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“Unity and Refinement”. Paths and Quests for Organizational and Ceremonial Unity in the First Half of the 20th Century²

Abstract.

This article explores the efforts of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the first half of the 20th century to achieve uniformity and refinement in its worship practices. The desire for a unified Hungarian Reformed worship service had been a hallmark of previous centuries, leading to a long journey of development in the 20th century. The standardization of the liturgical praxis aimed to create a sense of shared identity and eliminate historical variations in regional worship practices and customs. The movement for liturgical unity had been ongoing for centuries, with earlier attempts including church district agendas published in the 19th century. The publication of the Liturgical Book [*Istentiszteleti Rendtartás*] in 1930, which is the first official Agenda for the whole Reformed Church in Hungary, marked a culmination of efforts towards liturgical unity. The paper highlights the tension between achieving uniformity and preserving diversity within a religious tradition.

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"The Hungarian Reformed Church expressed its spiritual unity also in organizational unit during the Synod in Debrecen."³ – says the foreword to the *Liturgical Book* published in 1930 and officially implemented in 1931, fifty years after the constituting synod held in Debrecen. Homiletical and liturgical instructions and explanations are attached to the text of the canonical regulations issued in the form of a synodal resolution. The embodiment of the unified Reformed Church organization in ecclesiastical law, the Synod, which was authorized to issue liturgical regulations, created after the 1881 Synod, gives the entire Reformed Church in Hungary a new, consistent ritual book: "The Reformed Christian Church in Hungary establishes the following regulation of worship."⁴ The added comment is an important statement of liturgical history: "This book is the fruit of decades of ordinance reform in the Hungarian Reformed Christian Church. This reform was inspired by the idea of *unity and refinement*."⁵ Strongly associated with Bishop László Ravasz, bearing his handprint and theological vision, the liturgical book, known as the "Ravasz-ágenda", actually compiled by an editorial board, is still in the public awareness, being on the one hand a liturgical book that, consciously or not, still defines the practice, style, and language of Hungarian Reformed worship, and, on the other hand, it is the fulfilment of centuries-old aspirations. In this study, we want to provide some context to the history of the *Liturgical Book*, intended to be consistent and issued with the intention of standardization.

The publication entitled *Reformátusok a kegyelem trónusánál – A magyar református istentisztelet megújulásának teológiai alapelvei* [Reformed Believers at the Throne of Grace – Theological Principles for the Renewal of Hungarian Reformed Worship], published by the Liturgical Committee of the General Convention, makes the following statement based on historical experience:

³ RAVASZ, László (comp.) (1930): *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás*. Budapest. [V].

⁴ Op. cit. [3].

⁵ Ibid. The quoted sentence was included unchanged in the 1950 draft of *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás* [Liturgical Book], which was intended to amend the 1930 edition. Ibid.

The unity of the Church is not a ceremonial uniformity but a common faith and hope: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”. It is wrong if this results in a confusing mess. Identical forms that express cohesion are needed. Individualism must be rejected by the law of love. It is desirable that anyone anywhere should be able to participate in Hungarian Reformed worship in such a way that they feel a sense of home and belonging that strengthens our unique identity.⁶

Our Reformed confessional document, the Second Helvetic Confession, also deals with the issue of ceremonial unity and diversity, or “variety”. In compliance with the Reformed tradition, the confession emphasizes the need and importance of unity and identity of doctrine and faith rather than the uniformity of liturgical and ceremonial practices.

Today, having in our churches different rites in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and in some other things, nevertheless do not disagree in doctrine and faith; nor is the unity and fellowship of our churches thereby rent asunder. For the churches have always used their liberty in such rites, as being things indifferent. We also do the same thing today. (*Second Helvetic Confession* XXVII, 2)

The unity of the church is not in external rites. Furthermore, we diligently teach that care is to be taken wherein the truth and unity of the Church chiefly lies, lest we rashly provoke and foster schisms in the Church. Unity consists not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the catholic faith. The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by Holy Scriptures, of which the Apostles’ Creed is a compendium. And, therefore, we read in the ancient writers that there was a manifold diversity of rites, but that they were free, and no one ever thought that the unity of the Church was thereby dissolved. So we teach that the true harmony of the Church consists in doctrines and in the true and harmonious preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and in rites that have been expressly delivered by the Lord. And here we especially urge that saying of the apostle: *Let those of us who are perfect have this mind; and if in any thing you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. Nevertheless let us walk by the same rule according to what we have attained, and let us be of the same mind* (Phil. 3:15–16). (*Second Helvetic Confession* XVII, 27)

⁶ FEKETE, Károly (ed.) (2010): *Reformátusok a kegyelem trónusánál. A magyar református istentisztelet megújulásának teológiai alapelvei*. Budapest, Kálvin. 14. [The translations of all, originally non-English quotations belong to Augusta Szász.]

