

Citation style

Tóth, Zsombor: review of: Dávid Csorba, A zászlós bárány nyomában. A magyar kálvinizmus 17. századi világa, Debrecen-Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2011, in: Hungarian Historical Review, 2013, 1, p. 178-182, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189725547

First published: Hungarian Historical Review, 2013, 1



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## BOOK REVIEWS

A zászlós bárány nyomában. A magyar kálvinizmus 17. századi világa [Following the Flag-bearing Lamb. Hungarian Calvinism in the Seventeenth Century]. *Speculum Historiae Debreceniense* 6. By Dávid Csorba. Debrecen–Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2011. 230 pp.

The title of this volume of selected essays alludes to the coat of arms of Debrecen, a city with a remarkable culture and history intricately intertwined with the history of Hungarian Calvinism. Indeed, the ‘Calvinist Rome’ has born witness to the efforts of Hungarian Calvinist communities to (re)build and preserve their church, traditions and culture for the last several centuries. These essays not only acknowledge this fact, but overtly tend to impose this as a master narrative of Hungarian Calvinism. Thus the flag-bearing lamb is not simply a complex symbolical image, but a recurrent motif of the articles that gestures to their ultimate message: the early modern history and culture of Debrecen represents the quintessence of Hungarian Calvinism.

Whether this claim can be persuasively sustained or not remains, I believe, an open question. Still, the significance of the book, within the context of Hungarian scholarship on the culture and history of early modern Hungarian Calvinism, cannot be disputed. Furthermore, the particular attention that Csorba devotes to what he refers to as Neo-Calvinism, namely the connection between Calvinist orthodoxy and Puritan devotion, is a notable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of Hungarian Puritanism. Csorba’s sometimes debatable assertions notwithstanding, he has managed to articulate an alternative view of the devotional culture of Hungarian Puritanism that aptly complements interpretive attempts that have attempted to address some of the fixations of the existing scholarship. The so-called classic approach in the scholarship on the emergence and significance of Hungarian Puritanism has offered either a customary and biased narrative of ecclesiastical history<sup>1</sup> or a kind of obsolete

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1 Jenő Zoványi, *Puritánus mozgalmak a magyar református egyházban* [Puritan Movements in the Hungarian Reformed Church] (Budapest: Magyar Protestáns Irodalmi Társaság, 1911); László Makkai, *A magyar puritánusok harca a feudálisizmus ellen* [The Struggle of the Hungarian Puritans against Feudalism] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1952); József Bodonhelyi, *Az angol puritanizmus lelki élete és magyar hatásai* [The Spiritual Life of English Puritanism and its Influences on Hungary] (Debrecen: Pannonia Ny., 1942); István Ágoston, *A magyarországi puritanizmus gyökerei* [The Roots of Hungarian Puritanism] (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 1997).

cultural history.<sup>2</sup> There have been very few attempts to take advantage of the innovations of any kind of social history.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, Csorba's selection of articles constitutes a refreshing reassessment of our understanding of what early modern Calvinism and Puritanism might have represented. He opted for a multidisciplinary approach, something that comes close to Burke's concept of cultural history,<sup>4</sup> and he combines the interpretive possibilities of literary criticism, ethnography, history and (unavoidably) theology. In addition, he used as sources not only texts, but various artifacts and buildings each of which is related to Debrecen. The major methodological innovation, which was also intended to function as a common denominator for the multidisciplinary approach and sources, was the focus on Debrecen and its confessional existence in early modern times. In the resulting narrative, structured in four major chapters, Csorba attempts to decipher the complexity of the period from 1661 to 1705 in order to exhibit some of the historical, social, cultural-confessional and theological developments within the distinguished Calvinist community of Debrecen.

