contained short polemical notes. In later years my students, Imre Révész, József Vásárhelyi, and Sándor Makkai became its authors. At the beginning I was responsible for this section."<sup>4</sup>

It was mainly due to the short polemical notes that *The Protestant Review* drew the attention of the general public. In the first year of World War I it contained articles on Fichte, Kierkegaard, and Zsigmond Kemény, the 19th-century novelist and essayist, whose current unpopularity Ravasz interpreted as a sign of the cultural decadence of Hungary. A few months later there was another provocative statement in the same section about anti-Semitism. Three possible definitions of Jewishness were mentioned. The author dismissed racist and religious anti-Semitism but criticized "a spiritual trend, the mixture of hedonism and utilitarianism".<sup>5</sup> Since there is every reason to believe that these words were written by the editor, this short article may have been the first sign of what some commentators later called the anti-Semitism of Ravasz. This is not the appropriate place to discuss this thorny issue. Let it suffice to say that under his editorship the attitude of *The Protestant Review* towards Jews had changed.

Ravasz was on friendly terms with Prohászka and came to redefine the concept of predestination in harmony with the theology of Karl Barth. He dismissed fatalism as a simplified and even distorted form of Calvinism, and

insisted on the significance of a belief in a merciful God. This starting-point had far-reaching consequences. Even a superficial reading of the first issues edited by Ravasz indicates that his editorial policy was meant to combine a scholarly interest in ecclesiastical history with a critical analysis of contemporary intellectual life. One of his students, Imre Révész (1889–1967) started publishing a long series of studies on the history of Christianity which later made him the most important Hungarian specialist of this field in the 20th century. Sándor Makkai (1890–1951), another student of Ravasz, focused on a synchronic analysis of religion, drawing on German hermeneutics, American pragmatism, as well as French and Hungarian sociology. Both contributors helped the editor transform *The Review* into one of the most exciting journals in the country.

During the war years several Hungarian periodicals competed with each other. *The Protestant Review* proved to be well-informed about contemporary trends in Western and Hungarian culture. Such controversial works as *L'Action Française et la Religion Catholique* (1913) by Charles Maurras and *A száműzött Rákóczi* (Rákóczi in Exile, 1913) by Gyula Szekfű were analysed in long review articles by Révész, and Ravasz himself took issue with the interpretation of Protestantism made by the most famous poet of the new generation, Endre Ady.

The Commune and the Peace Treaty of Trianon shocked Ravasz. Béla Kun's totalitarian régime was openly anti-religious, so *The Protestant Review* was not published in the first half of 1919. The ten issues appeared in one volume at the end of that year. Since Ravasz was cut off from the Hungarian capital, Géza Lencz was responsible for the editorial work. The next year Gyula Madai, a secondary-school teacher was appointed editor, but he could not save *The Review*, which was discontinued at the end of 1920.

In 1921 Ravasz became the bishop of the Danube region of the Reformed Church. Having settled in Budapest, he set himself the task of reorganizing the activities of Hungarian Protestants. In 1924 *The Protestant Review* was renewed under his editorship. Because of his many ecclesiastical obligations, the Literary Association of Hungarian Protestants decided to appoint a Managing Editor. Ferenc Zsinka, a librarian, was nominated at the beginning of April. He took full responsibility for the administrative work and continued to help Ravasz until his death in 1930. His successor was Lajos Áprily (1887–1967), a well-known Transylvanian poet, who decided to leave Romania in 1929.

In the 1920s Hungarian cultural life was dominated by two journals. *Nyugat*, founded in 1908, continued to represent the values of the bourgeois Liberals who had been forced to be on the defensive since they were blamed

for their failure to resist the Communist dictatorship of 1919. In 1923 *Napkelet* was started with the idea of supporting the Neoconservative régime of István Bethlen and the policy of his Minister of Culture, Kúnó Klebelsberg. Since most of the contributors of *The Protestant Review* sympathized with the ideology of *Napkelet*, they felt a compulsion to devote serious attention to the activity of the Liberals.

