

Article

Patriotism as a Political Religion: Its History, Its Ambiguities, and the Case of Hungary

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Abstract: The article discusses patriotism as a “political religion”, an ambiguous phenomenon that is both a substitute for former religious traditions and something that remains profoundly analogous with them. Special emphasis is laid on the origins of such political religions in the modern era and the role of the state in their emergence, which somewhat relativizes Böckenförde’s famous thesis on the rise of the state as a “process of secularization”. The article also follows the spread of religious patriotism in nineteenth-century Europe and how it contributed to the project of nation-building in different environments. This larger context helps to better explain such cases as that of Hungary, which has produced a variety of patriotic narratives, symbols, and rituals from its beginnings to the present day, raising doubts about the overarching validity of the secularization thesis. Methodologically, this approach involves the analysis of historical and contemporary texts, visual representations, and liturgical practices, while the conclusion suggests that, although the concept of “political religion” remains controversial, the enduring force of patriotism is better explained by the interaction of politics and religion than by a purely secular outlook.

Keywords: political religion; secularization; patriotism; nation-building; Hungarian politics



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1. Introduction

This article analyses patriotism as an example of a political religion. Although the concept of political religion and its heuristic value has remained the subject of debate (Maier 2004; Gentile 2005; Roberts 2009; Barry 2015; Nyirkos 2021), the enduring force of patriotism in contemporary politics suggests that it is not just a “special affection for” or a “sense of personal identification with” one’s country (Nathanson 1993) but an ideology whose claims to loyalty and sacrifice show a profound similarity to religious devotion (Backhouse 2020). In what follows, I use the term “political religion” to mean a political ideology that implies belief in an absolute, the acceptance of a set of indisputable dogmas, expressed by sacred symbols and professed by the community of faithful. In this sense, political religion is largely similar to what others have called a “civil religion” (Bellah 1967) or “secular religion” (Ford 1935; Aron 1944), emphasizing the incomplete nature of the analogy and maintaining that the inner-worldly absolute of such belief systems is essentially different from the transcendent absolute of so-called “genuine” religions.

The concept of religion, however, is just as debated as that of its political analogies (Asad 1993; Smith 1998; Fitzgerald 2000; Cavanaugh 2009; Webb 2009; Nongbri 2013), so any strict separation of political religions from religions “strictly speaking” continues to be problematic. The aim of the present study is not to eliminate such conceptual difficulties but to highlight their relevance for a more profound understanding of the complex relationship between the political and the religious. The case of Hungary is especially revealing in this context, for it presents a unique and nowadays highly controversial approach to patriotism as a religion. The exact nature of this religion remains ambiguous: it sometimes appears as explicitly Christian, while at other times it insists on being at least partially secular and thus distances itself from any specific “articles of faith” that seek to reconstruct Christianity

as a cultural concept, a historical source of patriotism, or simply as a traditional—national—“life form”.

It is also important to point out that the concept of patriotism stands very close to that of nationalism. Some authors do not differentiate between patriotism and nationalism at all; some attempt to delineate patriotism from nationalism; while others acknowledge the possibility of difference but conclude that “in the end patriotism is not sufficiently distinct from nationalism to offer it a viable alternative” (Backhouse 2020, p. 858). The reason that the present study prefers the term “patriotism” is that the origins of political religions have more to do with the concept of *patria* (Fatherland) than with the 18th and 19th century notions of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), or rather, as a community still to be imagined and construed. Love of the Fatherland was not only previous but also instrumental to the creation of the nation and its corresponding ideology of nationalism. In what follows, the two terms will sometimes be used interchangeably, but only when speaking of periods after the French Revolution, when the worship of *Patrie*, *Nation*, and *Peuple* in one overarching notion of political religion was first amalgamated (especially between 1790 and 1794).

Since this notion is significantly different from what *religio politica* originally meant, I will first discuss the early modern development of the term, before turning to its first critical use as something “secular” but at the same time “covertly religious” during the French Revolution (which was, however, a somewhat belated criticism, for by 1790 the revolution had already started to create its new—explicitly religious—cult of the Fatherland, which would later inspire other countries and nations to do the same). After a brief overview of how religious patriotism spread throughout Europe in the 19th century, the last section will discuss how the Hungarian imagination was affected by similar ideas and why these remain ineluctable when someone tries to understand not only Hungarian but also European politics in the 21st century. The conclusion will then return to the theoretical problems of secularization, the role of the state as a both religious and secular actor, and the ongoing relevance of patriotism in contemporary politics as a driving force behind the nation-state’s aspirations to hegemony.

