

THE APPEARANCE AND EVOLUTION OF NEOPROTESTANT CHURCHES OF TRANSYLVANIA UNTIL TODAY. 1918-1990

Summary

1. Premises

The appearance, development, historical evolution and geographical expansion of the religious faith is a present reality in Transylvania's history. Protestant churches, which have already become historical ones, together with the Catholic Church and Orthodox Church, existing beforehand, have created a framework for the appearance and the development of a new religious base. As time passed by, the representatives of the new protestantism renewed their Bible knowledge, building a theology of its own, each of them focusing on the aspects which they considered the most important, or even essential, as a confession of faith. Therefore, the Baptists have emphasized doctrine of baptism by immersion in water. Pentecostals have stressed the importance of the visible presence of the Holy Ghost, from the day of the Pentecost, externalized through the gift of speaking other languages. The Adventists have proclaimed the importance of preparation for an imminent return of Jesus Christ. The Church of Christ has tried to emphasize the importance of Bible lessons applied in everyday life practice. All these teachings taught by more or less secularized beliefs, seemed new lessons which aroused the listeners' interest and have gained followers.

2. The historical, social and legislative frame

The time period in which the main neo-protestant beliefs appear and develop in Transylvania is between the middle of 19th century and the beginning of twentieth-century. The membership for a long time to the Austro-Hungarian empire, made the historical churches relationship to the new denominations, to be more moderate, especially in areas with orthodox majority, due to Hungarian laws that were more permissive. During the interwar period there are evident more and more situations in which the priests with the local authorities, and even the central ones, trying to counter the expansion of evangelicalism, considered aggressive and representatives of religious proselytism. Archival documents talking

about complaints and disparagement of Baptist preachers, Adventists and Pentecostal later counted as deceived, heretical, ‘wolves’ that seek to divide the existing churches. One of the arguments used by the Orthodox Church has been its role in maintaining the national unity of the Romanians in all territories over time. This was an argument of interest to the Romanian political class who tried to use the church for social and political interests. Laws for the general regime of denominations, from the one in 1928, remained as landmarks and arguments of a political class who tried, despite the side effects, to solve the issue of freedom of expression of evangelical beliefs. The various speeches in the Parliament of that time, especially that of Alexandru Lapedatu, are eloquent in this regard.

3. The emergence and development of evangelicalism in Transylvania

a. Baptists

Their presence in Europe is linked to the English immigrants, led by John Smyth who arrived from the Netherlands by the year 1606, which in 1611, returned to London to lay the foundations of the Baptist movement. Scattered across Europe, hitting persecution initiated by Maria Tereza (1740-1780) they emigrated in Russia, where they founded churches. In Romania, including Transylvania, baptists appeared in many places almost at the same time, in the middle of the 19th century. The Baptist carpenter, baptized in Germany, Karl Johann Scharschmidt, came from Budapest to Bucharest and founded the first Baptist church. In Dobrogea, Cataloi, Frecăței some German immigrants from Ukraine, in 1862 founded the first baptist church. The founder of the Baptist Mission in Transylvania was John Rottmayer (1818-1901), who from the commitment of the Scottish mission, in the year 1866 moves from Budapest in Cluj, where he established a Bible distribution center. His collaborators became the first baptist missionaries in Transylvania. In 1874, the first Hungarian Baptist church appears in Salonta under the leadership of Anton Novak.¹ One of those who was baptized was Mihai Cornea, well known for a large number of baptisms (8000). Salonta becomes an important center, where the first baptist Conference is held and where attended delegates of 150 local churches. The first Romanian Baptist Church was founded in 1883 in Chesa, Bihor. Along with the Arad area, they become the nurseries of the Baptist Church in Transylvania. Despite of the oppositions of the traditional and Protestant churches, the Baptists have increased in number, each of the existing ethnies keeping their claims, their specific and work methods, the only common element being the doctrine of the New

¹ SENT BEFORE, Lajos, "Krisztusért járva követségben", Tanulmányok of Magyar Baptista miszio 150 éves történetéből, Budapest 1966, p. 3