The first chapter, a surprisingly short one, proposes a survey of the roles assumed by Calvinist priests in seventeenth-century Debrecen. Csorba asserts that the more or less coherent epoch from 1606 to 1711 should be divided into further sections in order to reveal the development of the identity patterns performed by Calvinist priests. Accordingly, he argues that the period from 1606 to 1657 corresponded with the age of legitimation, the difficult times from 1657 to 1664 coincided with the emergence of apocalypticism and the prophet-like preachers, the age of confessional conflicts covered the period of 1664–1681, the times of consolation lasted from 1681 to 1705, and finally, the last section from 1705 to 1711 was marked by the idea of confessional tolerance. Csorba's classification evidently attracts criticism, as these types of classifications are always problematic. Csorba tends to overestimate the significance of Debrecen as a city and a Calvinist community, and he ignores

2 Pál Berg, *Angol hatások tizenhetedik századi irodalmunkban* [English Influences on our Seventeenth-Century Literature] (Budapest: MNM Országos Széchényi Könyvtára, 1946).

3 Attila Molnár, *A "protestáns etika" Magyarországon* [The "Protestant Ethic" in Hungary] (Debrecen: Ethnica, 1994). For a survey of the secondary literature on Hungarian Puritanism see: Katalin Luffy, "Medgyesi Pál és a magyar puritanizmus. Historiográfiai áttekintés a kezdetektől az 1980-as évekig" [Pál Medgyesi and Hungarian Puritanism. Historiographical Survey from the Beginnings up to the End of the 1980s] in *Medgyesi Pál redivivus. Tanulmányok a 17. századi prédikátor életművéről*, ed. Gergely Tamás Fazakas and János Györi, (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem, Egyetemi és Nemzeti Könyvtár, 2008), 15–31.

4 Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004).

the fact that the destiny of the Principality of Transylvania had a decisive influence on the life and security of Hungarian Calvinist communities, both in Transylvania and Habsburg Hungary. Thus Csorba's classification could be adapted to the chain of tragic events in Transylvania of the 1680s and 1690s. Moreover, the death of the last prince of Transylvania, the pious Mihály I Apafi (1660–1690), might have been interpreted by Hungarian Calvinists as the end of a period of welfare and security. This event, for instance, did not influence Csorba's classification at all. Consequently there is no significant reflection on the function of collective memory over the emergence of these identity patterns, allegedly performed by priests and ultimately by the Calvinist Church as well.

The second chapter entitled, *Following the Flag-bearing Lamb: the Symbols of Debrecen*, consists of articles dealing with the examination of artifacts, buildings, and most importantly symbols. Csorba's intention is to recreate narratives and use these unconventional sources to provide a different perspective from which to consider Calvinist devotional and spiritual life. His endeavor, an inventive and truly multidisciplinary one, traces interferences between texts, symbols, and artifacts that offer access to intimate details or new vantage points from which to assess individuals, institutions or historical events. Thus the church buildings, the coat of arms of Debrecen, the famous pipes, and other objects of everyday life stand as historical proof of a distinctive Calvinist way of life in early modern Debrecen. Though this chapter may seem like something of a digression, it has been incorporated well into Csorba's explanatory discourse, though not convincingly sustained with methodological arguments.

*The Cataclysms of Calvinist Identity* is the telling title of the fairly consistent third chapter, which echoes some of the assertions expressed in the first chapter. There is a certain ambiguity between the foci of the first and third chapters, as if the latter were revisiting some truth revealed in the opening chapter. Perhaps a different structuring of these writings, a possible rapprochement of the first and third chapters, might also have been an option. Still, one should give credit to the author for finding the best structure for this collection of articles. The writings in this section seem to follow strictly the particular narrative and classification, with its debatable sections exhibited in the first chapter. However, rather surprisingly Csorba hesitates to articulate theoretical arguments; he reduces his approach to textual analysis or the projection of some relevant contexts (Nadere reformatie, Puritanism, Apocalypticism). He simply fails to point out theoretical standpoints concerning identity and the

various cultural practices of representing, performing or fashioning a religious self in early modern culture.<sup>5</sup>

However, Csorba proposes relevant topics tied to outstanding historical events, for instance, the unfortunate military expedition against Poland (1657) or the persecution of protestant priests, the so-called *persecutio decennalis* (1670–1680). Consequently, he attempts to depict the prototype of the prophet or the martyr relying mostly on the textual analysis of sermons. Thus, powerful characters like Pál Medgyesi, one of the first Hungarian Puritans, or Jakab Cseh Csúzi are described as relevant cases of Calvinist self-fashioning. Unfortunately, in Csúzi's case Csorba decided to reconstruct Csúzi's *mentality* instead of his *mental world*, which is confusing and methodologically does not constitute an accurate claim.<sup>6</sup> The remaining two articles dealing with the early modern perception of comets or the discourse of Calvinist priests during the 'kuruc' rebellion, though they fit in the chronological frame previously set forth, do not bolster the central thesis of this section.

