

STANDING BY THE NICENE CREED. THE CONFESSION OF  
DEBRECEN NEW ORTHODOXY MOVEMENT (1875). ITS EMERGENCE,  
THEOLOGICAL VIEWS AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH LIBERAL  
THEOLOGY IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT: Hungarian Reformed Christians experienced the emergence of liberal theology coming from mainly German, Swiss and Dutch centres of higher learning during the course of the nineteenth century. This new theological trend which repeated most of the non-orthodox teachings, often labelled as heresy during the patristic era, or false teaching in the medieval Catholic church, gained currency owing to the impact of Enlightenment in Europe. The *Zeitgeist* with its buoyant and dominant ideology named liberalism promoted precious values such as freedom, progress, science and development that married in various robe and forms with different Christian worldviews most notable what came to be called liberal theology 'liberale theologie' in Germany, 'moderne theologie' in the Netherlands or theology of science of religion (*vallástudományi teológia*) in Hungary. The challenge posed to the core doctrine of Christian theology by liberal theology had an incredible impact Hungarian Protestantism and the debate led to the emergence of Confession of Debrecen by new-orthodox theologians in 1875. The Confession of a peculiar expression that is somewhat similar to the Nicæan Creed yet it is different in some aspects. This paper uncovers how the debated evolved, the confession came into being and then it explicates the creed itself drawing lines of explanations to core issues of freedom of examination, *semper reformanda* and the voluntary obligation of accepting a faith upon entering a religious community. In so doing, the paper also throws light on some of the doctrinal differences of both theological camps, and underlines that even liberal theologians created doctrines despite of their desperate and good intentioned endeavour to reformulate the old Christian belief such as incarnation resurrection and alike.

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It is vital to notice that the Evangelical Protestant Newspaper came into being as a journal for new orthodox theological movement of Debrecen in 1875. Its aim was

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to counterbalance liberal theology which overwhelmingly influenced the Protestant theological landscape of Hungarian Kingdom. The very first issue of the journal starts with a confession of faith, called the Declaration of Faith by the theological professors in Debrecen, popularly called Debrecen Creed of 1875. The initiator of the movement was Sen. Imre Révész, the main minister of Great Church of Debrecen, the so-called Calvinist Rome of Hungary since 1860s. His aide was Ferenc Balogh, who became the leader of the new orthodoxy when he was appointed a professor of Church History in 1866.

The operation of the Evangelical Protestant Newspaper begins with the “main features of the doctrinal position of the current theology teachers in Debrecen”, or as it is popularly known, the Debrecen Creed (Tóth et al. 1875: 3–5, 13–15, 21–23, 37–39). This step is more than indicative. The theological teachers’ statement rejects the “non-denominational” theological principles that were also established organizationally in October 1871. Its creed can also be considered a kind of official position statement of the largest church district. Révész mentioned in the columns of his journal, *Figyelmező* (Observer) that the theological teachers also prepared a study in 1872 (Révész 1873: 298), but surprisingly it was only published in January 1875. The report of the committee commissioned by the district to give an opinion on the Protestant Union and the debate evaluating the credal statement were not held, on the grounds that it would have been discussed on the last day of the church district meeting, and the laity were not present (Litkei 1872: 1057). From the entry in Ferenc Balogh’s Debrecen Diary, we know that a draft, which was published as the Debrecen Confession only in 1875, was already ready in March 1872. The diary provides exciting details about the circumstances surrounding the creation of the declaration. Balogh writes this on March 7, 1872:

Today is a notable day. We professors of Theology have come together for the second time at the home of our colleague Mihály Tóth, to establish our critical and at the same time informative statement against the Protestant Union movements. [...] Our meeting was truly constructive. So our statement is founded, which is based on the Holy Scriptures and the *doctrine of the Holy Trinity*. [...] Menyhárt’s paper is so exhaustive, justified, a product of a true Christian spirit, which influenced us all, that we adopted his with a few modifications. I completely agree with Menyhárt, I am happy about this. In the end, I expressed our joy that such a notable document could be created, to which we can all sign our names. Debrecen “*locum est*”, it can be said. This will be a constructive speech and will give peace and faith to many hundreds of souls. I asked God’s blessing on the drafter. He thought a lot, and it came to fruition, because he is a believing theologian. *Debrecen seems to be the saviour of the ref. Church again, if it is included in its documents*. The plan is: to present our declaration to the Debrecen

clergy and, having met with approval, to print it out and distribute it primarily to our pastors. (Balogh 1872: fol. 336–337)

Two weeks later, on Friday, March 23, he notes the followings:

In any case, this is a notable day! [...] We, as professors of Theology, have made this new confession with a calm conscience. I have only two points for our colleague Menyhárt (Balogh 1872: fol. 338–339) of the entire beautiful work, and towards the end, if it was accepted, where it is said about Christianity: but it can also be perfected in that the effect on the feeling, will, etc. can still be extended, the points of the Sermon on the Mount, eternal peace, etc. At the end is also where (my, that is Balogh's own contribution) civilization, culture, humanism is brought up and examples of Antioch, Carthage, etc. are mentioned. In addition to these, some of my scattered observations were also taken into account, and at my request, this sentence was inserted into the section on miracles today: 'and thus – they are – not unnecessary'. (Balogh 1872: fol. 339)

