

Fidesz and Faith: Ethno-Nationalism in Hungary

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“The protection of Hungary’s self-identity and its Christian culture is the duty of all state organizations” says one of the new provisions of the 7th Amendment that was adopted on 20 June to change the country’s Fundamental Law of 2011. This article will highlight the legal, cultural and political background to this with possible consequences.

The purpose of the proposed provision was questioned at the preparatory meeting of the judicial committee by members of opposition parties. The only explanation MPs of the governing Fidesz party, who initiated the new text were able to provide was a paraphrase of an alleged sentence by Robert Schuman, founding father of the European Union: “Without Christian culture there is neither Europe nor Hungary.” The major points of the recent constitutional amendment, namely the criminalization of any civil assistance to refugees and the declaration of homelessness as an unlawful behaviour are deeply contradictory to the very idea of Christian culture. (Most probably the same intention to legitimate his anti-European idea lead Prime Minister Orbán recently to reframe his concept of ‘illiberal democracy’ as a fulfilment of ‘Christian democracy.’) But this reasoning does not reveal the compensatory message sent to the European People’s Party, the party family of Fidesz in the European Parliament, and to its most powerful member, the German

CDU-CSU: even if we may have strange views on European values, but we are good Christians, like you are. Besides the political message of the amendment towards Europe, there will be clear internal constitutional law consequences of the new provision, as it can be used as a basis of reference to annul any legal norm allegedly violating Christian culture, a tool that can be useful for the packed Constitutional Court or any court in Hungary.

Not that the text of the Fundamental Law would have been ideologically neutral so far. This new constitution, which was passed by the Parliament in April 2011, shows the role of religion in national legitimation through characterizing the nation referred to as the subject of the constitution not only as the community of ethnic Hungarians, but also as a Christian community, narrowing even the range of people who can recognize themselves as belonging to it. The preamble to the Fundamental Law, which is compulsory to take into consideration when interpreting the main text, commits itself to a branch of Christianity, the Hungarian Roman Catholic tradition. According to the text of the preamble, “We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian state on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe”, the members of the Hungarian nation recognise Christianity’s “role in preserving nationhood”, and honours the fact that the Holy Crown “embodies” the constitutional continuity of Hungary’s statehood. Besides the sacral symbols, this choice of ideology is reflected—inter alia—in the Fundamental Law’s concept of community and its preferred family model, and its provision regarding the protection of embryonic and foetal life from the moment of conception.

The preamble, while giving preference to the thousand-year-old Christian tradition, states, that “we value the various religious traditions of our county”. The choice of words displays its model of tolerance, under which the various worldviews do not have equal status, although following them is not impeded by prohibition and persecution. It is however significant that the tolerance thus declared only extends to the various “religious traditions”, but does not apply to the more recently established branches of religion, or to those that are new to Hungary, or to non-religious convictions of conscience.

The refugee crisis of 2015 has demonstrated the intolerance of the Hungarian governmental majority, which styled itself as the defender of Europe’s ‘Christian civilization’ against an Islamic invasion. In the beginning of the crisis, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claimed that “Christian culture is the unifying force of the nation... [and] Hungary will either be Christian or not at all.” In another speech held in early September, Orbán went further by stating that: “The Christian-national idea and mentality will regain its dominance not just in Hungary but in the whole of Europe.” This new era should follow ‘the age of liberal blah blah,’ because the origin of the mass migration and the consequent refugee crisis is ‘the crisis of liberal identity’: “For years we have told them that ‘the world is a global village’ ... we have talked about universal human rights to which everybody is entitled to. We forced our ideology on them: freedom is the most important thing, we said. We bombed the hell out of those who didn’t accept our ideology.... We created the Internet, we declared the freedom of information, and we told them that every human being should have access to it. We sent them our soap operas. They watch what we do.... We sent our TV stars into their

homes.... they now think that our virtual space is also their space and that in this virtual space everybody can meet anybody else. ... These people, partly because of our culture lent to them or forced upon them, are no longer tied to their own land and to their past.”