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5 Greenblatt's seminal book not only influenced the international scholarship on early modern Puritanism, but also had a lively reception in Hungary. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980). Greenblatt's concept was often applied to describe the process of shaping a religious identity in early modern Puritanism. See: Muriel McClendon, Joseph Ward, and Michael MacDonald (eds), *Protestant Identities. Religion, Society, Self-Fashioning in Post-Reformation England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Margo Todd, "Puritan Self-Fashioning: The Diary of Samuel Ward," *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 236–64; John Martin, "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5. (1997): 1309–42. For the Hungarian reception and applications of the self-fashioning concept see: Zoltán Cseh, "Humanista énfarmálási technikák a Quattrocento tájékán és napjainkban" [Humanist Self-Fashioning Techniques in the Quattrocento and Today], *Jelenkor* 3 (2002): 321–28; Gergely Tamás Fazakas, "Az „árvaság” reprezentációja a kora újkorban: egy kulturális szerepminta értelmezési lehetőségei (Előtanulmány)" [The Representation of "Orphanhood" in the Early Modern Era: Interpretive Possibilities of a Cultural Role Model (preliminary study)], in *Cselekvő irodalom. Írások a hatvanéves Görömbei András tiszteletére* [The Agency of Literature. Studies Honoring the 60-year-old András Görömbei], ed. Zoltán Bertha and Andrea Ekler (Budapest: Magánkiadás, 2005), 99–114; Endre György Szőnyi, "Az énfarmálás petrarkista technikái Balassi Bálint és Philip Sidney költészetében" [Petrarchan Techniques of Self-Fashioning in the Poetry of Bálint Balassi and Philip Sidney], *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 103 (1999): 251–72; Zsombor Tóth, *A koronatanál: Bethlen Miklós* [Witness for the State: Miklós Bethlen] (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2011), 147–92.

6 Csorba seems to confuse the term *mentality* with the term *mental world*. The reconstruction of a mentality relying on a single case is hardly possible. I believe he wanted to recreate the mental world of a Calvinist preacher. Amongst the many books dealing with this issue there are two classics worth mentioning: Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: an Essay in Historical Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World. A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

The last chapter, entitled *Late Puritan Print Culture*, is probably the most coherent and significant one. It offers a good example of Csorba's remarkable predisposition towards subtle textual analysis and his particular talent for reading and identifying rare sources. In his interpretations of sermons from homiletical and theological perspectives, he does not display such outstanding analytical skills. Here he convincingly investigates spectacular conundrums about a lost calendar from 1596, some unknown attempts to translate the Bible into Hungarian, and a mysterious sermon delivered in the Trinity Church. Furthermore, the case studies dealing with the ego-documents of Pál Ember and the devotional motivation behind Misztótfalusi's printing activity confirm Csorba's particular talent for understanding and fairly assessing the literacy of Puritan devotional culture.

Still, without ignoring the undeniably positive aspects of Csorba's effort in general, it is worth pointing out that some attempt to address the lack of methodological, historiographical and theoretical insights would have strengthened the coherence of this volume. The lack of methodological reflections on the use of sources, the applied scales of analysis, or the particular functions attributed to different interpretive contexts unfortunately somewhat diminishes the relevance of the poignant thematic challenges set forth by the author. However, the volume merits the attention of anyone who feels committed to the study of early modern Calvinist texts or undertakes any kind of research investigating the history, culture and social life of Hungarian Calvinists. No doubt Csorba's volume will become compulsory secondary literature.

Zsombor Tóth