2. Political Religion: The Origins

The term “political religion” (*religio politica*) was first used in the 17th century by authors such as George Thomson, Tommaso Campanella, or Daniel Clasen (Seitschek 2007). Although it had ambiguous connotations from the beginning (a religion used, abused, or even distorted to serve primarily political purposes), it nevertheless expressed an explicit attachment to certain religious views, practices, and institutions: including belief in God, the exercise of public rituals, and the establishment of a state church with its own official priesthood.

In this way, political religion was akin to what the ancient *theologia tripartita* had called “civil” or “political theology” in distinction from philosophical and mythical theologies. As the Roman author Marcus Terentius Varro argued in his now lost *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* (cited by Saint Augustine’s *De civitate dei* VI,5) civil or political theology was what “the people”, meaning the community of the city, adopted as an official cult. It nevertheless remained a *theo-logia* (literally, “speech about god”) and not something that substituted theology with what we today would call a “secular” ideology. Although Christianity broke with the ancient tradition of politico-religious unity when it separated temporal and spiritual powers (“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s”, as the Gospel says, Matthew 22:21), this separation never meant that temporal powers no longer sought religious legitimation. Emperors have been treated as God’s surrogates on earth since the 9th century (Coleman 2000, p. 19), kings have applied the divine attribute of “sovereignty” to themselves since the 13th (Quaritsch 1986, pp. 14–15), and already during the Middle Ages the laws, the body politic, or the *patria* were treated as sacred entities (Kantorowicz 1957, pp. 121, 219, 232; respectively). It was only in the early modern age—and especially after the Reformation—that the political use of religion began to be viewed with suspicion by those who thought that religion should be

a matter of the heart, an inner devotion; while those reliant on the classic Greco-Roman heritage saw it as the highest form of religion which elevated the individual to the level of communal existence (Mulsow 2003; Voigt 2009).

The enduring effort of political powers to share, or later to appropriate, the sacred aura that formerly belonged to the Christian church nevertheless raises doubts about the validity of Böckenförde's thesis of the rise of the modern state "as a process of secularization:"

"The emergence of the state (...) has to do with the detachment of the political order as such from its spiritual and religious origin and evolution; with its 'becoming secular' in the sense of exiting a world in which religion and politics formed a unity to find a purpose and identity of its own, conceived in secular (political) terms; and, finally, with the separation of the political order from the Christian religion and from any specific religion as its foundation and heaven". (Böckenförde [1967] 2020, p. 153)

What in fact happened, and this is what the concept of "political religion" with all its ambiguities expresses, was that the new nation-states did not represent a break with religion, only a transformation thereof, a "migration of the holy" from the church to the state (Bossy 1987; Cavanaugh 2011). Moreover, well into the 18th century, the political religion of the state retained its overtly religious character.

3. The French Revolution

In contrast, when the term "political religion" was revived during the French Revolution, its initial purpose was to unmask certain doctrines and practices that were professedly secular yet showed a deplorable similarity to traditional religious dogmas and rituals, most likely those of Christianity. The first author to raise such criticism was the philosopher Condorcet, who wrote five *Mémoires* about the state's reform plans of public education. The text in which he used the term was the first *Mémoire*, which posed the question of whether the obligatory teaching of the Constitution would not itself become a sort of dogmatic indoctrination:

"It has been said that the teaching of the constitution of each country should be part of national education. This is true, no doubt, if we speak of it as a fact; if we content ourselves with explaining it; if, in teaching it, we confine ourselves to saying: Such is the constitution established in the State to which all citizens must submit. But if we say that it must be taught as a doctrine in line with the principles of universal reason or arouse in its favor a blind enthusiasm which renders citizens incapable of judging it; if we say to them: This is what you must worship and believe; then it is a kind of political religion that we want to create. It is a chain that we prepare for the spirits, and we violate freedom in its most sacred rights, under the pretext of learning to cherish it". (Condorcet 1989, p. 68)

Although Condorcet's aim was to uncover the hidden religious leanings of a government that officially declared the separation of church and state, it is doubtful whether anything was truly hidden. *The Festival of the Constitution (Fête de la Constitution)* was made into a religious celebration in 1791 (Ozouf 1988, p. 61), but other, "patriotic", feasts had already begun with the creation of the *Festival of the Federation (Fête de la Fédération)* in 1790. Altars of the Fatherland were erected, and religious oaths were taken "to the Nation, to the Law, to the King", at a time when a culturally or linguistically unified nation hardly existed (Bell 2003, p. 15), the constitution was still not ratified, and the king was already becoming a symbol of national unity, rather than the actual head of government. Later developments (the creation of the Panthéon as a "temple of the nation" or the adoption of the *Marseillaise* as a national anthem with lines such as "the sacred love of the fatherland") also reinforced this spirit: the worship of the homeland and the nascent nation as the centre of a new religion. This also had a military significance, as the topographical disposition of the Festival of the Federation had already shown:

