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The “Hungarian Barmen”. The Impact and Reception of the Declaration of Confession and the Barmen Declaration in Hungary²

Abstract.

Finding a way out by confession. In 1955, the Declaration of Confession, inspired by the Barmen Declaration, was drawn up in great secrecy and became one of the necessary documents of 20th-century Hungarian Reformed Christianity. In this study, we examine its reception and impact in Hungary. We will look at how the Barmen Confession appeared in Hungary and what influence it had on the 1955 Declaration of Confession.

Keywords: Declaration of Confession, Synod of Barmen, Confessing Church, Martin Niemöller, totalitarianism

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Introduction

“Man is by nature historical. [...] Each man also lives in an interconnected series of events, which involves both his own decisions and also the things that happen to him. Together these things constitute his history which is entirely particular and unique.”³ – says Wolfhart Pannenberg. The Declaration of Confession (*Hitvalló Nyilatkozat*, hereinafter: DoC) of 1955 is not a mere event in history or within the narrowly defined history of the Hungarian Reformed Church but a defining part of a series of interrelated events. It had to be preceded by the theological discernment of Barna Nagy, Martin Niemöller’s visit in 1953, the confessional courage of Péter Fekete⁴ and Tibor Kovács in 1954, and the awakening that unfolded after World War II. The sequence of events does not stop with the DoC, as it becomes a decisive document that has an impact on the inner spiritual state of the Reformed Church, and we can rightly assume that without it the “Reformed ‘56” would not have been so catastrophic.

Our sources indicate that the 1955 DoC is related to the 1934 Barmen Declaration in Germany. To what extent did the Barmen Declaration appear in the theological practice criticizing communism, and how was it linked to the DoC? For both, we must first examine whether or not the participants even read the text of the Barmen Declaration. My study is historical, and I do not intend to examine the ideological implications of the two documents in detail but rather their reception and impact.

I hope that by the end of the essay it will be clear that the title of the article is provocative since there was no Barmen Declaration in Hungary. The circumstances, the insights, the structure, and the aftermath of the DoC were different. And the status, prominence, and age of the authors were very different from those of the Barmen theologians. One could say that the authors and the translator of the 1955 declaration became influential church-public figures not before but rather after the declaration.⁵ The

³ PANNENBERG, Wolfhart (1970): *What Is Man?* Philadelphia USA. Fortress Press. 139. <https://archive.org/details/whatismancontemp0000pann/page/n7/mode/2up> (accessed on: 28 June 2024).

⁴ Historical Archives of the State Security Services 3.1.5. O-13818. Péter Fekete, personal file.

⁵ Gyula Bárczay, István Debreczeni, Lóránt Hegedűs, Miklós Molnár, Géza Németh, Tivadar Pánczél, János Pásztor, Zoltán Szabó, Sándor Dizsery. CSÜRÖS, András (2014): *A Declaration of Confession, 1955*. In: Sepsi, Enikő – Balla, Péter – Csanády, Márton (eds.): *Confessionality*

two declarations are so different from each other that, in my research and opinion, we cannot speak about “the Barmen Creed of the Hungarian Reformed Church” at all, and it is questionable whether it can be called a confession of faith at all. This issue has also been raised in connection with the Barmen Declaration.⁶ I mean here its title proper: DoC.

The Barmen Declaration

The assessment and analysis of the Barmen Declaration from a Hungarian theological perspective was completed in 2009 by Károly Fekete.⁷ Béla Árvavölgyi⁸ carried out the theological exploration of its reception in Hungary after its publication in 1934. Therefore, we have got the following task: to describe the historical part of its publication, as well as to present the reception of the Barmen Declaration, while keeping the focus on the 1955 DoC.

The Hungarian ecclesiastical and secular press continuously reported on the church struggles in Germany from 1933 onwards.⁹ Among others, the great struggles of the Bekennende Kirche (“German Confessing Church”) were reported on by Sándor Tavaszly¹⁰

and University in the Modern World – 20th Anniversary of „Károli” University. 2013. Yearbook of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Budapest, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L’Harmattan. 240.