But should the alleged defense of Christianity from the ‘Muslim hordes’ be taken seriously? In a speech on 26 July 2012 Orbán explains why authoritarianism is needed to treat Hungarians: ‘*Joining forces is not a matter of intentions, but of sheer force. With a half-Asian lot such as ours, there is no other way* [than compulsion or force – G.H.].¹⁾See B. Szabó, ‘Félázsiai származékoknál, mint mi, csak így megy’ [*With a half-Asian lot such as ours, there is no other way*], *Népszabadság*, 27 July 2012. This assessment is very similar to that of the late Imre Kertész, the Nobel laureate in literature, who argued that Hungary’s ill-fate stemmed from its inability to choose between Asia and Western Europe.²⁾‘La Hongrie est une fatalité’, *Le Monde*, 10 February 2012. Historically in Hungary, the bloody conflicts of the Reformation meant that until the Horthy era no church could fully identify itself with the Hungarian nation. Although the Catholic Church dominated the Protestants, both numerically and politically, the Catholic Church still played little historical role in preserving national consciousness, so that Catholicism has never become equated with Hungarian patriotism. Under communism, the Roman Catholic church neither served as a symbol of national independence, nor as a source of protection for the opposition, as it happened in Poland.

Christianity and religion serve as reference points that Orbán’s right wing populism uses opportunistically. Fidesz, that used to be a liberal party with a militantly anti-clerical views, has started to become conservative from the mid-90s, turning to an openly positive stance towards religion. Still, religion has never been taken as significant part of its identity, rather played a purely instrumental, opportunistic role in the party’s political strategy (even after joining the European People’s Party (EPP), the center-right party family of the European Parliament).³⁾Only 22% of Fidesz voters are followers of churches, and the same percentage of them consider themselves as explicitly non-religious. Political Capital Institute’s reserach, Budapest, 2012. Fidesz uses religious symbols in an eclectic way in which references to Christianity are often mentioned together with the pre-Christian pagan traditions. This refers to the idea of ‘two Hungarys’: the Western Christian, and the Eastern pagan, tribal one.⁴⁾See A. Bozóki and Z. Ádám, State and Faith: Right-wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary, *East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2016/1. Orbán once voiced his conviction that the Turul bird, a symbol of ancient pre-Christian Hungarians, ‘the symbol of national identity of living’,⁵⁾‘Minden magyar a turulba születik’ [All Hungarian Are Born Into the Turul Bird], *Népszabadság*, Sept. 29, 2012. is the image Hungarians are born in. Fidesz interprets this pre-Christianity within the framework of nationalism, and this ethno-nationalism provides sufficient basis of political identification as a type of surrogate-religion. In this respect Fidesz follows the authoritarian traditions of the Horthy regime between the two World Wars, in which the nation-religion (‘nemzetvallás’) played a crucial role. Another example of Christianity being instrumental for Orbán is the fact that when he listed the illiberal regimes he admires from Singapore through China, Turkey, India, Singapore, and Russia all of them are either non-Christian or Orthodox.

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The newly adopted amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary with the state’s

obligation to protect Christian culture – besides its potential to limit fundamental rights – strengthens the role of religion to constitutionally legitimize the concept of ethnic nation. In this concept the nation, as subject of the Fundamental Law isn't just the community of ethnic Hungarians, but is also a Christian community, which means that those who do not associate themselves with Christianity, can feel themselves excluded from the nation as well. In this constitutional order the state is not necessarily obliged to tolerate all religions, and the representatives of the Christian religion can feel themselves entitled to be intolerant towards the representatives of other religions.

References [±]

1. ↑ See B. Szabó, 'Félázsiai származékoknál, mint mi, csak így megy' [*With a half-Asian lot such as ours, there is no other way*], *Népszabadság*, 27 July 2012.

2. ↑ 'La Hongrie est une fatalité', *Le Monde*, 10 February 2012.

3. ↑ Only 22% of Fidesz voters are followers of churches, and the same percentage of them consider themselves as explicitly non-religious. Political Capital Institute's research, Budapest, 2012.

4. ↑ See A. Bozóki and Z. Ádám, State and Faith: Right-wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary, *East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2016/1.

5. ↑ 'Minden magyar a turulba születik' [All Hungarian Are Born Into the Turul Bird], *Népszabadság*, Sept. 29, 2012.

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