

# NATIONAL FEASTS, POLITICAL MEMORIAL RITES FEASTS OF CIVIL RELIGION?

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**Abstract:** The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the “production” of the bourgeois state and national feasts. The paper deals with the formation of celebration of this Hungarian national historical memorial feast: 15<sup>th</sup> of March (National Memorial Day of the Bourgeois Revolution and War of Independence 1848/1849) in the past 150 years and the present. March 15, 1848 was first commemorated in 1849, after that it was forbidden for decades. It was only after the Compromise between Austria and Hungary (1867) that March 15, chosen as a national feast in 1849, could be celebrated freely. But it did not become an official national feast until 1927. Since then the different political forces have attempted to exploit the message of March 15 for their own purposes. The paper shows the different uses and abuses of history, the different interpretation of the past and the given feast.

**Keywords:** national feast, interpretation of feast, politics

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## The Feasts Examined

In the spring of 1848 there were revolutionary manifestations in a number of European cities (Palermo, Naples, Munich, Paris). On March 13, 1848 in Vienna and on March 15 in Pest-Buda the civil revolution was victorious. At the same time as the revolution in Pest the last feudal diet was in session in Pozsony, at that time capital of the Kingdom of Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia). Under the influence of the revolutions, on April 11, 1848 the estates and the ruler adopted the bills on taxation, the liberation of the serfs with state support, the formation of an independent Hungarian government, suffrage, the reunification of Transylvania and Hungary, and the national guard. Civil Hungary was launched, the civil Hungarian nation was born.

From September 1848 armed struggle began between the Hungarian state and Habsburg rule, binding the Hungarian nation together. On the first anniversary of the events, in 1849, public opinion made March 15 the memorial day of the revolution and war of independence, rather than April 11, the day on which the laws opening the way for civil development were adopted. The revolution and war of independence was defeated in August 1849 by the allied Austrian and imperial Russian armies. The most important catchwords of the Hungarian bourgeois

revolution were concepts borrowed from the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity, and they all became filled with national and sacral content – especially in the period of repression between 1849-1867.

An important event for the Hungarian people and Hungary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the 1956 Revolution and freedom fight. On October 23, 1956 the young people of Budapest and then the workers rose up against the oppressive socialist/communist regime. They used the symbolic language of 1848-1849 for their revolutionary demands. The struggle for freedom was crushed once again with Russian (Soviet) arms. Up until the change of political system in 1989/1990 it was forbidden to commemorate the 1956 Revolution; October 23 was a forbidden feast.

The paper deals with the celebration of these two Hungarian national historical memorial feasts: 15<sup>th</sup> of March (National Memorial Day of the Bourgeois Revolution and War of Independence 1848/1849) and 23<sup>rd</sup> of October (Hungarian Revolution and Freedom War, 1956) in our days. With the help of a small research group, consisting of my students, we tried to describe the rites of celebration on different levels (individuals, communities/settlements, political parties, state), and to analyse their content as secular memorial rites in connection with the sacred.

Determining concepts of both revolutions and freedom struggles were: alternative (liberating) memory, freedom, equality, equality before the law, independence, national unity, respect of the national symbols. Both revolutions had charismatic leaders: Lajos Kossuth in 1848/1849, Imre Nagy in 1956. Lajos Kossuth died in exile, Imre Nagy was executed by the socialist/communist authorities in the summer of 1958. Both became martyrs of the national struggle for freedom, together with many of their companions. They belong to the group of local national heroes, “secular saints” in East-Central Europe; with their life and martyrdom they represent anti-totalitarian, anti-communist sentiment, and the idea of freedom, solidarity, martyrdom, charity, self-sacrifice.

A national memorial day is or should be one of the most important ways of strengthening belonging to the community and identity. A historical memorial day can also help to confirm and legitimise the existing political regime.<sup>1</sup> March 15, 1848 was first commemorated in 1849. Within the space of a year, March 15 had already become the symbol of freedom. The anniversary is a feast day “of all Hungarians of honest sentiments”.