“Around the altar of the fatherland was a circle of soldiers, around it a circle of notables. Around it were the people: they attended as the oath was taken by the first two groups and sometimes were bold enough to demand that they themselves should take an oath. Nevertheless, they had to demand it”. (Ozouf 1988, p. 60)

At the beginning of the revolutionary war in 1792, its supporters and opponents used the same religious language: Brissot, for example, spoke enthusiastically of a “crusade of millions” (Beik 1970, p. 203) while Robespierre mocked the fanaticism of “armed missionaries” (Mason and Rizzo 1999, p. 161). There was, at the same time, a consensus that France, as a sort of “chosen nation”, did have a mission to liberate the nations of Europe, it was only the exact form of this mission that was—at least initially—disputed.

Even enemies of the Revolution such as Joseph de Maistre acknowledged that the successful amalgamation of patriotic zeal and religious spirit established the military triumphs of French armies:

“All we can do is fight for the government, whatever it may be; for in this way France, despite her internal discord, will preserve her military strength and her influence abroad. Taking things at their best, it is not for the government that we are fighting, but for France (. . .) The revolutionary government hardened the soul of France by tempering it in blood; the spirit of the soldiers was exasperated, and their strength was doubled by ferocious despair and contempt for life induced by rage”. (Maistre [1797] 1994, pp. 15–16)

Robespierre may have been an “infernal genius”, as Maistre called him, but “infernal” is as just as religious a concept as any. It is therefore no wonder that such a negative but still transcendent force was the guarantee of France’s success: “Even now it is still Robespierre who is winning the battles”, as he had to acknowledge (Maistre [1797] 1994, p. 60). The rhetorical force of words such as *patrie* and *nation* was so overwhelming that, ironically, the *émigrés* themselves (who were called as such in distinction from “patriots”) pedantically imitated some features of the patriotic cult. Louis de Bonald’s *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux*, for instance, envisioned a “Temple of France” just like the Panthéon, with statues of great soldiers, scholars, magistrates, writers, and politicians under its arcades: “This temple would be the object of the vows and the tributes of the nation; all French would rush here from the extremities of the kingdom to adore the God of France” (Bonald [1796] 1843, p. 356). That even a Catholic author used such a suspiciously heretical phrase as the “God of France” shows that by this time the political religion of homeland and nation had become the order of the day, and this is what the history of 19th century Europe also seems to confirm.

4. Europe in the 19th Century

In Poland, the “Christ of Nations” or “Christ of Europe” idea, popularized by Adam Mickiewicz’s (2016) dramatic poem *Dziady* (Forefather’s Eve [1832] 2016) identified the vicissitudes of Polish history with the redemptive sufferings of Jesus Christ on the cross. The immediate context was the 1830 November Uprising against Russia, which was crushed the following year, and henceforth Poland became an integral part of the Russian Empire, losing its former—however limited—autonomy. In Part Three, Scene Five of *Dziady*, a monk called Piotr has a vision that compares Poland’s oppression by Russia to the Massacre of the Innocent by King Herod as described in the Gospel of Matthew: “A tyrant rises—Herod!—Lord, all young Poland is given over into Herod’s hand”. Just as the infant Christ escaped the persecution, however, one child is prophesized to be saved to become a saviour himself: “And can it be that Thou hast sealed their fate? But look!—one child’s escaped—and he shall bring salvation to his nation suffering!” Later on, an even more overarching analogy is developed with the biblical story, comparing Europe to the people who cry “Give us Barabbas”, France to Pilate who “finds no sin in him, and yet washes his hands”, and the Russian emperor to Caesar (“Crucify him, or thou prove thyself Tsar’s enemy!”). Poland is then nailed to the cross, along with other nations like the Two Thieves in the Gospel, while Austria and Prussia offer vinegar and gall to the dying Christ-Poland. Who—or

which—will eventually rise from the dead and become a saviour of all humanity: “Upward and upward! To Heaven he flies and from his feet his snowy shroud drops down, spread out far and wide over the earth to wrap it round about”.