In the first centuries of the Reformation, the traditions of the so-called "liturgical areas" played a decisive role around Europe and in the Hungarian geographical regions, which must and can be interpreted and evaluated in their own historical, ecclesiastical, historical, and cultural context. The researcher is confronted with a bewildering variety of worship traditions and practices, based on historical sources, agendas, canons, ritual rules and descriptions, hymnbook types, and various historical sources. Due to the historical, ecclesiastical, and cultural contexts mentioned above, our sources show a slightly or highly different liturgical practice in the regions of Eastern Hungary, Upper Hungary, Transdanubia, Transylvania, and the so-called Tiszáninnen region. Historical sources always draw on historical antecedents, organizing, describing, and shaping normative claims about the practices of worship that became common knowledge.

Our early, 16th-17th-century, often sketchy, tract-like liturgical sources and their authors already mention the diversity in the wrong sense, variety, in many cases individualism and fragmentation in ritual matters. The sources of liturgics and agenda history show that prominent church figures, often church leaders, bishops, whose task as church governors in the Reformed tradition was to supervise and oversee the rituals and acts of worship, published from time to time their publications with normative intentions to guide in matters of worship at least once in every century. With one or two exceptions, such as the ritual book of Máté János Samarjai (Lócse, 1636; RMNy, 1654),⁷ there were agendas and, from the 18th century on, mainly small agendas (agendas' extracts) which described and prescribed the ritual duties of the pastors/preachers, the performance of "holy acts".⁸ The ordinances broadly regulate what the preacher says, concentrating on the liturgical practices and the bound texts of the rites, regulating primarily the rite of baptism and communion, the two sacraments as well as the wedding ceremony. These may include the tradition of mothers going to church for the first time after childbirth, the description of churching of women, public penance, ecclesiastical exhortation, sometimes the election of a judge and very rarely the texts for

⁷ HELTAI, János (2008): *Műfajok és művek a XVII. század magyarországi könyvkiadásában (1601–1655)*. Budapest, OSZK – Universitas. 206.

⁸ PAP, Ferenc (2012): Báthori Gábor (1755–1842) liturgiai öröksége és a Pesti Egyház Ágendája (1796) a korszak összefüggésében. In: Pap, Ferenc (ed.): *Illés lelkével. Tanulmányok Báthori Gábor és Dobos János lelkipásztori működéséről*. Budapest, KRE – L'Harmattan. 14–16.

funerals, and then, building on 18th-century precedents, starting from the 19th century the description of the rite of confirmation has gradually appeared in the agendas.⁹

With the exception of the ritual description found in the 1574 gradual of Gál Huszár (RMNy 353), the order of the full service or the preaching service without communion is practically not found in the sources until the end of the 18th century; at most, it can be reconstructed by taking into account individual sources by analogy although in this case it is always a question of the extent to which a single source or data can be extended to a larger area or to several liturgical geographical areas.

The acts of worship, especially the celebrations of baptism, communion, and wedding, had to be polemically focused on in the agendas, as their course and the way individuals recurred to them expressed the sense of belonging to the given denomination, thus to the Reformed confession, and guaranteed the realization and maintenance of pure doctrine and practice in accordance with the Scriptures and the creeds. In the agendas, and especially in the sermons and teachings of the agendas and rituals, the separation and dissociation from other denominations – most firmly from Roman Catholic practice – were especially emphasized in order to avoid identification or a mixing of denominational practices among the faithful.