According to the resolution of the theology faculty, Sámuel Tóth, professor of Dogmatics was entrusted with the 'clarification' of the study prepared by Menyhárt, to record the observations of his colleagues and to present the matter to Bishop Bálint Révész, who according to the canon is also the guardian of "the basic doctrines of faith". Bishop Bálint Révész's "canonical" task was to communicate the position of the theological teachers of Debrecen to the local clergy. The teachers hoped that the declaration would be published. Perhaps the general assembly of the church district in April 1872 could have provided an opportunity for this. The text was signed by all four theological teachers: János Menyhárt, Mihály Tóth, Sámuel Tóth and Ferenc Balogh (Balogh 1872: fol. 340). The "combat" nature of the entire orthodox-liberal theological debate is well illustrated by the dialogue between Mihály Tóth and Balogh, which took place at the time of the signing:

[Mihály Tóth:] This historical document will be and remain, and a spark will become a flame. I [Balogh] replied: only if it entails the building up in Christ and the strengthening of believers and our church, can we be satisfied. Finally, at the street door, my last words were: "neque volentis, neque currentis, sed miserentis Dei". (Balogh 1872: fol. 340)

However, the declaration, as noted before, was only published three years later in the *Evangelical Protestant Journal*.

The declaration, dated as of November 14, 1874, and finally published in Jan-

uary 1875 in Balogh' newly launched journal, had a serious impact. The father of Hungarian liberal theology, Mór Ballagi also wrote three open letters in the columns of Protestant Ecclesiastical and School Newspaper (PEIL) (Ballagi 1875: 129–138, 193–199, 257–266), to which János Menyhárt, professor of Old and New Testament Exegesis in Debrecen replied in his article entitled “Observations” (Menyhárt 1875: 105–107), and Ferenc Balogh also wrote three long studies entitled “Open Answer” to Mór Ballagi (Balogh 1875: 93–96, 133–138, 153–156). Other members of the liberal Protestant Union established in 1870 also lined up alongside Ballagi, including Albert Kovács, Ödön Kovács, Domokos Simén, Samu Weber, József Peti, János Pereszlényi, etc. In contrast to them, supporting the orthodox statement, the ten deacons and five chief trustees of the Reformed Church District of Transtibiscan issued the “Transtibiscan Declaration” in April 1875, practically signing the confession of faith formulated by the teachers of Debrecen. This was a courageous stand, and if not the whole of the Transtibiscan Church District, then a significant part of it openly accepted the confession of faith formulated in traditional forms.

The ‘theological position of the current theological teachers of Debrecen’, as published in the “Evangelical Protestant Newspaper”, appeared to be a pleasant phenomenon. Standing on the holy ground of the Gospel, they courageously identified the essential main points, while leaving the path of freedom and progress open for the less essential ones. ...we are filled with joy that the young generation, preparing for the important pastoral career, is being educated on solid evangelical beliefs and spiritually prepared for the struggle of life, for the service of the Lord Jesus Christ... (Tiszántúli nyilatkozat 1875: 161)

The above does not mean, of course, that Debrecen and Transtibiscan Church diocese, which was the largest church district in the Hungarian Reformed tradition, were completely strongholds of orthodoxy: in Transtibiscan, many people sympathized with liberal theology. This has been demonstrated by Ferenc Balogh's earlier opinion, which presented public opinion in Debrecen, but the so-called “Nyírbátor decree” published within the diocese, which differed from the Transtibiscan declaration, also indicates the same thing (Nyírbátori végzés 1876: 407). The gathered pastors did not consider it appropriate to teach the miracles of the Bible in religious education in public schools, because “they lead to superstitious beliefs” (Heiszler (1876: 426). This immediately provoked a fierce protest from the Orthodoxy of Debrecen, as fifteen pastors of the Diocese of Felső-Szabolcs publicly denied the supernatural nature of the Holy Scripture (Heiszler 1876: 425–426). Sámuel Tóth also argues with the diocesan representative of Sály, Rev. Mór Bartha, over the existence of miracles (Tóth 1876: 386). Despite all the controversy, it can be said that through Sámuel Tóth

professor of Dogmatics, who was the chief notary of the church district, and with the support of Bishop Bálint Révész, the joint stance of the theological teachers had a serious impact in the district. Among other things, this moment also contributed to Debrecen entering the history of theology as a stronghold of Protestant orthodoxy in Hungary, in addition to the above.

The situation is similar in Budapest. Although it was the stronghold of liberal theology not all key and influential persons subscribed to modern theology at the beginning. There, the liberal Pál Török had been Ballagi's friend and silent companion since the 1840s. After Filó's departure and Tatai's death from Budapest Theological Seminary in the early 1860s, the teaching staff became almost entirely liberal. In the Reformed Church District of Dunamellék, the later bishop, Károly Szász, led the opposition. First, Pál Török was called upon to prepare an account of theological matters, and then, enjoying the tailwind of this account, Áron Szilády and seven of his companions raised serious objections to the activities of teachers Ballagi and Kovács at the 1874 general assembly of the church district. The main criticism against Ballagi was that he did not pay "sufficient attention to the systematic and complete teaching of the doctrine of the Reformed Church", and Albert Kovács was a practical theologian who did not really serve in congregations (Duna River Reformed Church District 1874: no. 69).

*Interpretation of free inquiry: freedom of conscience versus the binding force of faith*

The *Zeitgeist* always had an impact on various understandings of Christian faith. Liberal theology was not an exception to the rule at all. On the contrary, it absorbed the fashionable, appealing and permeating worldview to Christian theology with an unreflective optimism where human beings were perceived as not utterly corrupt beings like traditional theology maintained but people who are initially and essentially good persons and can be even educated to a higher level of morality.