This peculiar combination of particularism and universalism (with all its problematic, not to say idolatrous, inclinations toward a religious worship of the nation and the fatherland) became widespread all through Europe, especially after Mickiewicz took refuge in France in 1832. While France, as we have seen, needed no special lecturing about national and patriotic religion, the Polish example gave further impetus to an already existing tradition. This was the time when not only Georges Sand praised Mickiewicz on a par with Goethe and Byron (Sand 1839), but Catholic writers such as Pierre-Simon Ballanche, Charles de Montalembert, or Félicité de Lamennais also fully embraced the Polish cause, translated Polish works (McCalla 1998, p. 351), or went as far—at least in the case of Lamennais’ *Paroles d’un croyant*—as to identify the People with Jesus Christ: “His heart was beating in the heart of the people, and the heart of the people was beating in his heart” (Lamennais 1836–1837, p. 102).

This new combination of religious nationalism and patriotism with a likewise religious idea of republicanism and democracy became even more prevalent in Italy during the unification process of the Risorgimento. The very word “risorgere” (revive, rebirth, or rise again) could be understood as a religious reference to Jesus Christ who also rose from the dead (“risorto dai morti”). This is not only a superficial analogy, in 1849, Giuseppe Mazzini explicitly wrote of a republican “faith”, the people as a “religious” idea, and the “sacred” word of the future (Mazzini 2009, p. 124). To which he also added the militant features of the patriotic faith that could “organize democracy into an army” (ibid. p. 125).

This religious zeal was sometimes in agreement with Catholic doctrine, sometimes in open hostility with the latter, which, however, did not prevent Mazzini to call for the Pope to be the head of the national movement for a united Italy. In an open letter to Pius IX, he declared: “I adore God, and for me an idea that is equal to God: an Italy that is one, a cornerstone of moral unity, and of the progressive civilization of the European nations (. . .) I believe deeply in religious principle, and in a divine order which we ought to seek to bring on earth” (Chadwick 1998, p. 71). To which he nevertheless added that the “old hierarchy” or even Christian “faith” itself was now dead, Catholicism was “lost in despotism”, while Protestantism was “lost in anarchy”. The only role of the Pope was therefore to give his blessing to the new ideology of patriotism, effectively turning it into a religion:

“Humanity cannot live without heaven. You can guide them to truth out of materialism. To do this, you must unite Italy and abhor being a king or politician. To unite Italy you have no need to do, only to bless. Let the pen go free. Throw the Austrians out of Italy (. . .) Bless the national flag—and leave the rest to us” (p. 72).

The most intriguing fact is that the Pope himself did not immediately reject such hopes and aspirations that would have made him the sovereign symbol or even the “saviour” of Italy; it was only in the face of an upcoming war that he refrained from joining forces with the patriotic movement:

“When there was revolution over Europe, I sent troops to guard the frontiers. But when some demanded that these troops join with other states to war against Austria, I must say solemnly, that I abhor the idea. I am the Vicar of Christ, the author of peace and lover of charity, and my office is to bestow an equal affection on all nations. I repudiate all the newspaper articles that want the pope to be president of a new republic of all the Italians” (p. 77).

It was after this proclamation that the Risorgimento took an anti-papal (but still not fully anti-Catholic, and certainly not anti-religious) turn. In Italy, the Savoyard Kingdom's *Festa dello Statuto* (the Festival of the Constitution) would be celebrated in cooperation with ecclesiastical authorities from 1851 to 1861, and it was only the 1861 law on the *Festa Nazionale* that eliminated this obligation and switched to a purely "civil" character of the ceremony, asserting the separation of state and church (Severino 2021, p. 27). The very word "ceremony" indicates, however, that the feast had its own liturgy, and similar liturgies were held for the commemoration of those who died for the "immortal fatherland" (*patria immortale*, another explicitly religious reference). The "roll call" of fallen soldiers is but one example of the new political religion of the nation-state (Severino 2017), and many other symbolic manifestations would appear in later decades, the Victor Emmanuel II National Monument, which was also called the "Altar of the Fatherland" (*Altare della Patria*) just like its French counterpart in 1790, until Mussolini could confidently declare in the early 20th century that despite all its allegedly secular features, fascism treated "Italy as a religion" (Rohe 1922).

Similar examples from Germany (Pohlsander 2008) and other nations that still strived to create their own nation-states in the 19th century (for Greece, see Grigoriadis 2013; for Balcan states such as Romania, see Schifirneț 2013; Kitromilides 2019; Roudometof 2019) also confirm that the political religion of patriotism remained truly transcendent in the sense that its object of worship was more an eschatological idea than a present reality. It had its own vision of a "chosen nation" with all its belligerent features and developed a patriotic symbolism that never fully detached itself from the religious tradition in which it was embedded, be it Catholic, pagan, or Orthodox. It therefore remains dubious whether any such political religion has ever been a "surrogate" or "quasi" religion, let alone a "secular" one, which is itself an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms: something that is religious and non-religious at the same time (Nyirkos 2021, p. 153).