Throughout Europe, the history of Reformed worship can largely be described as an agenda history.¹⁰ One of the outstanding tasks and significance of the agendas was to draw clear boundaries between Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as to mark out more easily permeable denominational areas between Protestant practice, including Lutheran and Reformed, and hymnbooks and hymnbook traditions that had their roots in common traditions but which gradually became denominationally separated by the 17th century.¹¹

The first third of the 17th century saw the birth of the agenda tradition, which has continued to play a dominant role to this day. We consider István Nyilas Milotai's Agenda (1621/1622) to be *the* Agenda, the reference point, which has defined and

⁹ PAP, Ferenc (2021): Konfirmáció a 19. század elején a dunamelléki egyházkerületben. In: Siba, Balázs – Szabóné László, Lilla – Kaszó, Gyula (eds.): *Hitben növekedni – ősi gyökerek és új hajtások. Tanulmányok Németh Dávid hatvanötödik születésnapjára*. Budapest, KRE – L'Harmattan. 201–220; PAP 2012, 73–88.

¹⁰ BIERITZ, Karl-Heinrich (2004): *Liturgiik*. Berlin – New York, de Gruyter. 536–565.

¹¹ H. HUBERT, Gabriella (2004): *A régi magyar gyülekezeti ének*. Budapest, Universitas. 270–283.

influenced the history of Hungarian Reformed worship for centuries and has had an impact to this day.¹²

The difficulty of research is that our liturgical history up to the late 19th and 20th centuries (contrary to the methodology of liturgical history research still prevalent in the 20th century) cannot be written and assessed merely on the basis of ritual books and agendas.

The concept of "agenda" has undergone several changes in meaning in Protestant theological-liturgical language over the past centuries. *Liturgika* by Ferenc Tóth, a theology professor in Pápa,¹³ which in Csaba Fekete's words "is the first Hungarian Reformed *liturgy compendium*",¹⁴ gives the following definition:

[...] the Greek Fathers understood the word [*leitourgein*] [...] the preoccupation with the sacred things belonging to the formalities of worship: and hereinafter the word *Liturgia* signifies the manner of the entire formalistic devotions as established¹⁵ and of the Church Servants in their occupation and their obligations around the Ceremonies and, in a more general sense, the phrases the so-called Agendas written and approved of by the Church, which the Church Servants say and do when they conduct a certain Church ceremony. In Latin, the Liturgy is called now *Officium* or *Ordo Agendi* or *Agenda* and *Cursus Ecclesiasticus*.¹⁶

In his memoirs, Mihály Könyves Tóth writes:

Although this term, *Agenda*, in the ecclesiastical sense, includes all the formulas (phrases) which are given to the pastor as the norm in the commonly accepted and established Liturgical Book: notwithstanding, in the idiotism rooted in everyday speech, the *Agenda* was especially and primarily the pastor's text by the communion table before communion.¹⁷

¹² FEKETE, Csaba (2009): Milotai Nyilas István Ágendájának változatai. *Református Egyház*. 61, 6. 131–140.

¹³ TÓTH, Ferenc (1810): *Liturgika*. Győr. 46.

¹⁴ FEKETE 2009, 133.

¹⁵ *Interpret as 'set', 'ascertained' (?)*.

¹⁶ TÓTH 1810, 8.

¹⁷ KÖNYVES TÓTH, Mihály (1996): *Emlékirat a tiszántúli református egyházkerület életéről (1855)*. Debrecen, TtREL. 249.

Ferenc Tóth, in his work *Lelki pásztori gondviselés* [Pastoral Care], published in 1806, before the publication of his *Liturgika*, also identifies the concept of the agenda with the ceremonial speech:

“The Agenda should be meaningful, but not always the same; which, in order not to depart from the traditions, should take into account the agendas that have come before it. It will be well if the new minister should first say the agenda to which the people are accustomed. For if he says the new one, the listener, noticing the change, will think that the minister wants to change the religion. Briefly, the servant must conform to the traditions which is accustomed in the Superintendency.”¹⁸

The agenda by the 19th century referred both terminologically and practically to the liturgical act rather than to the sermon associated with the ritual.¹⁹ Most cases it contained and regulated only those elements and sections of the liturgy which was meant to be performed by the preacher or in some cases the schoolmaster or cantor leading the liturgy. Over time, the administration of the sacraments became more of an individual kind of worship, and the communion, usually six times a year, became an easily neglected appendage or side-element of the preaching service.

The agendas offer very little information about congregational and ritual singing, while our Hungarian Protestant and Hungarian Reformed church music and hymnbook history is a rich framework and impression of the history of worship, culture, and literature, obviously reflecting and being adapted to the liturgical practice of the time and materialized within this framework. The lack of resources can be explained by the fact that there was no need for defensive and polemical norms compared to the acts already mentioned (baptism, communion, wedding).