It is characteristic of theological liberalism that, based on the theories of political liberal scholars, it seeks to transpose the absolute freedom and free inquiry of the individual into its ecclesiastical worldview, when it says:

We Protestants write free inquiry on our flags and at the same time we make our scholars swear to teach throughout their lives what was established a quarter of a century ago, as if we were to put a man on a leash and say to him: behold, you are free, because you can move freely along the entire length of the leash (Ballagi 1871: 6–23).

The radical liberals did not even abandon the idea of freedom in the idealization of it, but in the absolutization of its practical application. They imagined the ideal *reality* they had formulated as a real reality that could be realized in its full form. They could

not really deal with the fruitful dialectical tension between the two. Albert Kovács clearly rejected the regulatory authority of creeds accepted in the church when, in the Protestant Union, he demanded “complete individual freedom” in “theological sciences and beliefs.” (Kovács 1871: 25–27). At first glance, his position may seem similar to the Reformation approach, but liberal theology subjects everything to the criteria of human science and reason not in the Bible and faith in the Word of God embodied in the Scripture. Ödön Kovács, his brother Albert and Ballagi promoted a complete rejection of confessions. However, not all liberal theologians were as radical in this respect as the vocal theological teachers of Pest.

Reformed Bishop Domokos Szász of Transylvania, had a much more moderate liberal attitude towards confessions. According to him, they should not be regarded as having only the “value of antiquity”, since they contain “treasures” and “are still needed today” (Szász 1872: 46). One of his main questions was “to what extent and in what sense can confessions be attributed binding force within the bosom of individual denominations and towards their members?” (Szász 1872: 46) The early Church, from the time of Tertullian, regarded confessions as “unchangeable and unconditionally binding”. In the words of the Church Father himself:

The rule of faith is truly one, unchangeable and immutable, namely, that we must believe in one God, the Almighty, the Creator of the world, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, rose again from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come to judge the living and the dead, and by the resurrection of the body. (Tertullian 1844: 1)

Szász argued that Tertullian’s use of the wording of the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) is of particular importance to the Reformed ear, since the expression “*sola immobilis, et irreformabilis*” means “alone immovable and irreformable.” For the 19th-century theologian, this also means that the principle “*ecclesia semper reformari debet*” simply does not apply to the Credo formula presented above, since this summary of faith is truly “*irreformable*.” If we take Tertullian’s statement literally at this point, then there can be no dispute that we can only think of God and his Son as persons, and that we should consider the other events of salvation history - not only the resurrection of Christ, but also the last judgment and the resurrection of the body - as unchangeable articles of faith. The liberals were also aware of the above point, but according to Szász, the Reformers went beyond this with the principle of sola Scriptura. “Since the exclusive authority of the word of God in the Holy Scriptures was accepted as a principle,” “the unconditional binding force of all confessions had to cease.” (Szász 1872: 47) Szász’s statement is absolutely correct, but his conclusion is ultimately in-

correct, because what the Reformers formulated this thesis against was the vast body of documents of the later Catholic tradition; and the very aim for what they reached out to the Holy Scriptures was for the purpose of examining and confirming the fundamental theological truths of faith. Szász finds excessive, on the one hand, the “rigid adherence to the letters of the confessions,” which, according to them, “is the only remedy against the final dissolution of the Church.” On the other hand, he condemns the kind of thinking that “wants to make an absolute break” with the past, and people who consider confessions to be merely “memorials of a ruined world.” (Szász 1872: 49) He sees the solution in distinguishing the essence of confessions from their form:

Even the most perfect confession cannot be considered a completely faithful reflection of the gospel of Christ. (Szász 1872: 50)

Owing to this realisation, he sees an opportunity to change the creed, provided that it not only “jealously guards” the treasures entrusted to them, but also “purifies them of the dross elements” (Szász 1872: 50). However, he calls for a cautious change, because it is important that the “inner unity” of the church be preserved, that is, that the basic truths of “religious faith and life” be preserved, “*insofar as they are in agreement with the Word of God*” (Szász 1872: 50). So far, he seems to be taking a mediating position. Before he turns to the main subject of his presentation, he already raises his guiding questions like arrows. He repeats himself, saying that some people consider the confession to be the echoes of a ruined world. “And is there not some truth in this statement?” By raising this question, he has already made it clear that he somehow belongs to one of the liberal camps. This becomes quite obvious from the following statement:

Who believes that there is a hell under the earth’s crust, [...] Christ’s earthly body ascended into heaven, and will return again and judge the world, [...] that the same body in which we now live will be resurrected. (Szász 1872: 52)

At the end of his theological reflections, which are more rhetorical than coherent reasoning, Szász nevertheless votes in favour of opposing and even denying the fundamental Christian beliefs. He denies the existence of hell, the ascension to heaven, the *parousia*, God’s just judgment at the end of time, and the resurrection of the body. His conclusion may seem somewhat surprising, since he built a kind of intermediary position in a significant part of his treatise. His case, which started out as moderate, also clearly shows that instead of a confession of faith, he valued reason, reason based on experience, more than a confession of faith based on the revelation of the Bible. Liberal theology did not recognize any limits on human reason, since it was essentially human-centred. With its boundless optimism in man’s goodness, his ability to self-improve, and the development of science, it placed freedom above everything,

even above God. Consequently, the liberal theologian did not want to recognize any constraints or rules of faith.