Testament. The most wonderful time for development and growth of the Baptist faith was during the World War. This makes that through the movements of the troops on the fronts Baptism to spread. After the war, many Romanian prisoners from the Russian front came home in Transylvania, converted to Baptism and Adventism, creating small communities which began to grow with the passage of time. The territorial reorganization of Romania makes that from the 24,000 believers in Hungary, about 17,000 belong to Romania, through the annexation of Transylvania. According to statistics compiled by Vasile Berbecar, the General Secretary of the Baptist Union in Romania, in 1918, the number of the baptized members was of 18,838. ² Despite territorial reorganisation, a significant role in organizing Baptists was the relationship with the Union from Budapest, considering that they were part of Hungarian territory. The new founded churches started to organize Sunday School studies, bands and orchestras, which kept the interest of young people for the church. In 1919 the Romanian Baptist Union is organised, becoming the leader of all Baptists in the country. It had been edited the first Baptist magazine. After 1918, the number of the Baptists increases continually. Thus, in 1922, according to their statistics there were 22,228 members (baptized and dependants).

b. The Adventists

In the sixteenth century (1588) in Transylvania appeared the Sabbatarians. It is not about the Adventists, but they had a common thing: keeping the Sabbath as the weekly day of rest commanded in the Bible. The history of the Sabbatarians is very interesting and a phenomenon with unique features in the world. Among the leading advocates of this movement include Lugossy Jozsef, Johann Sommer (1540-1574), Jacob Paleologus (1515-1585), Adam Neuser (1530-1576), Mathias Vehe, also known as Glirius or Jewish doctor in Cologne (1545-1590), Francisc David, Eössi András, Pécsi Simon and others. Some of them have paid dearly for their religious beliefs. An important center of their activity was Bezidul Nou, Mureş County. Even if they were not all born in the region of Transylvania, their most important work has been carried out in Cluj, Târgu Mureş, Bistriţa, Odorhei, Turda, Dej and other places. Their history is interesting and can be a stumbling start of what was to mean Adventism in Transylvania for centuries that were to follow.

² Popovici, Alexa , *History Baptists' place (I Ca in Romania, 1919-1944, vol. II, Ed. Romanian Baptiste Church, Chicago, 1989, p. 17.*

The first Adventist messenger in Romania, in Transylvania, was in the nineteenth century, a Polish catholic priest named Mihai Belina Czechowski (1816-1876). The Adventism together with its message is rooted in the circles of earnest believers Baptists and Methodists who were impressed by prophetic studies and their interpretation by William Miller (1827 - 1849), who studied, in particular, the two prophetic books of the Bible: Daniel and Revelation. In 1869 Mihai Belina Czechowski is in Turda, the manager of a brick factory, struggling with financial difficulties and persevering in his missionary work. From here he sent three letters to his supporters. The letters were maintained and they are an argument for the beginning of Adventism in Transylvania. The visited localities were: Lunca, Turda, Pata, Cojocna, Cluj, Gherla, Bistrița, Beclean etc. In 1890, after 20 years, in Cluj appears Ludwig Richard Conradi, the first Adventist missionary. Looking for Sabbatarians he encounters professor Dr Kovács Janos, professor at the History Faculty and the president of the Unitarian College in Cluj county, with which, in the library, he found books of Sabbatarian hymns. First converts after Conradi's work in the city of Cluj, were the wife of Johann Rottmeier, who brought Baptism, and a daughter of his. Later Johann Rottmeier accepts baptism, thus becoming host of several visits which Conradi makes them subsequently in Cluj. Among the converted during this time, there were believers in Viștea like Egyesy Szabo István, Kovács Janos and others. We find Adventists in Făgăraș, Brașov and Sighișoara already in 1898. After Conradi, in 1899 J. F. Huenergardt arrives, so in 1900 in Arad area there were 38 baptized Adventists. After 1900, Adventism spread nearly in all corners of Transylvania. The documents to prove the existence of the Adventists are not very many. The existing talk about the consistent increase of the number of members of this confession and the work of canvassing with religious books. After 1903, when J. F. Huenergardt was moved to Budapest, the evangelistic work is continued by Ștefan Kelemen, a graduate of the Seminary in Fridensau, Germany. After converts, there were set up churches in Sibiu and Arpaș. In February 1904, O. Schweneke arrived in Leipzig, by means of a transfer. The fifth Conference of Hungarian missionary field in which it was included Transylvania, was held in Cluj in 1905. The European delegate was L. R. Conradi. Starting with the year 1907, there have been converted to Adventism in Transylvania 81 persons and there were organised local churches in Laslea, near Sighișoara, Vaida Cămăraș near Cluj. In 1908, after an Adventist training at the Seminary in Fridensau, Germany, Petre P. Paulini is sent to Arad, who was a part of the Hungarian Conference. In the same year, on the 4th to 8th November 1908, in Arad there has been held a general meeting of the Hungarian Missionary Field, which became a Conference a year before. According to the existing statistics at that