⁶ Gerhard Sauter writes on the 50th anniversary that the Barmen Declaration had by then become a creed, “die Barmer Erklärung sei inzwischen als Bekenntnis etabliert”. SAUTER, Gerhard (1984): “Zu diesem Heft”. In: *Evangelische Theologie*. 44, 1. 1–2. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.14315/evth-1984-0102/> (accessed on: 1 March 2024).

⁷ FEKETE, Károly (2009): *A Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat*. Budapest, Magyarországi Református Egyház Kálvin János Kiadója.

⁸ ÁRVAVÖLGYI, Béla (2021): *Keresztység–Egyház–Közélet. Karl Barth személyének és ekleziológiai gondolatainak hatása a XX. századi magyarországi református teológiára. Tézisfüzet*. Debrecen. <https://derep-di.drhe.hu/39/2/Arvavolgyi-Bela-Phd-Tezisfuzet-arch.pdf> (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

⁹ FEKETE, Károly (2009): *Adalékok a Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat magyarországi recepciójához*. In: *A Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat*. Budapest, Magyarországi Református Egyház Kálvin János Kiadója. 128.

¹⁰ TAVASZLY, Sándor (1936): A teológiai egzisztencia ma! In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 42, 12. 469–470; CZEGLÉDY, Sándor (1936): A Hitvalló Egyház harca. In: *Református Élet*. 3, 34–35. 323–324. CZEGLÉDY, Sándor (1937): Mások helyett is harcolunk! Dr. Niemöller nyilatkozik a Református Életnek. In: *Református Élet*. 4, 1. 3.

and László Pákozdy. The latter's detailed article reporting on several documents makes no specific mention of the confessional synod (if it can be called a synod at all) that convened between 29 and 31 May 1934 or of the Barmen Confession read on the last day.¹¹

An article about Barmen was first published in Hungarian in Cluj/Kolozsvár as early as June 1934.¹² And the first publication of the Barmen Declaration in Hungary was not in a church newspaper, but in *Az Est*. It published a full-page report on the state of German Lutheranism and then mentioned the Barmen Synod and the Confession of Faith in the same article.¹³ After the report in *Az Est*, news from Wuppertal – although incomplete – arrived.¹⁴ The first detailed analysis was published in the daily newspaper *Ujság* in September 1934.¹⁵ The article also interviewed Lutheran Bishop Sándor Raffay,

¹¹ PÁKOZDY, László (1933–1934): Barth, Karl: Theologische Existenz heute. Heft 1–6. Barth Károly és a német egyház belső küzdelme. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. 9–10, 5–6. 233. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/TheologiaiSzemle_1933-1934/?pg=240&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹² 34 theology professors and the confessional synod of 18 regional churches in Germany sharply confronted the official church. [no author] (1934): *Ellenzék*. 55, 132(15 June). 2. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ellenzek_1934_06/?query=n%C3%A9met%20hitvall%C3%B3&pg=105&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹³ Concerning the same oath to which all the pastors of Germany are nowadays required to swear – the confessional synod, which opposed the movement of German Christians, passed the following resolution at its meeting in Barmen: “On the matter of the oath, the confessional synod of Barmen has not yet taken a final decision. If such an issue is settled as quickly as the Reich Church, it shows that they are not aware of the sanctity of the oath. With this understanding, the carelessness with which the Reich church wades through the constitution and the law is understandable. Moreover, in a wide variety of cases, the Reich church has spread false news.” [no author] (1934): A papoknak Hitlerre és a nemzeti szocializmusra kell felesküdniük [Priests Must Swear Allegiance to Hitler and National Socialism]. In: *Az Est*. 25, 215(23 September). 3. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/AzEst_1934_09/?query=barmeni&pg=224&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹⁴ *Külgügyi Szemle – a Magyar Külgügyi Társaság közlönye*. 11(1934/4), 1934. 10. 01. 397. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/KulugyiSzemle_1934/?query=barmeni&pg=398&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹⁵ *Ujság* 10(1934/221), 30 September 1934. 29. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ujsag_1934_09/?query=n%C3%A9met%20hitvall%C3%B3&pg=484&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

who tried to remain basically objective and did not take a clear stand in favour of the Bekennende Kirche.¹⁶ The first article that tries to quote from the synodal text (the exact wording) was published in the communist newspaper *Magyar Nap* in Czechoslovakia.¹⁷