According to the orthodox view, liberal theology thus failed to understand the essence of Christianity, the following, the imitation of Christ, since Jesus calls on everyone to follow voluntarily. It illustrates with several parables the religious philosophical idea that freedom can only be interpreted in a system of relationships, that absolute freedom does not exist. If someone becomes a follower of Christ, then they voluntarily undertake the service of Christ: “you have only done what was asked of you.” The statement of the theological faculty formulating the Debrecen Confession truly points to this issue. The freedom undertaken in Christ has limits. Consequently, the church, which is built on the teachings of Christ, the community of individuals who voluntarily undertake to follow Christ, also has limits.

The theologian and philosopher of religion of Protestant new orthodoxy, József Heiszler, was quite shocked when one of his good “modern” friends explained that “Protestant freedom of inquiry has *no limits, no boundaries*. This freedom is human and yet unlimited.” (Heiszler 1874: 414) Against the liberal claim, Heiszler uses the tools of the philosophy of religion to defend the fundamental principles of Christianity. He speaks of God in a specific sense, as “absolute spirit,” on a confessional theological basis. Catholics, with their dogma of infallibility, and liberals, with their claim to “limitlessness,” did not “refrain from appropriating divine prerogatives.” (Heiszler 1874: 413) As a theologian and philosopher of religion who adheres to confessions, he is very aware of the significance of the claim raised by liberals. On the one hand, he states that the confession “as a momentous but epochal declaration of Christian self-consciousness, has a temporary boundary and is not an absolute limit”; and on the other hand, he also clearly sees that “symbolic books are also temporary declarations of Christian religious self-consciousness”. From this, he draws the conclusion that these cannot be absolute limits, since the validity of both of the above-mentioned things depends on “how faithful the exposition is to the divine spirit that expresses itself and acts in the writing” (Heiszler 1874: 414). In his view, this is the criterion of the examination of the professing Christian.

It can be seen that in terms of exploring and establishing the problem, he thinks similarly to liberal theology, but he does not reach the conclusion that many liberal thinkers do: if the Word of God cannot be accurately expressed in human words, especially in written, precisely formulated doctrines, then there should be no fixed creed. Heiszler cannot agree with this. Furthermore, he cannot accept the proposition that there is no limit to investigation. Even more specifically, that there is no limit to ‘research’ on the Christian religion within the Christian church. The radical liberals did not really admit to themselves and consistently carry out their line of

thought, although the Orthodox often demanded it of them. Heiszler, standing on a philosophical basis for religion, underlines that “*the absolute limit, the determinant of every thing and being is its own essence, that is, its internal law, its life principle.*” (Heiszler 1874: 416) In other words, he formulated a theory of subjectivity that later became known under the name of Polanyi much earlier. Since there is no objectivity in the absolute sense, there exists only the striving for it, which of course a standard that a scholar would need to endeavour to grasp. At the same time, it is maintained that subjectivity is an existing reality for every person, whether a person admits and acknowledges that it applies to him completely, covering all aspects of his life, or not. (Erdei 2000: 26-32).

Heiszler justifies his thesis with three arguments. First, “the Reformation cannot be limited by any other principle, authority, or tradition than Christian self-consciousness, religious conscience”. Second, true Protestantism is characterized by “rigid scripturalism”, on the basis of which it stands in opposition to Roman Catholics and other denominations. “No authority, no tradition, no compulsion... only and forever Scripture”. What is common to both is that the Holy Spirit is revealed in the Christian person as a “religious subject” and in Scripture. The third determining principle is arrived at from the first two. “If the Holy Spirit is at work in Scripture and manifests in the conscience of the individual, why should he not also manifest in that *organicus collectivus* of religious subjects which we call the church?” (Heiszler 1874: 416) After this he raises the question of whether it is permissible, from the standpoint of conscience, to completely dispense with the declarations of the individual’s public Christian consciousness, “that is, the Holy Spirit manifesting himself in the organic collectivism of religious subjects?” (Heiszler 1874: 416) Here he touches on a sensitive point of liberal theology, which makes the Holy Spirit a human spirit or a religious-philosophical concept of Spirit.

Heiszler concludes on the basis of religious philosophy that it is not fair to completely dispense with creeds and symbolic books in investigations, because “they are the social programs of Christian consciousness”. In doing so, he indirectly states the principle of the rule of faith, according to which a system of doctrine and dogma accepted and established by a religious community functions as the “organizational and operational regulations” of any social organization, which the individual who enters the given community voluntarily undertakes, and therefore, in fact, it is not the individual truths, but the truths considered general by the faith of the community that are the guiding principles. Of course, he also maintains that if someone, even as an individual, teaches better, then universally valid articles of faith can be developed, but *only* on the basis of, and in accordance with, Holy Scripture (Simmler 1562: 9).

The extent to which the principle of *sola Scriptura* is valid for him is evident from the following statement:

“True Protestantism protests against the restriction of religious conscience and subjectivity caused by external human authority, but never against Scripture, because it is essentially scriptural, and never against the scriptural church, because it would then deny its own life principle, and thus become a rigid, sterile, and empty negation.” (Heiszler 1874: 417–418) This position was further clarified by Lajos Filó professor from Budapest and Imre Révész, Sr., because they also do not see unconditional authority in the creeds. They emphasized that it is not the creeds that have eternal validity, but the Word of God (Barth 1925: 186). Orthodoxy understood the Word to mean the Holy Scriptures, and from them primarily the Gospel, the content of which was summarized in the Apostles’ Creed. According to Ferenc Balogh,

The apostles also lived with Christian evangelical freedom, demanding and using the freedom of interpretation of the Holy Scripture for believers, respecting the achievements of the great Reformation of the 16th century, our confessions of faith, and adhering to them insofar as they agree with the Holy Scriptures; in case of divergence, the decisive authority always belongs to the Holy Scriptures. (Ötvös 1997: 174).