5. Patriotic Religion in Hungary

5.1. The Classics

The case of Hungary fits well into the theoretical and historical patterns outlined so far. Although the country itself had existed since the Middle Ages, by the 17th century it became a *de facto* part of the Habsburg Monarchy, losing its former sovereignty; moreover, it became increasingly multiethnic and multicultural, especially after mass immigration (mainly by Germans, Slovaks, and Romanians) replaced the population lost under 150 years of Ottoman rule. A "Hungarian state" or a "Hungarian nation" was therefore yet to be revived by those who saw Hungary as an ancient historical entity, the origins of which could be traced back to times before medieval Christianity. That such ambitions were overtly religious (even if in the "pagan" sense of the word) is not surprising; what is more intriguing is that it was a Catholic monk, the Piarist András Dugonics, who first fabricated a myth about the original religion of the Hungarian tribes and the "God of Hungarians" in his epic tale *Etelka* in 1788 and its sequels. The term appears many times in these works and is both a manifestation of exclusivity ("to distinguish our powerful Lord from the others, its holy name shall forever be the God of Hungarians", Dugonics [1788] 1791, p. 66) and a confession of sins ("I will show them the reasons why the God of Hungarians punished those who deserved these many years of chastisement", Dugonics [1794] 1904).

While the "God of Hungarians" would become an everyday reference in later patriotic literature (see Gergely Czuczor's *Alarm* and Sándor Petőfi's *National Song* in 1848, both of which would use the phrase in the context of a liberation war), the idea of Hungary as a promised land and Hungarians as a chosen nation also appeared in Ferenc Kölcsey's *Hymnus*, the later national anthem of the country: "God bless the Hungarian/With good cheer and prosperity/Extend your arm to protect him/When fighting with his enemy/Those torn by ill fate for long/Let them enjoy a merry year/This people has been punished already/For the past and for the future" (Kölcsey 1823). God's special providence was also manifest by giving Hungarians a "beautiful homeland" under the "holy peaks" of

the Carpathians, and by supporting them in wars against the Ottoman and the Austrian Empires: “Our flag you often planted/On the ramparts of the wild Turk/And [King] Mathias’ Black Army was suffered/By the proud fort of Vienna”.

This idea of a two-front holy war against both “East” and “West” also belonged to a well-established Protestant tradition: one that viewed Hungary as being stuck between “two pagans”, Islam and Catholicism (as expressed by popular songs since at least the 18th century, see e.g., [Krizsa 2021](#)). Kölcsey himself was a Calvinist, educated at the Reformed College of Debrecen; Petőfi—who is still considered as “the” national poet of Hungary—was a Lutheran, just like Lajos Kossuth, the political leader of the 1848–1849 uprising against Austria. It is also remarkable how the language of the war of independence retained a religious overtone when calling Kossuth “the Moses of Magyars” even in official documents ([Hermann 2006](#)), or when the Hungarian generals executed after the defeat were called “martyrs” (or literally, “witnesses of blood”) much in the same way as Christians who died for their faith.

At the same time, the cult of martyrs appropriated a number of symbolic elements from Catholicism (which may be explained by Protestantism’s relative scarcity of visual representations). Their bones and parts of their gallows were placed in reliquaries like the body parts of Christian saints or pieces of the Holy Cross in the Middle Ages (Figure 1).



Figure 1. From the Déri Museum, Debrecen. The text explicitly mentions the “relics” of the martyrs: generals Lajos Aulich, János Damjanich, and Károly Vécsey.

The personal objects of Sándor Petőfi (who also died during the war of independence) and his relatives—like the wedding ring of his wife—were also collected by patriots and put on public display in monstrance-like vessels (Figure 2).



Figure 2. From the Petőfi Museum of Literature, Budapest. The text says “The personal objects of Petőfi and his relatives were venerated in a similar manner as the relics of medieval saints; some of them placed in ciboria or in ornate reliquaries for public display. At the end of the 19th century, a nationwide movement was organized to collect such items by the Petőfi Society”.

5.2. The Short 20th Century

The image of Hungary as a holy land or as a martyr nation also gained a new impetus after the First World War, when two-thirds of Hungary’s former territory and half of its population was lost to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (the later Yugoslavia). Although replacing the universality of Christ’s redemptive action with that of the nation or the nation-state should once again seem problematic from a Christian point of view, it remains true that, in Hungary, the new (political) and the traditional (Christian) aspects of the patriotic religion continued to be intertwined.