On the Lutheran side, Lajos Szimonidesz tried to systematize the events in Germany in his book published in 1936, with special reference to the Barmen Declaration.¹⁸ A progressive call was made in 1938 in an article by István Török, in connection with our topic: “When God’s call to confession of faith is heard, let us not flee from it into our traditions, but rather open our ears and receive it. The rest is up to Him.”¹⁹

The German situation was not depicted in the church county or district minutes, except for a brief reference in the 1934 report of the Chief Elder of the Reformed Church District of Pápa, Miklós Jókay-Ihász.²⁰

¹⁶ “It has been a fatal tactical error to use the political methods of the highly organized national socialism to persuade the church bodies to accept the common organization when the transformation started. However, the church is not only a legal organization but also a spiritual community, whose unity is not a straitjacket but a unity of heart. The Evangelical Church of the German Reich still lacks this solidarity and cannot be called united until it achieves it.” [The translations of all, originally non-English quotations belong to Augusta Szász.] Evangelical Bishop Sándor Raffay on the split of the German Protestant Church. *Ujság* 10(1934/221), 30 September 1934. 29. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Ujsag_1934_09/?query=n%C3%A9met%20hitvall%C3%B3&pg=484&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹⁷ HUSZÁR, Emil (1937): A Führeerek nem fognak az egyháznak parancsolni! A német Hitvalló Egyház protestantizmusa. In: *Magyar Nap*. 2, 233(October 8). 5. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/MagyarNapOstrava_1937_10/?query=barmeni&pg=44&layout=s. (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

¹⁸ SZIMONIDESZ, Lajos (1936): *Napjaink vallási forradalmi*. Budapest, Viktória Könyvkiadóvállalat.

¹⁹ TÖRÖK, István (1938): Protestáns hitvallás. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 47, 7–8. 359.

²⁰ “Today the great German nation is in a serious crisis and, unfortunately, so is German Protestantism, one of the strongest and most valuable, and by its very mass, one of the most serious branches of world Protestantism. May God grant that this serious crisis and ordeal may soon be over and that the great nation and the German Protestantism which is bound up with it may soon find the right path for its future development in the direction which the Reformation, initiated by Luther, has marked out for it.” Speech held by Dr Miklós Jókay-Ihász, Church County Elder in: VÉGH, János (ed.) (1934): *A pápai református egyházmegye közgyűlésének jegyzőkönyve*. Pápa, 13 July 1934. 9.

In 1940, in Sárospatak, the theology students studied the text of the Barmen Declaration in a German class held by Barna Nagy.²¹ And it is no wonder, as Barna Nagy was a student of Karl Barth and studied in Bonn in the academic year 1933–1934.²² However, as far as we know, a full, published translation was not completed until after the war.

Barmen, however, may have had an influence not only through the German text or the Hungarian translation but also through its spirit, including Barth's visit to Hungary in 1936.²³ During this visit, Barth also touched upon the situation in Germany in his lecture on the relationship between state and church, which, even if not in the exact wording of the Barmen Declaration, certainly brought its spirit to the country. The life and fate of the Barmen Declaration and the Bekennende Kirche were well known to the local Reformed public.

Barmen after 1945

After the war, a detailed book was published in 1946 on the relationship between Nazi Germany and Christianity.²⁴ After 1945, Barmen became interesting not for his confessionalism but for his responses to changing social effects.²⁵

²¹ https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/Sarospatok_30036_30118_1940/?query=barmeni&pg=95&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

²² Barna Nagy reporting on the period: NAGY, Barna (1997): *Mit tanultam Barth Károlytól?* In: Németh, Pál (ed.): *Magyar református önismereti olvasókönyv. Válogatás a XX. század első felének református teológiai irodalmából.* Budapest, Magyarországi Református Egyház Kálvin János Kiadója. 477–485; FAZAKAS, Sándor (2018): *Isten szuverenitása és az ember szabadsága: Karl Barth teológiájának innovatív ereje a mai magyar református egyház és teológia számára,* In: *Collegium Doctorum.* 14, 2. 111. http://real.mtak.hu/136377/1/CD_2018_2_beliv_FazakasS.pdf (accessed on: 3 May 2023).