The main tenet of the Orthodox was that if a Christian did not accept the guidelines of inquiry, i.e. the *regula fidei*, the principle of the rule of faith, he had a duty of conscience to leave the Christian church. The liberal theology operating within the church rejected the *regula fidei* and subordinated the “regulation” of his thinking to reason, not to faith. It was truly not an ecclesiastical, non-church-loyal theology, but began to create a secular religious science dealing with religion, adhering to the church from within but outside the church in its spirit. We saw the correct, consistent and almost exactly extracted summary of this from the fundamental principles most clearly in Ödön Kovács. Others did not clearly formulate for themselves where they stood, and were even less willing to draw the ideological and existential conclusions that the leading figures of confessional theology had pointed out.

The Révész’s *Figyelmező* and the theological professors of Debrecen formulated the consequence of the *regula fidei* most definitely. The representatives of the new orthodoxy “considered the biblical teaching of the Holy Scriptures and adherence to the creeds important” (Tóth et al. 1875: 3.13.21.37; Balogh 1872: fol. 336–337). According to Balogh, the creeds formulated such propositions that are “unchangeable fundamental truths”. To justify this position, Balogh refers to Tertullian’s above-mentioned work, *De virginibus velandis* (On the Veiling of Virgins), emphasizing that the fundamental Christian truth does not fall “under reformation, it must remain eternal” (Balogh 1872: 42). In this way, he indirectly states that there are changea-

ble elements in the inherited creeds and symbolic documents. Thus, the principle of *semper reformanda* can be applied to the tenets of faith contained in them, with the exception of the cornerstone dogmas. They can be accepted with a believing heart, but in this regard, the people of Debrecen highlighted the importance of the fact that theological teachers, pastors and people belonging to any church have an obligation of faith (Tóth et al. 1875: 4).

The extent to which the Debrecen Confession did not stand alone is also shown by the article published by the pen of “Alföldi”: if someone has made a decision and is “a follower of Christ, [...] he is under an obligation of faith” (Alföldi 1875: 46). Almost four years before the publication of the Debrecen Confession, Ferenc Balogh drew attention to the fact that the teachings of Jesus had a binding force for those who voluntarily followed him. His teaching – like dogma – served as a standard, a criterion. That is why he asks: “then faith in Jesus, and justification by this faith, is not a dogma?” “Does he not teach it clearly and with weight (sic!) that he is the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in him has eternal life (John 6.47)” (Balogh 1872: 42).

The Debrecen Confession first states that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, “to form one’s religious convictions according to the laws of one’s own reason and the desires of one’s own heart.” (Tóth et al. 1875: 4) This is an “inalienable right” for man. However, for a Christian, the “innate, completely unrestricted right of man” to think freely, to “believe what he pleases,” only exists up to a certain point, until he becomes a follower of Christ. If this happens, then the “Christian no longer has that right, he has bound himself by using that right.” (Tóth et al. 1875: 5) This theological vision, in which the confession of faith accepted by the community is binding on the individual entering, stands in contrast to the modern theologians’ position that proclaims absolute freedom of individual belief. The Debrecen theologians find this kind of theological vision of liberals unacceptable, and write about it as follows:

It (liberal theology) chooses to reject the dogmas of the Christian religion, instructing believers not to consider the Bible a canon of faith and more precious than other books, but to believe whatever they please [...] we cannot fully approve of this thinking and trend, because we consider freedom not constructive, but destructive, while we consider the maintenance of the positive elements – beliefs and facts – existing in the Christian religion to be salutary and necessary. (Tóth et al. 1875: 4)

According to the logic of the argument, it is unacceptable for them that the individual Christian should believe whatever he pleases. Instead, the Christian has an obligation of faith, to which he “voluntarily submitted himself by professing and wishing to consider himself a Christian” (Tóth et al. 1875: 4). This is expressed in the sacrament

of baptism, where a confession of faith is also made, as Peter did: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Tóth et al. 1875: 4). The theologians from Debrecen summarize their opinion as follows:

If Peter could only serve as the foundation stone of the Mother Church of Jesus Christ because he believed and confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, it naturally follows that this article of faith and religion is also required of all those who are members of the Mother Church, which rests on such a foundation, or who, according to the biblical view, want to be its stones. (Tóth et al. 1875: 4)

Ferenc Balogh also emphasized in his numerous religious writings that joining the church is based on the individual’s conscience, on the free decision of the person. One can join the church of Christ, but then one must accept its tenets as “basic rules”. An individual who has joined a church community operating on the territory of the state, as one of the possible associations he likes, is obliged to adapt to its rules. Referring to Christian dogma, Balogh asks the question:

Why does such a law not oblige? Why does such a dogma not oblige? [...] Faith is precisely the root, the foundation of morality, because it obliges it with the authority of the truth – Such freedom which knows no duty, and which is not bound by the most holy, is only nominal freedom, *factus voci*. Indeed, the yoke of the gospel of Christ, according to him, is even easy and delightful, and

We see again and again that new orthodox theologians emphasize the inalienable right of free choice, but at the same time also the voluntary community, the measure of which is the confession of faith, the acceptance of the Bible and the canon. These contain those cardinal, unquestionable basic truths that the Christian believes to be true and valid for himself. The main representatives of orthodoxy have repeatedly declared that it is not necessary for everyone to belong to the church, that one can join somewhere else, and one can also leave. This is the ecclesiological aspect of their views on the confession of faith.