A new patriotic Creed (*Hiszekegy*) was created and taught in schools: “I believe in one God, I believe in one homeland/I believe in one eternal divine truth/I believe in the resurrection of Hungary”. The same creed was supplemented later by fifteen additional verses such as “This is my religion, this is my life/I take the cross on my shoulders/And have myself crucified on it”. Belligerent lines also appeared: “This faith is weapon, power, and life/With it you’ll crush all your enemies/With it you’ll redeem all your sufferings” (Vonyó 2002). Postcards and placards were issued depicting Hungary nailed on a cross, although—unlike Poland—not as a Christ of Nations, but as a symbolic female figure that was just as ecumenical as any politico-religious symbol should be: it could be understood either as a general reference to the “Motherland” or as a more specific one to the Virgin Mary, the patroness of Hungary, a country that had traditionally been called the “Land of Mary” since at least the 17th century (Knapp and Tüskés 2002). The cross was also

transformed into a T-shaped one, referring to the Treaty of Trianon that ended the First World War for Hungary (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A postcard quoting the Hungarian Creed: “I have myself crucified on it”. The female figure on the cross wears the “Holy Crown”, a symbol of Hungarian statehood since the Middle Ages, while the T-shaped cross refers to the Treaty of Trianon. From the Trianon exhibition of the Calvinist Church in Pócsmegyer, 2020.

When, as a result of the First and Second Vienna Awards in 1938 and 1940, former Hungarian territories were regained from Czechoslovakia and Romania, new churches were built to celebrate these events, such as the “Church of New Hungarian Dawn” in Szeged or the “Church of Homecoming” in Budapest. It was only after the Second World War that such symbolism and rhetoric became unacceptable or outright forbidden during the Communist era, only to reappear—but still in a rudimentary form and certainly not as an official political religion—after the regime change in 1989–90.

5.3. Contemporary Politics

An explicit return to the religious language of patriotism only emerged in the 2010s, when a new constitution (“The Fundamental Law of Hungary”) was promulgated on Easter Monday, 2011. The creation of the new constitution was made possible by the fact that the Fidesz party had won a two-third majority in parliament, enabling it to override former

constraints on simple-majority or one-party legislation. This new Fundamental Law—which was thus accepted without a national referendum or a consultation with opposition parties—quoted Kölcsey’s *Himnusz* (“God bless the Hungarian”) as its motto and began with a *Nemzeti Hitvallás*, officially translated as “National Avowal”, while the Hungarian expression literally meant a “National Confession of Faith”. The national approach to politics was also emphasized by prime minister Viktor Orbán’s highly controversial speech on “illiberal democracy” in 2014, but this, too, was soon transformed into “Christian democracy” in 2018; indicating that the two terms were basically identical. As the 2014 text—a speech delivered at the Bálványos Summer Free University and Summer Camp, organized for ethnic Hungarians in Romania—put it:

“The new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but instead includes a different, special, national approach”. (Orbán 2014)

It is also important to note that the speech mentioned an “illiberal state”, putting an unmistakable emphasis on the nation-state as the organizer, or even creator of national unity (“the Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organized, reinforced and in fact constructed”). This strictly secular argument took a more religious turn in the speech at the same location in 2018:

“Let us confidently declare that Christian democracy is not liberal. Liberal democracy is liberal, while Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal. And we can specifically say this in connection with a few important issues—say, three great issues. Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept”. (Orbán 2018a).

For our present purpose, the main point of interest is the rejection of multiculturalism and immigration, which seems most obviously to involve a defense of national unity. Alternatively, as the prime minister more explicitly put it in a radio interview in 2018, Christian democracy meant the protection of the nation and the homeland against all outside forces: “global ideologies are rejected; because we believe in the importance of the nation, and in Hungary we do not want to yield to any supranational business or a political empire” (Orbán 2018b). Linking nationalism and patriotism to Christianity (despite all the theoretical problems that Christian universalism poses for such a move) still seemed to constitute a political religion in the traditional sense of the word: an explicitly religious ideology with a political purpose. Another passage in the 2018 speech, however, repeated no less than three times that the duty of governments—even Christian democratic ones—was not to defend “religious articles of faith” (Orbán 2018a). In other words, Christian democracy was not a religious, but a secular ideology, a translation of religious concepts into the political realm, which is how political religion had usually been understood since Condorcet.

Some ambiguities of this approach, however, came into focus again in 2020, the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, which meant the greatest loss of territory and population for the Hungarian state in history. In his commemoration speech on June 6th, Viktor Orbán outlined a complex eschatological vision that combined Christian symbolism (“we walk the Way of the Cross again”) with a salvation history of Hungary and the Hungarians (literally from “the beginning of time”) to the present day and beyond (Orbán 2020). The speech also combined two units of measurement: “one Trianon” meaning one

hundred years, and four—more loosely defined—“Trianon generations” during the past hundred years.