## Civil Religion and its Role in Society

As is well known, civil religion was first described in American circumstances. Robert Bellah regards the society as a totality and the function of religion is to give meaning and motivation to the total system.<sup>2</sup> According to Bellah, civil religion is a universal phenomenon, all societies will have some form of a civil religion. It

1 ERDÉLYI 2004. 160-161.

2 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

gives legitimations for the state or the nation by reference to a transcendent reality.<sup>3</sup> Bellah discusses the relationship between religion and politics in terms of the problem of legitimation, which he defines as “the question whether existing political authority is moral and right or whether it violates higher religious duties”.<sup>4</sup> He postulates that in early modern or modern societies, religion in the public sphere will take the form of a civil religion. Civil religion is a shared religious factor that is differentiated from church and state, or sometimes they mingle with each other. It consists of a set of transcendent or transcendent-oriented ideals, values, by which society is judged, integrated, and legitimated.<sup>5</sup> Bellah stresses the normative aspects of civil religion.<sup>6</sup> Civil religion provides the basis for social integration.<sup>7</sup> Within a civil religion there are some societal ideals which provide legitimation for the political institution, and then can also be used to criticise political leaders (actors, institutions, etc.).<sup>8</sup> So civil religion connected to political/national/state feasts can be a tool for querying political systems.

It is in this sense that I shall deal with the national feasts mentioned and their content, function and meaning. In the modern age, in our days social and cultural sectors are no longer dominated by traditional religions (in Hungary the so-called ‘historical denominations’), civil religion emerges as an alternative way by which modern societies are provided with an identity and meaning, and through them with hope of security.<sup>9</sup>

## Hungarian National/State Feasts

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the “production” of the bourgeois state and national feasts.<sup>10</sup> Hungarian researchers in cultural anthropology have paid little attention to the celebration of the national feasts, although there are examples of the analysis of March 15.<sup>11</sup> However, the Hungarian ethnological literature has not dealt with the celebration of October 23, apart from a volume of studies by myself and my students on the feast.<sup>12</sup>

It was only after the Compromise between Austria and Hungary (1867) that March 15, chosen as a national feast in 1849, could be celebrated freely. It did not become an official national feast until 1927. Since then the different political forces have attempted to exploit the message of March 15 for their own purposes.

3 BELLAH 1975. 3. Quoted by FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

4 BELLAH 1980. VIII

5 BELLAH 1967. Quoted by FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

6 Quoted by FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

7 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

8 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 100.

9 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 103.

10 HOBBSAWN – RANGER 1983.

11 HOFER 1992, BODÓ 1995, GYARMATI 1998, ERDÉLYI 1999, FEISCHMIDT – BRUBAKER 1999, PLAINER 2001.

12 BARNA 2006.

During the socialist decades it remained officially a “national feast” as a work-day. It was practically celebrated only in schools. One of the demands of the 1956 October Revolution was to restore again March 15<sup>th</sup> as the national feast.

October 23 is taking shape as a feast and being filled with symbolic content before our eyes in the political system that draws and strengthens its legitimacy from the revolution of October 23, 1956. The revolution of 1956 was thus a force legitimising the regime that appears not only as a story formulated as a truth of a higher order but also shapes our lives with its normative force.

At the same time there is a striking discrepancy between society’s view of history and certain actors on the political scene: a section of society questions the right of the left-wing parties to celebrate 1956 because they are officially successors of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party that crushed the revolution. Some of its still active leaders played a role in the armed defeat of the revolution (e.g. Gyula Horn, former prime minister 1994-1998). For this reason differences have arisen in the way the political parties celebrate. The left-wing parties participate in the official wreath-laying ceremonies but they do not take part in the mass gatherings and do not go to the graves of the martyrs of the 1956 revolution. The representatives of left-wing parties are often shouted down when making speeches because public opinion finds it difficult to tolerate their anti-revolutionary policy being legitimated in this way. The previous socialist regime interpreted the events of 1956 as an attack on existing socialism, and its participants were punished, discriminated against and persecuted up to 1989, in the same way that Habsburg autocratic rule imposed a ban between 1850 and 1867 on the commemoration of March 15.