József Heiszler puts the “moderns”, that is, the liberal theologians, and the Nazarenes under the same umbrella from the point of view that both have stretched the boundaries of the church to such an extent that the Nazarenes have left it, while the Unitarians have not (Tótfalvi 1871: 380; Révész 1872: 22). The “moderns” actually form a “philanthropic association” (Tóth et al. 1875: 4). They are no different from other religions, e.g. the Essenes, or those who are “the best of the old pagan world”, because like Christians they also lived a moral life. The orthodox point out that it is not only Christians who live a religious and highly moral life. However, high morality does not make someone a Christian, because proving that they did good deeds for

non-moral reasons is hardly any better than making the same claim against the vast majority of Christians (Tóth et al. 1875: 5).

The basic condition for belonging to Christianity or one of its denominations is following Christ and believing in him and in the Father who sent him. János Menyhárt, professor of exegesis in Debrecen, firmly rejects the liberalism of Ballagi, who “mockingly” attacked the theologians who professed the Holy Trinity. The other great figure of sober orthodoxy, next to Révész, argues that the articles of faith – being statements of faith – if “not rational, but not irrational, are rather beyond human comprehension and supersensible” (Menyhárt 1875: 106). Menyhárt sees the new orthodoxy of Debrecen in the same spiritual line as the earlier ‘all Protestant theologians’, when we claim that man can only use his reason in the formation of religious convictions in complete independence until he recognizes the divine, and therefore faith-regulating, authority of the Bible (Menyhárt 1875: 106). He also points out that whoever has recognized this, with certain limitations, “thoroughly understands the Bible, which is recognized as an authority, from its well-understood doctrines and forms his convictions in the spirit of these.” (Menyhárt 1875: 106) The central creed, formulated item by item, in the Debrecen Creed, served as an example of this.

*The central tenets of the Debrecen Confession and the dogma and confession in the two schools of thought*

According to the representatives of Debrecen Orthodoxy, the “specific characteristics” of the early Christian teaching were the following: Christ’s death on the cross, his resurrection, and his divine nature (Tóth et al. 1875: 4). It may sound surprising, but in the Debrecen Credo of 1875 we do not find the understanding of later Pietism and Evangelicalism that the main characteristics include “conversion, the practice of love, and the urge for an impeccable moral life in general.” Although the evangelical Scottish influence is remarkable tangible both in Debrecen (Balogh) and Budapest (Szabó), one clearly notices the lack of this peculiar view of contemporaneous piety. On the contrary, the Debrecen theologians believed that the persecutions of Christians were not caused by the latter, but by their views on Christ. Their beliefs were the following, which they formulated “following the canon”:

We believe in God (sic!) the reason for the world.

We believe in the Holy Trinity (sic!), the principle of the moral world and the redemption of men, just as we believe in the Father, as not only the creator and provident God, but also the moral lawgiver, the judge of men, the one who repays everyone according to their deeds, we believe in the Son, the prince of life and light, who redeemed men who had separated themselves from God through their sins and fallen under divine

punishment, and led them back to God, and who, having obtained for them the fatherly love of God, the grace that grants them forgiveness of sins and eternal blessed life, assured them of all who cling to Him with living faith and strive to live in spiritual communion with Him, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the originator, the constant helper, and the strengthener of the union of the saints who have received redemption and grace in Jesus Christ, we believe that these three are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally existing power and authority, a living and eternal God.

We believe in the resurrection of the dead, immortality and eternal life after death.

We believe that for the revival of faith in Jesus Christ, to make it more alive and effective, to live in spiritual communion with Jesus Christ, to bring about a complete moral transformation, the preaching of the words of God and the administration of the sacraments obtained by Jesus Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are salutary and necessary. (Tóth et al. 1875: 14-15)

A concise comparison between the Nicene and Debrecen New Orthodoxy Creeds provides much food for reflection. The Structure and Core Themes of Debrecen Confession follows a classic Christian doctrinal pattern: (1) Belief in God, (2) Belief in the Trinity, (3) Belief in salvation through Christ, (4) Belief in the Holy Spirit, (5) Belief in resurrection and eternal life, (6) Belief in means of grace (Word and sacraments). It could be stated that this structure is very similar to historic creeds like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, although the Debrecen Confession articulated by new orthodox is more expanded and explanatory.

As far as the doctrinal sections are concerned the following could be observed.