time, in Transylvania there were 374 members organised in 22 local churches. In 1909, Hermann Meyer arrives in Transylvania, who comes from Switzerland and settles down in Braşov. Between 18-22 November 1909, at Braşov there was held the last general meeting of the Hungarian Conference where participants voted the leader of the Hungarian Conference in the person of J. F. Huenergardt. On the 6th November 1913, at Sibiu takes place the fourth annual meeting of Transylvania Conference where they report 40 local churches and 889 members. In 1919, at Târgu Mureş is observed the work of a colporteur, Nemes Alexandru, to which joined after a short period of time Manchen Mihai, as aid preacher, arrived from Sibiu. Cluj and Mureş areas become important for the Adventist movement which will develop here.

c. Pentecostals

By 1896, in America, there was a movement called "the Latter Rain", lead by A. J. Tomlinson. As a result of studies and deep biblical meditation on biblical texts of the Facts chapter 2, he has come to claim that he has received the gift of the "speech in languages". The phenomenon was called "glosolalie". One of Tomlinson's followers was Charles Fox Parham (1873-1929), a professor at Bethel Bible College. He found that "the gift of languages" was to be received by "putting the hands", which he started to do. The first signs of Pentecostal spiritual guidance in Romania appeared before the first world war. Some old oral testimonials talk about the first pentecostals ideas in Romania, spread from Hungary, in Arad area. There, Pavel Budeanu, which before 1910 was in America, came home with this conviction of faith. The appearance of this religious movement in a more organized form, according to Pentecostal historian Andreiescu Valeriu, is linked to Gheorghe Bradin of Păuliş, Arad in June 1922. Here appears the first church, which at the end of the year already had 30 members. In February 1923, there was founded a new Pentecostal church in Cuvin, near Păuliş. The first who opposed this religious movement was the Orthodox priest from Păuliş, Cornel Popescu which has led local authorities from Radna to prohibit the new cult. In 1923, Gheorghe Bradin as leader of the new religious association and Dumitru Stoica, secretary general, protested and requested that the religious freedom to be respected, action which becomes the beginning of the history of fighting for their right to freedom of consciousness.

d. The Church of Christ

The faithful Church of Christ in Romania connects their roots to two foreign missionaries who have arrived in the country in 1899. It is about E. H. Broadbend (1861-

1945) from the society, "Free Christians congregations in England" and Francis Berney, then being on a mission in Africa. They have found people dissatisfied with the spiritual status of the official church, and they started to gather in private homes for the study of the Bible. Even though they were speakers of French, they have learned Romanian to be able to preach in the language of the listeners. They are followed by other missionaries that came from Constanta, Braşov, Ploiesti in 1902 and 1905. In *Transylvania*, the Church of Christ appear in Braşov, Râşnov, Codlea, Cisnădie and Sibiu. In 1902 Francis Berney and E. H. Broadbent have reached Râşnov, where they met the Germans from the city and they held their first sermons. In 1905, there are groups of believers among Germans and Romanians in Braşov and Sibiu. As a result of the work of the two missionaries, in 1909 the Romanian authorities have expelled them, along with other foreign missionaries. During the first World War, the fraternal movement is experiencing difficulties due to the incorporation into the army of many faithful existing in the country. Some soldiers, convert between those who were sent to war, arrived in Moldavia, Iasi, where they are beginning to show their faith. In 1918, in Iasi there was a first group of 11 converts which set the foundation of the first Churches of Christ.