The authorities have different attitudes towards the adoption of the above-mentioned feasts by society. They always involved school education and the media, as the best communicating tools for the rulers. The churches can also join in strongly in the organisation of the celebrations. In a few places, mainly smaller settlements where other organised political forces, even schools, are not present, the churches organise the celebration, or which is more general in other places, the content of the political celebration is sacralised in some way by the participation of priests. New memorial sites are often given church blessing. In this way they sacralise the place of commemoration, the sites of the revolutions.

By erecting monuments we link our memory to the continuous present time of the space. However, other symbols also appear in the celebrations: for March 15 the cockade symbolises national unity, with a strong emphasis on use of the national colours (red symbolising strength, white for fidelity, green for hope); for October 23 use of the Hungarian flag with a hole in the middle (where the hated socialist/communist state arms were cut out in 1956), and in general the Hungarian flag, as well as the carved wooden column originally a peasant grave-marker that has become a national symbol. This is an indication that an element of peasant culture has become a national symbol: grave-marker – carved post = once used for fighting – symbol of the Hungarian nation. As Anthony D. Smith

underlines, “also the folk culture of the present can take on a political aspect”.<sup>13</sup> Wreaths using the symbolism of colours have become integral parts of the commemorations. The so-called Kossuth arms (= the Hungarian arms without the crown) are being increasingly pushed into the background although in 1956 they were one of the most effective symbols of opposition to socialism. During the period of socialism the authorities regarded the cockade and the Kossuth arms as a symbol of independence or even of an anti-Soviet attitude.

It is of note that the cockade, earlier characteristic only of March 15, is now playing a growing role also in the celebration of October 23. Its national content is now widening. But the creators of the new “invented traditions” cannot be sure whether their inventions “sill find a deeper response in the next generation”.<sup>14</sup>

As in the past, the commemorative speeches and media manifestations stress the desire for freedom, independence, freedom of speech and conscience, social solidarity, organisation from below, religious freedom, the respect and protection of private property, patriotism, Hungarian pride, in short, the civil virtues. Of course, the emphasis falls in different places in different periods: at times it is on social equality, at other times on national unity, or on organisation from below as the basis of democracy, or on personal sacrifice. Values which are sacralized and which are in connection with God are “generosity, charity, loyalty, justice in distribution of opportunities and rewards, reasonable respect for authority, the dignity of the individual and his right to freedom”.<sup>15</sup> The ritual system of civil religion includes rites expressing only very general and highly abstract values. It means the religious interpretation of (Hungarian) history.<sup>16</sup>

Built on these values, both national feasts legitimate the social order of the country. After the Compromise between Austria and Hungary (1867) the laws of 1848 gave the basis for the social and economic development of the Hungarian state. During the process of the political turn in 1989/1990 in Hungary the proclamation of the Republic took place very consciously on October 23<sup>rd</sup> giving a deeper symbolical legitimation of the event. History and state laws give the fundamental principals to the content of both feasts.<sup>17</sup>

## Celebrations – Rites of Civil Religion?

Religion can clearly be an element in many of these features. An important element of nationalism is the national hero, who might be a historical figure or a living person. Both revolutions produced heroes and martyrs (such as Lajos Kossuth, Imre Nagy), who became national heroes and examples in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and whose figures have been preserved by the Hungarian national

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13 SMITH 1995. 68. See further about the use of tradition BAUMAN 1999. 132-139.

14 SMITH 1995. 139.

15 LANE 1981. 257.

16 Reflecting on Bellah's theory see further GÖPFERT 1987. 106-107.

17 See SCHIEDER 1987. 287-292. with further references.

view of history in statues and the names of streets and squares. In this way they have become “secular saints” of the modern age.