First, God portrayed as Creator with Moral Authority. New orthodox underscores God as creator, provider, moral lawgiver, and judge while traditional Christianity exhibits the Same core idea—God is both creator and judge of humanity. Nonetheless it also underlines oneness and omnipotence of God. Therefore, this aligns closely with mainstream Christian theology, especially Protestant formulations. Second, regarding the Trinity, Debrecen confession explicitly defines Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as “personally existing” yet one God. it is in line with the historic doctrine: the Trinity is one of the central doctrines affirmed at the Council of Nicaea. However, it is vital to underline that Nicene confession does not mention the word, Trinity. Third, the Christological aspects of Debrecen confession are *different since it is not talking about homousios at all like Nicaea* “true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation. The phrasing here is slightly philosophical (“personally existing power and authority”), but the doctrine is standard. Furthermore, there is a strong soteriological aspect of Christology in Debrecen confession. Jesus Christ (The Son). It

follows the Calvinists tradition starting with the acknowledgement of original sin since Humanity fell into sin and divine punishment is just. Therefore, Christ redeems and restores humans to God is explicitly stated. Nonetheless, now orthodoxy does not mention Virgin birth, Pontius Pilate, ascension to heaven, Christ's role as a judge. The soteriological aspects are underlined which is in line with the contemporary Evangelical – Pietist understanding of faith. Therefore, Salvation includes forgiveness and eternal life, and a Christlike person's life requires living faith and moral effort. The Debrecen confession stresses both faith and moral transformation, which is typical of many Protestants and Catholic teachings, though phrased in a more ethical and philosophical tone.

Finally, Debrecen confession brings in a strong ecclesiological component which is intertwined with an expressive Christology. In the text the Holy Spirit is the originator, helper, and strengthener of the community of believers. whereas Traditional Christianity emphasises the Holy Spirit sanctifies, guides, and unites the Church. The ecclesiological feature of Debrecen confession underlines community of believers where means of Grace (Word & Sacraments) are vital to form an *ecclesiola*. Therefore, the Debrecen confession not only emphasizes preaching and sacraments but also specifically names them as baptism and Lord's Supper. In sum, it could be observed that Debrecen confession is fully consistent with the teachings of traditional Christianity, though expressed in more functional terms. Obvious that this wording strongly resembles Protestant theology, especially Lutheran or Reformed traditions. Distinctive features of Debrecen Creed are the followings. It uses more explanatory, philosophical language. It strongly emphasizes moral transformation, connects doctrine with practical religious life, and avoids highly technical theological terms (like "consubstantial"). This suggests that its ideas that prof. Menyhárt penned down may come from a later Protestant confession or catechetical text, rather than an early church creed.

#### *Dogma and confession as voluntary obligation*

The followers of Debrecen new orthodoxy emphasized that the articles of faith and dogmas "not only do not have a numbing effect on the soul, [...] but rather have a beneficial warmth and animating effect on the heart." (Tóth et al. 1875: 15) According to them, dogmas are the truths of the faith of the heart. In contrast, the liberals' idea of religious thought was that Jesus did not teach dogmas. They proclaimed that religious thought is eternal, its essence is always the same, but the expressions of the thought change with each age (Ballagi 1871: 65; Cf. Ballagi 1876: 785). According to the liberal theology, dogmatics only mean forms of content; they are like clothes, attire, which after a while become obsolete or simply unusable (Peti [n.d.]: 28). It is

clear that what the Hungarian liberal theologians are doing is nothing more than distinguishing form and content in the light of the idea of development of Liberalism as a worldview. Liberal theology firmly believes that the creation of dogmas and creeds should be avoided.

The extent that how much they did not know what to do with the creeds, the symbolic documents of the church, is clearly shown by the 2nd paragraph of the statutes of the Protestant Union in Hungary, which, in addition to rejecting the “articles of faith”, stipulates that “the centre of gravity of Christianity must be returned to the religious-moral community of life” (Kovács 1871: 25; Cited in Frecska 1872: 243). This approach sees this religious-moral ideal in the Sermon on the Mount of the historical Jesus as a narrowed gospel. According to this, Jesus realized in the highest human spiritual existence that which ‘man’ can know from the Spirit. For anthropocentric liberal thinking, God, his incarnation, his personality and his redemptive actions are simply incomprehensible. The question of dogma also echoes the basic position that the subject and the object, the transcendent and the immanent merge. The theological application of the philosophy of identity in this area follows that only the individual, the unlimited faith of man has absolute truth. The object of faith is also transferred to man “instead of faith in the spiritual self-communicating work of God.” (Tófalvi 1871: 378).

According to the liberal Christian, the great achievement of the Reformation is that it made man the judge, the decision maker over religious truths, and even against them (Ballagi 1871: 293). In Mór Ballagi’s view, the individual, or more precisely his opinion, is placed on a pedestal, with almost obligatory and unconditional validity. No human power or authority can rule over the faith and conscience of a Protestant person (Márkus 1983: 101). He considers everything “that aims to level individual convictions” to be inspired by evil (Ballagi 1871: 18). The Unitarian bishop from Transylvania, Domokos Simén formulated a similar idea at the second annual general meeting of the Protestant Association: the creation of dogma “contradicts freedom of conscience” (Simén 1872: 96). which is “the most sacred of human rights” (Ballagi 1875: 129). Nothing shows the extremely human-centred theological-religious view of the liberal Ferenc Szilágyi better than the fact that liberal theology emphasizes man’s right to live out himself in the entire field of religion, stemming from the fact that man himself is the bearer of the revelation (Szilágyi 1864: 169). It is no wonder that the creeds and dogmas clearly stood in the way of this radically human-centred, apparently Christian religious conception. According to liberal theologians, fixed creeds bind man and the divine spirit that manifests itself in him (Szilágyi (1864: 302). Creeds are an obstacle to the divine spirit that resides in man, and are therefore harmful and damning. Modern science has shown that the creeds are not in harmo-

ny with natural science. Human nature cannot be forced into confessions, because if this happens, the creeds arouse hatred for themselves and aversion for religion (Szeremley 1870: 9).