Great emphasis was put on the analysis of the international scene. In 1924 Imre Révész gave a critical analysis of works about religious minorities. Two years later a book on the Soviet Union by a Scottish professor was reviewed. The article confirms the view that the attitude of *The Review* towards the Jews had changed partly because of the prominent role some Jews played in the Bolshevik Party and the Hungarian Communist movement. In 1930 Ravasz published a long essay on the Hungarian Reformed Church in North America. Important translations of outstanding Christian texts were given a close reading. Sándor Karácsony (1891–1952), a man of letters who was familiar with the most advanced trends in linguistics and semiotics, put forward ideas on educational reform. Among the new contributors were members of the new generation. Tibor Joó (1901–1945), a prominent representative of the *Geistesgeschichte* school, started a long series of penetrating investigations of the main ideas of Liberalism and nationalism; the literary historian Dezső Kerecsényi (1898–1945) set himself the task of reinterpreting the Hungarian literature of the 16th and 17th centuries; and László Németh (1901–1975), one of the most influential Hungarian writers of the 20th century, sought to revise the national canon. Zsigmond Ritoók (1870–1938), a medical expert and Kálmán d'Isoz (1878–1956), the Director of the Music Department of the National Museum, extended the range of topics discussed. Theatrical performances, musical events, and exhibitions were analysed by professional critics. In February 1938, for instance, concerts given by such artists as the American black singer Marian Anderson, the Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia, and the great German conductor Wilhelm Furtwaengler were reviewed.

In the interwar period the reputation of *The Protestant Review* was so high that Roman Catholics were pleased to publish in it. In 1938 a book on the great 19th-century poet János Arany by Dezső Keresztury, a prominent Catholic Liberal essayist, was given a scholarly critical assessment by János Barta, the leading Catholic literary historian of the new generation.

The change between the second and third stages in the history of *The Protestant Review* was less decisive than the one between the first two phases. In March 1938 Ravasz was replaced by Sándor Makkai and Áprily by Dezső Kerecsényi. Born at Szentgotthárd, Kerecsényi came from the small Lutheran community of southern Transdanubia. The years he spent as a student at the

Eötvös College brought him into contact with Liberal intellectuals. As Managing Editor he modified the orientation of *The Protestant Review* in the sense that he asked authors of different political convictions to contribute, focused on the history of Hungarian culture and contemporary literature rather than on ecclesiastical issues, and made *The Review* one of the chief organs of Geistesgeschichte essay writing. Two eminent historians, Elemér Mályusz and László Makkai, the son of Sándor Makkai, discussed the role of Joseph II in the history of Protestantism, and Tibor Joó reviewed the important collection of essays *What Is Hungarian?* (1939), edited by Gyula Szekfű, which had both Ravasz and Kerecsényi among its contributors. Gábor Halász, who was later to perish in the holocaust, was given a chance to comment on any important publication, irrespective of religious affiliation. He published an essay on Kölcsey, a Protestant, and praised a monograph on Péter Pázmány, the leader of the Hungarian Counter-Reformation, written by Sándor Sík, a well-known Catholic.

In 1940 the Northern half of Transylvania was returned to Hungary. Understandably, several articles were devoted to the past and present of the region. László Makkai examined the urban culture of Transylvanian Hungarians, while his father made an inquiry into the historical reasons for the loss of Transylvania after World War I. Different conceptions of Central Europe were discussed. Panslavism was investigated by Tibor Joó, and the life of the Hungarians living beyond the Carpathians by László Mikecs, an expert on the subject. From Nazism to Masaryk's bourgeois democracy the political movements of other countries were analysed.

Although Ravasz and Révész continued to appear in *The Review*, and Makkai wrote longer essays on such important subjects as the interpretation of the story of Cain, the significance of Calvin's theology for the 20th century, or the meaning of the tragic suicide of István Széchenyi in 1860, members of the young generation represented the majority of both the authors discussed and the contributors. The first books of Sándor Joó, László Vatai, and László Mátrai were reviewed. It is instructive to remember the later careers of these three talented intellectuals. Joó would become one of the most influential pastors to be persecuted by the Communists, Vatai was forced to leave Hungary altogether, whereas Mátrai went on to become an official philosopher of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. One or two minor figures seemed to flirt with nationalism, but the intellectual integrity of the journal was preserved by the editors and by most of the authors. In the early 1940s, when most Hungarian periodicals sided either with the bourgeois Liberals or with the Populists, *The Protestant Review* tried to keep a balance, occupy an intermediate position, and keep a distance from the ideological tension caused