Ravasz’s agenda tradition was also nourished by the deep roots of the Hungarian Reformed worship practice and reality, passed down from generation to generation and integrated into consciousness, becoming accepted and standardized. The publication of the Liturgical Book was preceded not only by a study of the liturgical history and practice of the other Protestant confessions in Hungary and Europe but also by the

¹⁸ TÓTH, Ferenc (1806): *Lelki pásztori gondviselés*. Győr. 42.

¹⁹ PAP (2012), 15.

practice of the time. Actually, the origins of most of our bound texts of worship can be traced back to the written and printed antecedents of the 16th and 17th centuries.

As we have pointed out, our historical sources have been urging for centuries the unification of a diverse, fragmented, often individualistic liturgical practice. *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás* [Liturgical Book], implemented in 1931, was preceded by the publication of *Ágenda – A magyar református egyház liturgiás könyve* [Agenda – The Liturgical Book of the Hungarian Reformed Church], edited by László Ravasz in 1927. Ravasz stated in the foreword:

The development of our Hungarian Reformed Church in the spirit of Calvinism progressed from smaller to larger units. For a long time, church districts were more or less [sic!] powerless entities, not to mention that the whole Hungarian Reformed Church was represented only by the Buda Synod (1791); only 90 years later: the Synod of Debrecen including Transylvania. The Debrecen Synod created the Universal Convention. The Universal Convention worked zealously and successfully to build unity. Securing of constitutional unity was followed by securing liturgical unity.²⁰

At the Buda Synod, liturgical issues and misuses (especially in funerals) were discussed. A committee was appointed to work out a liturgy, and the need for a unified hymnal also emerged.²¹ The common hymnal was published only in 1806, becoming official from 1813, and after the Buda Synod, the theological taste of the time led to the publication of the following district agendas (Dunántúl: Fábíán József, 1805; Dunamellék: Göböl Gáspár, 1806; Tiszáninnen: Lácza Szabó József, 1814 and ²1832).²²

The 1927 Agenda is the "comprehensive result of the work began around 1900 for the creation of a unified liturgy" that started after the Constituting Synod of 1881 and went on in several stages, after several attempts and facing several forced transformations and difficult historical situations.²³ In the "preface" to this historical overview, Ravasz gives a detailed history of the decades leading up to its publication.²⁴ As professor of

²⁰ RAVASZ, László (ed.) (1927): *Ágenda. A magyar református egyház liturgiás könyve*. Budapest. [1].

²¹ PAP 2012, 45–50.

²² Op. cit. 52–53.

²³ FEKETE, Károly (2006): A református liturgikák története a XIX–XX. században. In: *Collegium Doctorum*. 2, 1. 183.

²⁴ Ravasz 1927, [1]–7.

practical theology in Kolozsvár/Cluj, he himself prepared for his liturgical work as Bishop of the Dunamellék Church District through his academic work and his writings published from 1915.²⁵

In the post-1900 period, there was a comprehensive discussion in the church press about the distortions in the celebration of the Holy Communion, the connection of the Holy Communion to the preaching service as an appendix, the connection between the Holy Communion and penance, the number, content, and phenomenon of penitential and communion questions related to the celebration of the Holy Communion.²⁶

The demand for the introduction of the *Scripture reading (lection)* as a separate Bible reading during worship appeared in literature and public discourse from the end of the 19th century, and the ancient Christian and international Protestant practice has appeared in our worship order and practice thanks to the work of László Ravasz.²⁷

The name of the official ritual book (*Agenda*) from 1927 was replaced by the title *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás*, published in 1930 and introduced in 1931, because the common liturgical book – in contrast to the previous traditions of the church, which contained sketchy and partial descriptions of ritual – presented and regulated the entire life and practice of the church worship with the intention of describing and prescribing, and it sought to eliminate points identified as historical deviations. It sought unity and perfection. The novelty of the 1927 edition, its contemporary guidance and “its significance is given by the fact that it embraced all the occasions of worship, gave a rich parable, and set forth in its preface the principles of Reformed worship. The publication of the basic liturgical statements, which was received by all pastors, equalled the publication of a standard, core liturgy book.”²⁸

The end of the long 19th century, the need for a theological change of style, as well as several historical, political, and theological traumas that shook the world and the Hungarian nation in the 20th century, and then split Hungary and the Reformed Church, contributed significantly to the long-term and clear reception of the *Agenda*

²⁵ FEKETE 2006, 182–183.

