

Recovered histories of priests of traditional communities

Papok a 18–20. századi lokális közösségekben: Történetek találkozása

[Priests in the Local Communities, between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries]. Edited by Dániel Bárh. Budapest: MTA–ELTE Lendület Történeti Folklorisztikai Kutatócsoport, 2021. 714 pp.

Florin Cioban 

Institute of Romance Studies, Department of Romanian Philology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Múzeum körút 4/D, 1088 Budapest, Hungary; cioban.florin@btk.elte.hu

The book “Priests in the Local Communities, Between the 18th and 20th Centuries,” published in 2021 in the *Folkloristica Historica* series and coordinated by Daniel Bárh, contains the reformulated versions of presentations given by members of the Folklore branch of ELTE BTK and the folklore research team of MTA–ELTE during a conference called “Clash of Histories” held from 1–2 October 2020. The gathering was originally planned for spring 2020 but had to be postponed until autumn because of the coronavirus safety measures in place. The solution was to have a hybrid gathering, making it both a physical presence and an online event (this solution paved the way for the continuation of the country’s humanistic studies, lifting spirits previously affected by the pandemic).

The Library of ELTE’s Ethnography branch, which served as the location for the event mentioned above, had already been a gathering place for a “lower priesthood conference.” In 2012, this was the space where the first invite-only, ten-speaker symposium was held, and its goal—a dialogue between young representatives of the Ethnography and the (back then) Church History branches—was achieved successfully. This success was confirmed one year after the conference, as a book was published, enriched with further studies (“Lower Priesthood, Local Communities and Folk Culture from the 18th to the 20th Century in Hungary”), while the writings that had created it have been used extensively in the past few years. Having been used and quoted so many times, they have become an unavoidable topic reference.

Compiling the information found between 2013 and now into a single paper is rather impossible. Without citing the exact sources (books, specialised studies)

that present newer information about the priesthood, we can say that such (newer) sources have started to appear in research workshops dealing with ethnography and church history not only in Hungary, but also abroad. One important step forward was that several more doctoral dissertations involved work on aspects of the topic, most of these nowadays available in the form of books. Similarly, it is also noteworthy that in Church history workshops in Pécs, a series of conferences about Catholic society were organised. This society has not abandoned the idea even after hundreds of years because “lower priesthood / the life of the simple, country priest” is a problematic theme. This theme has its own sections in books, or even whole volumes. Other than this, there have been case studies about the relationship between Protestant pastors and their communities. These have spread not only on the Hungarian side of the Danube–Tisza but also in Transylvania.

Apart from these examples, the Folklore branch of ELTE had great success in 2018, as the MTA–ELTE movement’s Historical Folklore team won a grant to study the subject for five years, after their success with “Lower Priesthood from the 18th to the 20th Century in Local Communities inside Hungary and Transylvania.” Following the aforementioned studies, the team adopted an interdisciplinary approach: members working with ethnography and the history of the Church also worked on the role of Roman and Greek Catholic, as well as Protestant (reformed, evangelical, unitary) denominations in society, mentality, and the social context. In 2019, the team started publishing a series of books called *Folkloristica Historica* with four volumes already published.

One of the project’s central functions was organising conferences to help with research related to the topic. This was achieved in 2020 in the form of the event mentioned above. Looking at the list of speakers, it was obviously an interdisciplinary meeting: many of the humanistic studies (historical science, literary studies, religion history, ethnography/folklore/cultural anthropology, cultural history) were represented. It is important to note that the Protestant and Catholic religious history narratives covered in the conferences were not separate but somewhat intertwined. Of the forty speakers at the meeting, the vast majority took on the task of turning their presentations into “proper” studies.

The volume reviewed here presents an arrangement of case studies concerning meetings and clashes between Christian (Catholic or Protestant) priests and local communities, or a given community and its priests. The topics in focus include financial conditions, among many other things (such as the economic situation of the parish; the flock as a credited institution; the living conditions of priests and their legacy; different versions of “good priest” – “bad priest” models; conflicts between priests, their communities, and their superiors; imprints of harmony; “priestly services”; the inheritance of a pastor’s family; priests’ attitudes and habits; the literacy

of priests and their mentality; priesthood culture and that of their community, etc.). The topics are linked to the publishing researcher group.

The authors of the 33 topics of the book primarily present (micro)stories about priests, pastors, and their followers who live in cities and villages. A comprehensive reading of these allows one to spot their typical and atypical aspects, similarities, and differences, as well as the stories that vary among regions, languages, denominations, and the aspects present in all layers of society.

The reader may ask themselves the following question: Why should we be interested in priests? From the perspective of Church history to this day, the main points of study in this area are the history of the Church itself and the events related to it, both within the country's borders and outside of it. In this, the "lower priesthood" remains a background topic alongside the "big" names of religious leaders. Wishing to change this situation by inspecting the societies centred around the Church, those who have worked with the history of the said societies have managed to garner much information, even if the situation varied according to the country. Although the information on the meso and micro levels that were discovered is unquestionably valid, it was hard to come by. When analysed, the information about several priests contributes to the so-called "bottom view." Because of their local roots, these kinds of studies about the history of religion are all the more susceptible to being linked to ethnographic studies that research popular/folk culture. There is no need to argue why knowledge of local communities and the Catholic priests and pastors working among them, as well as their deeds and culture, may be of interest to ethnographic studies. The term "folk culture" has almost entirely been replaced by "local culture." This was due to the priests, as they were the ones to record – with changing terms – local customs. Regarding case studies related to this, people nowadays do not question the authenticity of historical anthropology or the importance of microstories from abroad.

Avoiding the issue of micro and macro stories, one does not need to talk about micro stories as much as case studies that are, hopefully, unquestionably valid. In the last few years, there has been a change in the research perspective. The new perspective claims that when researching lower priesthood, one should do more than just analyse sources in large quantities; what is required is closeup "qualitative studies" that focus on the characters of unique stories and their personalities. It is also true of these case studies that it is not concrete persons that matter, nor their so-called "unveiling," or even doing justice in their name. In this sense, the focus is not on "what happened" but rather on "why" and "how". After all, what matters is knowing everything there is to know about a testimony, how interest-driven a letter is, and the multiple ways an event can be interpreted.

The studies presented in the book show that the authors (such as Bence Ament-Kovács, Gábor Koloh, János Bárh, Judith Kis-Halas, Gyula Perger, and

—of course— Daniel Bárth, the coordinator of the volume) are not driven by ideology, which is why both the pros and cons have been neutrally presented. Efforts have been made not to generalise unique events. With these stories, the focus was on the culture behind them and the structure of this culture. Similarly, priority was not given to specific individuals but to the “institutions” and “symbolic intellectual worlds” they represented, as well as certain priestly habits, attitudes, “roles,” and collective “meanings,” not to mention the symbolic forms associated with the culture of local communities. Out of all this, even if the only thing the authors have interpreted correctly with a “dense description” is a little trace or a sign, they have still managed to bring us closer to understanding the social structure of religion and how it operates.