Hungarian liberal theology sees the highest manifestations of the spirit in the new science created by man, thus unconsciously making man himself the standard. According to Domokos Simén's view, only those creeds can be retained that stand the test of science, the standard of (human) reason. If we encounter creeds that are in conflict with modern scientific results, we should put them in museums like we do with antique objects (Simén 1871: 131; Hetessy 1885: 11 kk). According to Ödön Kovács, creeds were originally nothing more than expressions of the faith and conviction of the era that created them (Horváth 1872: 31). The creed was first a formula of religious consciousness, that is, a completely subjective statement, and only later did it become an objective authority (Kovács 1875: 115).

The liberals also well understood the fact that creeds were often strongly influenced by external factors. And secular power has countless times forced church bodies to express their faith in a declaration. Mór Ballagi clearly mentions the influence of power (Ballagi 1875: 257 kk). Liberals argue very eloquently that the "idea", i.e. religious, in this case Christian truth, cannot be fully realized in a single creedal formula formulated by man. This is similar to the Reformer position on the surface, because they also say that "if someone teaches them right," then they are willing to align themselves with them in the Lord, whether the right teaching comes from an individual or a community. However, there is a cardinal difference. This is a question of the standard, the one in relation to which I am willing to change. For the Reformers and the new orthodoxy, this is the Word of God, while for the liberal theologians, it is man himself, human reason, its product that is natural science, that functions as a criterion. Both groups claim for themselves the consciousness that they understand and almost possess the complete truth. Liberals held this idea of truth to be the "spirit of Jesus," while orthodoxy held it to be the proclaimed, incarnated Word of God, communicated to people in the Bible and in history as being essential one with God, the Father. Liberal theologians claimed that the "spirit of Jesus" could not be identified with any creed (Márkus 1983: 103).

If we assume, for the sake of understanding, that the "spirit of Jesus" and the Word of God meant the same thing to the two groups (of course, they were not the same), then both maintained the religious-philosophical proposition that the finite cannot express the infinite, but can only strive for it. However, the orthodox believed that by the grace of God they could understand the truth, the Word of God, that something-someone whom they considered axiomatically absolute, and were open to changing their understood, written opinions according to the principles of the *regula*

*fidei*, while the liberals equally strongly believed that they understood the *spirit of Jesus*, the *absolute morality*, which they also considered to be the axiomatic starting point. In the meantime, however, they set aside the source, the Bible, from which – as members of the Christian church – they primarily took their religious ideas. At the same time, they also rejected the idea that in order to belong to a community, one should ever formulate and record one's own creed in writing. Radical uniformitarian liberals therefore have no business creating a system of doctrine. This contradicts their basic understanding (Kovács 1869: 188). They dismantle the structure of faith, but they cannot create it. This is also touched upon by Lajos Frecska and Imre Révész when they point out that they are trying to do something without even theoretically having any real agreement or clear theological vision among them.

These observations of new orthodoxy only partially hold, because even if the liberals did not consciously create a confession, what they professed about the Christian religion were “belief” propositions, even if they were not systematically presented. However, there was still some kind of consensus on the basic issues: e.g. the denial of the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus is already a kind of “negative” belief, dogma. A dogma can not only be something that we formulate with a positive sign, but also one whose existence we markedly deny. Although the Hungarian liberals rejected the idea of organizing their theological view of faith in propositions, traces of them can still be found in their publications. Gusztáv Nagy, a theology professor from Sárospatak, as a freethinker, already sees the opportunity to formulate propositions, but he does not put them down on paper either. Liberal theology, which was markedly present in the church, therefore undoubtedly had its own presuppositions, premises, i.e. “dogmas of faith”, which were indeed radically different from the accepted teachings of the traditional church.

This study has shown the emergence of new orthodox movement in Hungary as a result to counterbalance the enormous influence of radical liberal theology. It has been pointed out that none of the two major competing trends of theology and their main strongholds were entirely exempt from inner critical groups. In Budapest, where the father of Hungarian Liberal theology Mór Ballagi took the banner from the 1860s slowly a new theological outlook began to emerge and by 1880, the conservative Aladár Szabó, professor of pedagogy and philosophy at Budapest Theological Seminary with various means produced a counterbalance to liberal theology to supersede it by the turn of the century. Similarly, during the struggle between Pest led liberal theology and New Orthodoxy of Debrecen, it has been demonstrated from the diary of Ferenc Balogh the leader of the movement that not only all theological professors were staunch conservative like Mihály Tóth but also in the diocese at large there were also sympathetic voices of liberal theology (see Nyírbátor decree).

It is also a peculiar phenomenon that both theological trends perceived itself as a true heir of Reformation, one labelling itself as true Protestant, the other true Christian. Light has been through on how this self-understanding relied on a different understanding of constituent Christian faith, what the norms, the point of reference was (reason for the liberals, faith in miracles for the new orthodoxy) and how this impacted their understanding of Christology, the personhood of Jesus Christ. Finally, it was explicated that even liberals were producing and construing doctrines by their very statements about Jesus' person and deeds. Moreover, the critique of the new orthodoxy shown that in some sense liberal theology did not do more than repeating theological views that has been on the margins of mainstream Christianity for century and owing to Enlightenment and *Zeitgeist* of contemporaneous liberal political, social and economic climate it managed to gain currency and recognition as another form of doing theology other than those confessing incarnation, virgin birth, atonement, bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Christ. In sum, this study is a reminder of how various schools of thoughts competed for presenting themselves the sole heirs of Christian tradition that always leaves much food for further contemplations.

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