²⁶ A kérdéshez lásd: PAP, Ferenc (2015): Bűnbánat és úrvacsora: szertartási, teológiai és terminológiai kérdések. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 9. 4–14.

²⁷ The issue was last tackled by BALOGH, Dávid (2023): *A lekcio a magyar református istentiszteleti gyakorlatban*. Doctoral thesis. Budapest.

²⁸ FEKETE 2006, 182–183.

and the intricate formation of the Hungarian Reformed identity in the 20th–21st centuries.²⁹ The Agenda and the Hungarian Reformed worship life, which was truly unified and reshaped, built and strengthened a community of faith and language and became a point of reference. Following the liturgical history of the preceding years, the innovation and novelty of the ritual book, which was indeed distributed to all congregations, could achieve centuries of impact and renewal. It is striking that the 1927 publication, which had not yet been raised to the official level, was generally more accessible than the official *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás* of a few years later, presumably for the reasons given above.

The *Agenda* and then the *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás* cannot be interpreted without the precedents, being the child of its time. Each liturgical turn can only be evaluated in the light of its antecedents, but the question of singing and the hymnal, among other things, cannot be separated from the worship. The 1921 reform of the so-called Reformed hymnal, used since 1806, reached an absolute low in the rich Hungarian Reformed/Protestant hymnological treasure on the one hand, and it did not help the cause of worship, but even worsened it on the other hand.³⁰

The fact that the Synod that established *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás*, making use of the *ius liturgicum* and describing the Church's life of worship, liturgical orders, and acts in homiletic and liturgical instructions, has been a step forward and still quantum leap today,³¹ whilst the rest of the book includes a set of examples for practising pastors.

Károly Fekete summarizes his critical assessment by looking back at the context and developments of the late 20th and 21st centuries:

through the Agenda, the clergy as a whole absorbed an approach that was actually based on Schleiermacherism, when the influence of Barthian theology began to appear in our country already in the late 1920s. Another criticism is that Ravasz did not consistently apply the order of Calvinist liturgy in the homilies. The liturgy of the Lord's Supper is bound up with the desire to replace adult catechesis and lacks the eschatological joyfulness.³²

²⁹ SZETEY, Szabolcs (2016): *Adatok a magyar református prédikációs gyakorlat újraértékeléséhez 1784–1878 között*. Budapest, KRE – L'Harmattan. 55.

³⁰ CSOMASZ TÓTH, Kálmán (1950): *A református gyülekezeti éneklés*. Budapest. 193–196.

³¹ RAVASZ 1930, [3]–48.

³² FEKETE 2006, 183.

The lines of appreciation clearly show that the typically long and protracted liturgical works could not have reflected the precursors of the theological turns that were then taking place or the theological and liturgical insights and demands intensifying from the second half of the 20th century, and that those who drafted the liturgical works brought and always bring with them the blessings or burdens of their own theological and ecclesial socialization. The publication of a new hymnal in 1948, which represented a truly significant change in church music and theology, as well as Ravasz's intention to further develop his own work and the liturgy draft of 1950, could not be achieved for reasons of church policy,³³ so the revision of the earlier significant work failed,³⁴ or, rather, its formalization could not take place. Instead, in 1985, due to its particular theological and party-state context, a dubious *Istentiszteleti Rendtartás* was introduced, which was questionable in some points from a liturgical-historical and liturgical point of view, and therefore poorly received,³⁵ being one of the major building blocks of a still unsolved situation.

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³³ Ibid.

³⁴ KOVÁCS, József: (2003) A Magyarországi Református Egyház 1948/51-es liturgiai reformja. In: *Sárospataki Füzetek*. 2003/2. 57–77.

³⁵ PAP, Ferenc (2016): Harminc éves az Istentiszteleti Rendtartás. Zárójeles és lábjegyzetes úrvacsorai kérdéseink nyomában. In: Zsengellér, József – Kodácsy, Tamás – Ablonczy, Tamás (eds.): *Felelet a Mondolatra. Tanulmányok a 60 éves Bogárdi Szabó István tiszteletére*. Budapest, PRITA – KRE – L'Harmattan. 337–355.

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