by World War II. The various articles on the posthumous works of Babits and on the essays and dramas of László Németh had one common denominator: they criticized Hungarian intellectuals for their resistance to serious meditation on the possible role Hungarians could play in Europe. In December 1940 the works of the Populist poet Gyula Illyés were highly praised side by side with *The Breviary of St. Orpheus*, a work in progress by Miklós Szentkuthy, one of the most emphatically urban writers. The first issue of 1941 contained a favourable review of a book by József Darvas, a Populist who was member of the illegal Communist Party, and an appreciative essay on Sándor Márai by László Bóka. Both Márai and Bóka were among the harshest critics of Nazi Germany and the strongest opponents to the Populist movement. The next issue devoted much space to a summary of the posthumous works of Dezső Kosztolányi, one of the major figures of the first Nyugat generation, but it also gave a favourable interpretation of the overtly political message of *Mit ér az ember, ha magyar?* (What is a man's life worth if he is Hungarian?) by Péter Veres, one of the leading Populists. In contrast to other Hungarian journals, which were affected by the growing German influence, *The Protestant Review* insisted on the importance of French culture and the works of writers who were opposed to the political right (Márai, Illyés, the historian Szekfű, the translator Marcell Benedek, the Catholic poet Sándor Sík, the Socialist writer Kassák, the Anglophile essayist László Cs. Szabó, the pro-Communist sociologist Ferenc Erdei) and/or were of Jewish origin (Antal Szerb, György Rónay, György Sárközi, Jenő Mohácsi, Imre Waldapfel).

Was *The Review* affected by the German occupation? At the beginning continuity seemed to be almost unbroken. In May Gábor Gönczy spoke about intellectual decline and praised Kassák for his moral and artistic integrity. In June Endre Vajda made a comparative analysis of three verse collections, calling Sándor Weöres a great, Zoltán Jékely a fine, and Géza Képes a craftsmanlike poet. The influence of the growing political pressure was felt in the quantity rather than in the quality of the articles published. The January issue had 32, whereas the August issue had only 16 pages. In the latter Kerecsényi published a short article. Its title – *Why are Hungarian writers silent?* – had obvious political implications. The Managing Editor has to be given credit for the honesty of his conclusion. If a writer has a moral standard, Kerecsényi argued, he cannot be forced to make any statement that is in conflict with his beliefs.

Although the names of Makkai, Kerecsényi, and Révész appeared on the title page until the last issue came out, they all stopped contributing after August. The November issue contained only one longer essay. Early in 1945 Kerecsényi died. As far as I know, he was shot in southwestern Transdanubia.



For almost a half century *The Protestant Review* seemed to be dead. The reasons for this are too complex to discuss here. Ravasz was forced to retire from public life, whereas others made compromises with the Communists. In some cases the compromise was justifiable, in others it helped to undermine the traditional churches of Hungary. Since 1945 the world has seen radical changes. Our first priority must be to find a place for *The Protestant Review* in a largely secularized age. It is by no means easy to know what sort of audience such a journal may have at the end of the 20th century. There are some who ask for a highly intellectual publication that would make religion meaningful for a sophisticated public. Others insist on the mission such a journal can have for the Hungarian minorities of the neighbouring countries.

The present editor has no ecclesiastical function. Not only the Reformed Church and Lutherans, but also Unitarians and Adventists are represented in the Editorial Board. One of our goals is to make important theological texts available in Hungarian translation. I cannot see any reason for fundamental disagreement with Catholicism and Orthodoxy. No Hungarian Protestant can live without the tradition represented by Pázmány, Széchenyi, Babits, and Pilinszky. Our attention cannot be limited to Christianity; we intend to pay attention to other religions. The legacy of *The Protestant Review* is so distinguished that it will not be easy to achieve our goals. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *East Coker*, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

### Notes

1. László Tőkéczy claims that the first period in the history of *The Protestant Review* lasted until 1919. See his article "Az első Protestáns Szemle (1889–1919)" *Protestáns Szemle* 54 (1992): 12–18.
2. István Hamar, "A rituális vérvád kérdéséhez" *Protestáns Szemle* 25 (1913): 610.
3. Ravasz László, "Beköszöntő" *Protestáns Szemle* 26 (1914): 5–6.
4. László Ravasz, *Emlékezéseim* (Budapest: A Református Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya, 1992), 116–117.
5. "Mikor a zsidó antiszemita" *Protestáns Szemle* 26 (1914): 386.