²³ DIENES, Dénes (2023): Az állam és az egyház viszonya. Karl Barth 1936-ban Sárospatakon tartott előadása. In: *Egyháztörténeti Szemle.* 2023/4. 22–28.

²⁴ P. KIRÁLY (Köni), Kelemen O.F.M. (1946): *Hitlerizmus és keresztyénség. A németországi evangélikus hitvalló egyház harca a nemzeti szocializmussal.* Budapest, Ferences Missziók Országos Központja kiadása.

²⁵ See the study by Sándor Jakab, especially p. 412. JAKAB, Sándor (2006): Az igaz hit megvallása. A Barmeni Hitvallás egyházépítő szerepe a posztmodern korban. In: *Református Szemle.* 99, 4. 410–430.

It was first published in translation in 1948 in the journal *Evangelikus Theologia*, translated by László Benczúr.²⁶

István Török, a professor in Debrecen, prepared a translation of the confession in 1954, but its publication was refused. The manuscript is dated 13 May 1954.²⁷ Thus, the chances that this version was known to the authors of the DoC are extremely small.²⁸

The analogy of Karl Barth and the *Bekennende Kirche* appears in Ervin Vályi-Nagy *God or History?* written in 1955, which was also conspiratorially sent abroad at the centenary celebrations as the DoC.²⁹

Martin Niemöller’s³⁰ visit to Hungary in 1953 was an important occasion for learning about the Barmen Declaration. This was confirmed by Tivadar Pánczél and Gyula Bárczay in their recollections.³¹ As they received the Barmen Declaration during Niemöller’s visit, they were reminded of the status confessionis analogy between the two totalitarian regimes. This is how Gyula Bárczay reported about it:

In 1953, Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), a famous German (anti-fascist) theologian and pastor, President of the Church of Hesse-Nassau, a well-known “peace fighter”, founder of the anti-Hitler German Confessing Church, and one of the authors of the so-called Barmen Declaration (later known as the Barmen Confession), adopted at the 1934 Barmen Synod, visited our seminary. This declaration firmly rejected, among other things, the interference of the fascist state power in the life and internal affairs of the Church. Naturally, he met the young theologians, accompanied by Bishop Albert Bereczky, in a solemn

²⁶ BENCZÚR, László (1948): A Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat. In: *Evangelikus Theologia*. 2, 1. 46–51. https://www.epa.hu/02300/02359/00008/pdf/EPA02359_Evangelikus_Theologia_1948_01_46-52.pdf (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

²⁷ FEKETE 2009, 25. The last translation was done in 2009 by Tamás Juhász. See: JUHÁSZ, Tamás (2009): 75 éves a Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat. In: *Református Szemle*. 102, 3. 336–339.

²⁸ A textual comparison of the original texts and translations of the Declaration of Faith and the Barmen Confession is part of a forthcoming study.

²⁹ VÁLYI-NAGY, Ervin (1993): *Isten vagy történelem?* In: Vályi-Nagy, Ervin: *Minden idők peremén*. Budapest, Európai Protestáns Szabadegyetem. 43–57.

³⁰ KARASSZON, István (1984): Martin Niemöller emlékezete. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. 27[new vol.], 3. 147–148.