4. Interwar period is considered one of the most prolific on the prevalence and development of evangelical movements in Romania. We can not talk about a voluntary acceptance by the clergy and faithful historical churches of the new Christian theological claims, not even indifference to them and their promoters. Without exception, the representatives of neo-protestant beliefs, their embers and supporters were ridiculed, blackmailed, teased, threatened and humiliated in front of other believers. This attitude hardened more the new believers in their profession and this has resulted, paradoxically, in even more conversions to the new faith. Baptists consistently asked for their rights being the only ones that had some support among authorities in the person of Dr J. H. Rushbrook in England, an official in the Baptist movement in Europe. His interventions, in the end, have received favorable response. The Baptist magazine from England "Baptist Time" that published, starting from the year 1922, articles about the Baptists' prosecutions in Romania, had a great impact on the Romanian authorities of the time. Even if in Transylvania, the more permissive Hungarian laws still operated, the Orthodox Church, in particular, did not take this into account. Despite this fact, the Baptist cult has been able to rise, asserting its convictions in a brave manner, for it became a significant movement with a great stability. During 31st July to 2nd August 1937, the Baptist Union of Romania was

invited to organize the Baptist Congress of the region South Eastern Europe, which was approved by the Ministry of Culture of that time.³ Although T. Păcescu, the inspector of religious denominations, was present here to calm the spirit, the Congress unanimously passed a motion to protest against ministerial decision no. 4781/1932, which passed the Baptist cult among religious associations, taking all the denominational rights provided by the Constitution and the 53rd article from the law of Religious Affairs. The provisions of this decision would lead to the closing of houses of prayer as well as the prohibition of the activity of the preachers. The Adventists in their turn have had a cloudy period, but also with positive results. Together with a publishing house, highly-performant for that time, they had a school in the preparation of the clergy at Stupini, near Braşov. The threats from Bucharest have not been able to interfere with their work, specialized in colporting books and magazines of their faith. In Transylvania the two conferences are organized as the area leading forum of the Adventists. During this period would be set up most Adventist churches in Transylvania. Also, houses of prayer are being built, which subsequently will be used for a very long time and the period of the communist regime (e.g. the building of the Adventist church in Târgu Mureş, etc.). For the Pentecostals it has to be noted the position of the bishop Grigorie Comşa from Arad, in the year 1925 before the expansion of the number of believers in the area. Believers have not been exempted from the persecution, but they have carried them with courage. Due to repeated victimization, starting with the year 1938, some of the Pentecostals have accepted their transfer to another cult. Mainly, the orientation was toward Baptists, but also toward Greek catholic.⁴ The pursuers were gendarmes, mayors, judges, the priests and private individuals. Even in prisons, the pentecostals were treated more harshly than other any prisoners. ... A good example is that from the Haft Arad. The policemen took them to the gendarmerie, where men with long moustaches (as Transylvanian custom then) were hanged of their moustaches. Then, the floors of the gendarmerie were scrubbed with their faces.⁵ ... In Ilva Mare Pentecostals were forced, in the place of the oxen, to pull the carts filled with stones and ballast on the streets on a market day, being insulted by their fellow citizens. At school, the children were beaten on the palm with bayonet. Even the Romanian denominational publications were condemning persecution the Pentecostals and other neoprotestants believers were subjected. Thus, the newspaper "Morning" of 20th of

³ "The lighthouse Christian", no 14/1937, p. 5.