In contrast to Bellah’s concept of civil religion as a transcendent universal religion of the nation, which legitimates but also criticizes the nation, religious nationalism represents a world view in which the nation is glorified and idolized.<sup>18</sup> Religious nationalism is also one form of civil religion. Nationalism is a way of thinking about questions such as collective identity, social solidarity, and political legitimacy that helps to produce a nationalist self-understanding and recognition of nationalist claims. In this sense, nations are “imagined communities”, and nationalism is a distinctive form of “imagining” collective identity and social solidarity.<sup>19</sup>

Nationalism is not a universal religion, but can perhaps be viewed as more akin to a “tribal religion”. For that reason, those who belong to universal religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam, will often remain ultimately sceptical about nationalism. In other words: although religions can be used as reinforcements of nationalism, they can also be a source of opposition to nationalism. Or different religions build up different approaches to values which are represented by religions.

The concept of the *sacred* is in many cases the core concept in substantive definitions of religion. The sacred is a powerful entity which compels respect and cannot be approached in an ordinary way.<sup>20</sup> The sacred fills people with awe and fascination; it is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.<sup>21</sup> The concept of the sacred may make a division between the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and profane. The concept of the sacred is relatively wide and includes also the concept of syncretism.<sup>22</sup> All of the mentioned values, sentiments and heroes may have the characteristics of religion.

But the concept of the sacred can be wider than the religious. “An essential quality of the sacred is its unquestionability... Unquestionable tenets exist in secular political ideologies which are as sacred in that sense as the tenets of any religion.”<sup>23</sup> Ceremonies, rituals using national feasts lend authority and legitimacy to the given political system. Their repetition through the years gives the impression of stability and social, cultural perpetuation of the social order.<sup>24</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century salient political and ideological characteristics of revolutions and freedom struggles have been identified with numerous virtues of the

18 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 104.

19 On the connections of religion and nationalism with special attention to the situation in the East European countries see: RAMET 1989 and the article in that volume of Leslie László who mentions only the relations of the Hungarian state and the Christian churches in the long 20<sup>th</sup> century. See LÁSZLÓ 1989. See further FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 105.

20 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 19.

21 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 19. with reference to Rudolf Otto’s perception.

22 FURSETH – REPSTAD 2006. 20.

23 MOORE – MYERHOFF 1977. 3.

24 MOORE – MYERHOFF 1977. 7-8. Here they refer to Rappaport’s writings on the characteristics of these elements: 1. repetition, 2. acting, 3. “special” behaviour or stylization, 4. order, 5. evocative presentational style, staging, 6. collective dimension.

Christian religion, or religion in general. That is, they were given religious connotations not only in themselves but also in connection with religion. This is manifested in the fact that the Catholic and Protestant churches also participated institutionally in the commemoration; in this way the churches gave and give religious legitimacy to the feasts which might have anti-socialist/communist and nationalistic features. A number of elements in the collection of national symbols used also found their way into the churches where they acquired a religious character: the Hungarian flag, the arms with the crown, the national anthem. On the feasts of the revolutions these are part of both the national and the religious set of symbols. It is of note that in the Calvinist Church<sup>25</sup> the emphasis is principally on the national symbols (national colours, cockade) and on freedom and independence, while in the Roman Catholic Church these are joined by the universal values (solidarity, fidelity, fraternity, diversity). The Roman Catholic Church is an institution with international character. It has traditionally invested in the conception of a unified Christian Europe. This idea has undergone systematic renovation on a number of levels but brought the veneration and cult of the so-called patron saints of Europe. It is a symbolical support of the European Union and politics, declaring on the other hand that Eastern Europe is also an integrated part of Europe. So civil religion appears in the celebration of the above mentioned national feasts not only on the national level but in a broader European context too.<sup>26</sup>

I do not claim that there is a real civil religion in Hungary but I can underline that many elements of national feasts show characteristics of the sacred in the field of symbols, objects, values, and ideas.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. the relation of faith, culture and Protestant-type of religion. GELLNER 1997. 75-78.

<sup>26</sup> HEELAS 1998. 195.



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