“We fended off the attack of Western empires one after the other. We recovered from the devastating blows of the Eastern pagans. We did what the other peoples of the steppe could not. We fought, we organized, we adapted, and we kept our place in Europe. For four hundred years, the time equivalent of four Trianons, Hungary was a strong and independent state”.

The first era seems to have lasted from the year 1000 (the foundation of the first kingdom of Hungary under King Stephen) to cca. 1400. The latter is a purely symbolic date when no special historical event took place, yet signaled the beginning of a new era when the Ottoman threat became a reality:

“Then for three hundred years, for three Trianons, we fought against the Ottoman Empire. Deep down, on the Balkans, then at our southern ends, and finally in the heart of the Carpathian Basin. And although Buda was in Turkish hands for a time of one and a half Trianons, they could not march through us”.

The time frame is again used with some laxity: although the first encounter between Hungarian and Turkish troops was in the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, it was only from the 1440s that János Hunyadi—the governor of Hungary—started to lead campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. In 1456, he defended Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade); in 1526, the Hungarian army was defeated in the Battle of Mohács; and in 1541, the country’s capital Buda was also occupied by the Turks and remained so until 1686 (that is, for almost “one and a half Trianons”).

“Then, after two hundred years, two Trianons of failed uprisings and freedom fights, we entered the gate of the twentieth century as a partner nation of a great European empire”.

The reference here is to the anti-Habsburg insurgencies, supposedly between 1700 and 1900. These in fact had already started during the Turkish wars, sometimes in alliance with the Ottoman Empire, as was the case of the Thököly uprising in the 1680s as well as in the former campaigns of Transylvanian princes such as Gábor Bethlen against the Habsburgs during the Thirty Years’ War. Since the last great uprising against Austria was the 1848–49 revolution and war of independence, which was later followed by a historical compromise establishing the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, it is also difficult to see why Hungary became a “partner nation of a great European empire” only at the threshold of the twentieth century.

To place Trianon on this rather arbitrary timeline is just as problematic, especially if one speaks about it as the result of internal conspiracies (presumably those of Mihály Károlyi, the president of Hungary in 1918 and the Hungarian communists in 1919) that “stabbed in the back” the “thousand-year-old historical Hungary” which may have been a little more than 900 years at the time. Chronological accuracy is not to be expected from salvation histories. As for the time between Trianon and the present day, the speech applies a subdivision of generations:

“We can hope that our generation, the fourth generation after Trianon can fulfill our mission and take Hungary all the way to the gates of victory. But the decisive battle must be fought by the generation following us, the fifth generation after Trianon. They must take the final steps. As it is written: ‘Gather your strength/ And first of all/ Start with the simplest thing/ Come together/ To grow in a tremendous way/ To somehow approach God, who is infinite’”.

Although it is difficult to decide who the first three generations were (perhaps one in the interwar period, one after World War Two, and one during the later semi-totalitarian phase of communism), the periodical succession of generations until a final fulfillment of history reveals a grand apocalyptic vision. Everyone with a, however superficial, knowledge of Christian theology knows that medieval eschatology (from Joachim of Fiore to a

number of millenarian movements) has always applied a similar periodization, a counting of generations, and prophecies about an imminent future, a final battle between the forces of Good and Evil (Béres 2021, p. 27).

The final quotation, however, is not a biblical one; it is from a lesser-known poem by the Hungarian poet Attila József, who was, ironically, a self-professed socialist and later communist before he was excluded from the Hungarian Communist Party in the early 1930s. The title of the poem is *On Numbers*, and it is a meditation on the mathematical concept of the “one”, transforming it into a critique of individualism, in which “Each one cares of itself only/Wanting to be better than the rest/Multiplying itself preposterously”, even though “One always remains one/And one neither multiplies nor divides”. This is when the moral of the story becomes clear: in a more faithful translation, it asks the readers to “overcome themselves” and “add together” in order to “somehow approach God who is infinite”. In József’s atheistic worldview, God is of course a metaphor, but the message is straightforward: it speaks of a certain secular apotheosis of the human community. Even though, in this case, in the “infinite” sense of humanity and not in any national or patriotic context.

The continuing presence of such ambiguous (never exactly theological but still theologically inspired) references to the community’s divinity and its redemptive power thus stand closer to the “immanentization of the eschaton” or the “secularization of salvation history”, well known from the works of Löwith (1949) or Voegelin (1952), than to any mainline Christian theology of history. In the case of Orbán’s 2020 speech, the location is also significant: the so-called “Hungarian Calvary” near Sátoraljaújhely, a town in Northern Hungary that was itself divided by the new borders of Trianon. The Calvary was erected in 1936, and its very symbolism expresses the analogy of the nation’s sufferings and the mutilation of the homeland with the passion of Jesus Christ, a core feature of so many political religions since the 19th century (Figure 4).