⁴ National Archives central Bucharest. *Fund General Inspectorate of Gendarmerie. file No 74/1942. f. 134.*

⁵ "The word truth", September 1931, p. 7. in Valeriu Andreiescu, course of history of Penticostal Church in Romania, manuscript, chapter 5.

November 1931, published an article in which clearly shows the Orthodox priests involvement in the problem of the persecution.

4. Freedom crisis during the second World War. Threats.

International circumstances determined by the outbreak and spread of war have encouraged political and social unrest in many countries, including in Romania and by default in Transylvania. The Governments and the ministers would succeed one after the other in accordance to political perspectives which were imposed in the new social conditions. Romania's entry into the war has had a strong impact on the religious life of the inhabitants of Transylvania. Decrees of restrictions and finally prohibitions of religious manifestations, in particular for neo-protestants appeared one after the other. Even though he promised freedom of belief, Marshal Ion Antonescu denied it for all neoprotestant denominations, intermittently between 1940-1944. Together with the ministry of cults order no. 37948 of Aug 30th 1941 there is the famous ministerial decision No. 311,999 /939 which has started the prohibitions. After the Antonescu regime fell, King Michael I on Oct 28th 1944 signed the decree no. 548 which grants full religious freedom of Baptists in Romania. Later by decree 553/1944, the baptists are recognized alongside other denominations which had this status.⁶

5. Neoprotestants in communism

The communists came into power; the regime was subject to instructions, and doctrinally guidelines issued by Moscow. Russian communism already had a specific strategy against religion which was to be imposed in addition to the Romanian authorities. The abdication of King Michael I in December 1947 gave even more legitimacy to Romanian communists in countering the religious life. Drawing up lists of believers, cards for priests, reports on the religious work, they were meant to prepare a very strict control of the authorities on the life of faith of Romanian citizens. In 1948, Security of the State transforms into People's Security, which shall become in a short time the frightening Security of Romanian Communists. In 1947, the Baptists cult, alongside with other neoprotestant denominations, it is taken under evidence, on the form of some notes,⁷ in which they were referred to the main information about each local church. It was identified all data relating to the establishment of the church, members, the pastor, the program, the ownership of the land, the building, maintenance, etc. The preachers were referred to, together with the personal data, data on the members of the

⁶ *Nonitorul Journal* No 255/1944, the Decree Law No 553 of 1944, p. 7029-7030.

⁷ National Archives Dir. penitentiary. Mureş. Background *Inspectorate M. I. County* file No 2608. f. 216.

family, the relatives, or any other information which could be used against them. The Baptists and Adventists preachers were suspected of connections with foreign powers, and in particular the Americans. All correspondence, or any other package from abroad was an argument for doubt, suspecting and finally charge. The documents of the CNSAS archive are testimonies of such an attitude of the authorities. Also, the neoprotestant cults were suspected of receiving and coverage in their row of fascist organizations members as well as the Romanian traditional political parties in the interwar period, they were no longer recognized by communist authorities. The Bible Institute from Stupini was seized and converted to security military unit. After 1950, many of neoprotestant preachers or other officials have been arrested and condemned to forced labour. Printings were beginning to be prohibited.

Some houses of prayer were transformed into community homes, or other premises for the activities of Communist Party. The addresses, the requests for restitution remained unanswered. Together with the security departments, against churches and religious denominations it was the Religious Denominations Department. Here were agents of religious denominations, and later inspectors who were watching closely the services of worship. Together with these believers there were also members of the security, disguised as faithful people, having with them the Bible, and listening to sermons to mislead. On the way, the Security Department recruited collaborators, informers and agents even from among its members, priests and pastors. The subjects of the sermons were interpreted, most of the times, in the light of political suspicion against communist rulers or subversive actions organized from abroad.