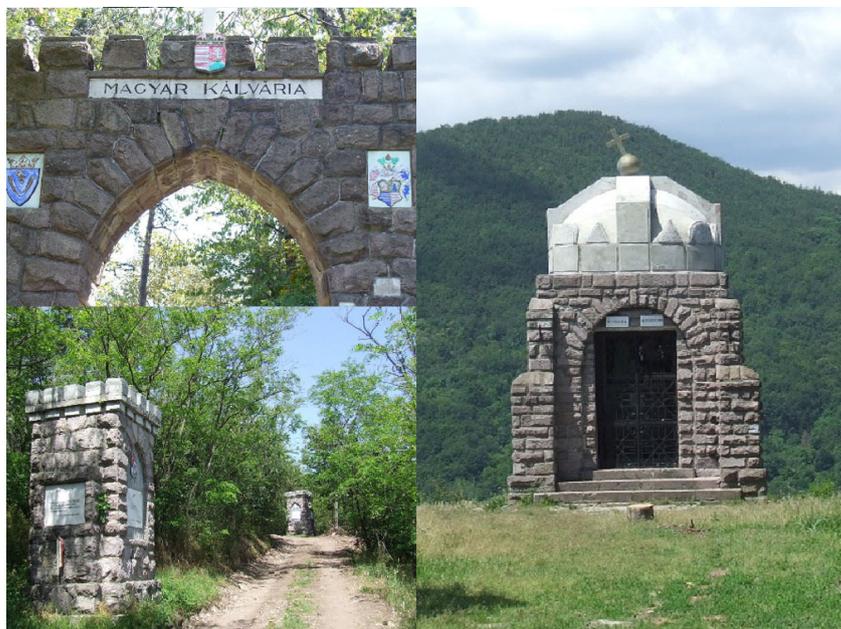


Figure 4. The so-called “Hungarian Calvary” near Sátoraljaújhely. The Calvary also has its separate “Stations” like those of the passion of Christ, and a final sanctuary—with the “Sacred Crown” on its top—at the end of the pilgrims’ path.

6. Conclusions

The word “political religion” nevertheless remains controversial. As mentioned before, the distinction of the religious and the secular has always been problematic, and the case of political religions confirms exactly that. The semantical shift from the more ancient

meaning of *religio politica* (an explicit religion with political purposes) to the modern one (a political ideology with hidden religious leanings) was gradual—if it ever happened at all. Some political religions still openly declare themselves to be religious, while others mix traditional (usually Christian) residues with implicit assertions of a new absolute such as the homeland, the nation, or the nation-state, as their guarantor. The role of the state is in fact so crucial that it is difficult to see how the such a sovereign entity can ever be viewed as purely this-worldly.

The enduring force of patriotism and state sovereigntism is impossible to explain without understanding this complexity. Patriotism is not, and by definition cannot be, a break with a so-called “religious” tradition but something that—explicitly or implicitly—relies on it. Metaphysical concepts, sacred scriptures, symbols, spaces, and rituals, or the emotional appeal of belonging to a spiritual community (which is about as tangible as the Holy Spirit) are just as present today as they ever were. It may, of course, be said that this complexity is only part of a “bricolage”, as the ideology of the Orbán regime is sometimes described (Körösenyi et al. 2020). Yet even so, its embeddedness in a larger European tradition suggests that this form of patriotism, whether one calls it a real or a quasi-religion, a religion abused by politics or politics disfigured by religion, is very difficult to abandon for a truly “secular” one. What the European experience shows is rather that the waning of overtly religious leanings contributes to the decline of patriotism as well, in the face of which any attempt to revive a more solid connection is itself a symptom of crisis. It would therefore be a fallacy to treat such attempts merely as signs of backwardness, something that can be eliminated by historical progress or the patient re-education of the masses. When history is perceived as a series of traumas—and this is what the example of Hungary best illustrates—the temptation to draw parallels with the salvation story is almost inevitable, for this is the only way to give meaning to events that would otherwise prove senseless.

Since, however, the definition of religion cannot be reduced to “meaning-making” without stretching its borders to the point where all meaningful human activity becomes religious, it seems better to speak about “religion” and “politics” not as two distinct categories; nor as two overlapping categories as the term “political religion” suggests; but as two faces of the same phenomenon, at least in the case of patriotism.

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