After 1960 it took place the famous reduction in the number of churches, called "assigantion". The reasons for doing so were subjective, in fact, they were watching to discourage the believers to go longer distances to reach the nearest church and also an easier check on a small number of churches. Also, in the Adventist Church there was prohibited the weekly Bible study, which was coordinated by an instructor. It was considered that the study group was an ideal place to plot, organize, etc. without be able to keep under control the people gathered there. In this respect, it has been approved a single intructor for the entire Church, which was still a sermon, added in place of debate by the members.

In the context of prohibitions of printing the materials needed for religious activities, most pastors started typing more than one copy whenever possible. The procuration of typewriters, writing paper and copy paper, there were grounds for suspicion, together with the time required for typing, which was again a reason to discourage the spreading of

publications. The limited number of periodicals, Bible studies and any other work was nowhere near enough for churches. Subsequently, typewriters were recorded, in order for the prints to be recognized in case of need. With the emergence of the xerox machines, the members of security, the only possessing such facilities, were using them to duplicate certain necessary work, forbidden to be printed. This was a very easy source of very large financial income. The multiplication was very expensive, everything had to be done secretly with the most stringent discretion. Some of those who were intermediaries or beneficiaries of such work were arrested, fined, materials were confiscated and drawn up criminal files.

The Clerical Staff training, at least in religious neoprotestant denominations right above mentioned, has been reduced drastically. For Adventists there were periods when they had a student per year, for the entire country. This meant a promotion of four students at 4 years. There have been years without a schooling opportunity. The first promotions widened, after many operations since 1974, which meant 10 students per year. After 4 years their number has been reduced again.

A specific problem of the Adventists, who had the day of rest on Saturday, it was the fact that their children did not attend school on this day. It was another subject of blackmail, threats, fines and convictions. The teaching staff which became adventists automatically were fired. Because of keeping Saturday, the Adventists did not participate to Olympics, examinations of any kind organized on this day and this hindered the access to higher education.

With regard to prayer homes, or churches, building approvals were wonders. For this reason, some neoprotestant communities, filed applications for the renovation of the building to be. When approval was given, in record time, with an infernal pace of continuous work, the old building was completely demolished and in its place a new one appeared. Since it was under the roof, it was out of the question dismantling (e.g. Făgăraș, Sântana of Mureș, Ocna Mureș, etc.)

One of the most painful aspects of Christians in Romania and in Transylvania it was the priests' collaboration, and of the members of churches with the security staff. This has to be treated separately considering the wealth of material for such work, which holds ACNSAS. There was not only the matter of the traitor brethren of faith but also in many cases the financial retributions or materials difficult to find in those times. Through persons who had positions of responsibility in church, recruited by security as a collaborator, an informer or agent, in a practical sense the church was under supervision, at the level of liability of the

party concerned. Any visit abroad was made only with the agreement of the Security Department. Any visit from abroad needed to obtain a visa from security, which was getting ready its forces to follow and influence via agents and informers, the people who were visiting us, for the purposes of a positive image of the country, on the outside. It must be noted and the cross-lessons, when informers and agents were watching among themselves without knowing one another. In this framework of life, the religious communities of Transylvania have survived nicely, nurturing a religious life net superior than that after 1989.

6. The 1989 events and the changes after them.

The political and social movements of 1989, for some of them were a surprise. Others were expecting "something " because , in the international context , it became increasingly clear that it could not continue. New conditions have opened the possibilities of freedom so much awaited by all believers in the country, including Transylvania. They began administrative reorganizations , purchase of land for churches and prayer houses. In their zeal, the faithful have designed and built impressive buildings , well above their operating needs, which subsequently became a burden for maintenance. Confessional schools began to be recognized and organized at higher levels. Each church was free to reorganize and return if necessary to their methods of living the faith , without violating the most basic principles and laws of living together . The most important thing, lost by believers is the spirit of faithfulness and dependence on God, and spiritual and moral relations between them that were under the constraints and persecutions of the communist regime.

Key words: christians, churches, communist, cults, informators, manifestations, members, neoprotestants, religious, pastors, persecutions, pray, priests, relationship, Romanian, security, Transylvania. war,