³¹ LADÁNYI, Sándor (2006): Református teológiai hallgatók a forradalomban. A Budapesti Református Teológiai Akadémia teológus ifjúsága az 1955–1956-os esztendőben. In: *Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Szemle*. 41, 4. 429.

atmosphere. During the conversation with the theologians, he asked them if they were familiar with the struggles of the German Confessing Church and the “Barmen Declaration”. The students spontaneously, honestly, and clearly said no. Niemöller was astonished. Bereczky was extremely uncomfortable with this situation, became very angry, and immediately ordered the already very startled Professor Sándor Csekey to urgently make up for the “serious omission”, “shortcoming!” [...] Thus, this very important and significant document of the German Confessing Church became known to the young Reformed seminary students of Budapest.³²

The implementation of the Barmen Declaration under the communist regime was taken for granted not only by the clergy in Budapest. It was sometimes even feared by the totalitarian state itself. Thus, in 1980, Wilhelm Niesel’s textbook *The Gospel and the Churches* was omitted from the translation made in Cluj/Kolozsvár, with the powerful support on behalf of state censorship.³³ In 1959, Gyula Groó also referred to the use of the Barmen Declaration against socialism, trying to deny it in an interesting manner: “After 1945, many people tried and still try to turn the theses of the Barmen confession against the behaviour of churches living under socialism and seeking the narrow path of service, or those already on the path. B. 1, 5, and 6 in particular apply here.”³⁴ Point 1 is that there is no other leader besides Jesus Christ. And points 5 and 6 speak of the denial of totalitarianism and that the Church cannot be in the service of a single system or ideology that “puts Christology in the shade”.³⁵ Gyula Groó continued his reflections as follows:

Care must be taken, however, that Barmen does not become the instrument of forces and factors that pull the church back from the path of courageous service. [...] The use or rather the misuse of Barmen in this way stems from the fundamental error of making an analogy between the state system and ideology of so-called National Socialism and socialism. This parallelism, this identification of situations and problems, is primitive and malicious.

³² Op. cit. 428.

³³ JUHÁSZ 2009, 336–339. NIESEL, Wilhelm (1979): A Barmeni Nyilatkozat. In: *Református Szemle*. 72, 2. 83–89.

³⁴ GROÓ, Gyula (1959): Barmen 1934–1959. In: *Lelkipásztor*. 34, 7. 419.

³⁵ BOGÁRDI SZABÓ, István (1994): A magyar reformátusság helyzete 1945–1989 között. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 56, 1. 32.

Without attempting to evaluate socialism in this sketchy study, which is not its objective, it must be said that the so-called National Socialism was only an episode, an incident in the history of mankind. Socialism is a historical factor, undoubtedly the most significant historical fact of our time, which must be taken into account by everyone, wherever they live in the world. It is typical, moreover, that it is usually those who are in no hurry to join Barmen, and who, on the contrary, have sharply attacked it, who would like to use Barmen as a weapon against the churches living and serving under socialism.³⁶

Briefly and objectively, we can only add that it would have been better to skip this discussion. The analogy cannot be denied, despite the length of the text, but only along a premise. The difference is that the Nazi regime was short-lived, whereas the Communist regime was longer and much more extensive in time and space. This has certainly no theological relevance. In fact, it seeks to prove its truth along the lines of the thesis, denied by Barmen and the DoC, that history is an important means of God’s revelation. But the quote shows that the parallel may have occurred to the authors and readers of the illegal document as early as 1955.

Much later, in his 1980 article criticizing the Theology of Ministry, István Török combatted Gyula Groó’s ideas by saying: “In 1957, however, the consequences of the cult of personality were a fresh reminder that what had happened in Barmen was not just an occasional resolution tailored to a particular historical situation but a universal setting of boundaries.”³⁷

In 1974, Imre Jánossy tried to draw lessons from the life of the Bekennende Kirche. In his opinion, Barmen was not acting primarily against Hitler’s authority but against the National Socialist ideology within the church.³⁸ Imre Jánossy published an article on the 50th anniversary of Barmen.³⁹ In the same year, Sándor Szathmáry gave a detailed account of his lectures delivered at a conference in *Theológiai Szemle*.⁴⁰

³⁶ GROÓ 1959, 419–420.

³⁷ TÖRÖK, István (1990): *A szolgálat teológiája és a keskeny út*. In: Török, István: *Határkérdések szolgálatunkban. (1972–1989)*. Budapest, Református Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya. 98.

³⁸ JÁNOSY, Imre (1979): A Német Hitvalló Egyház története és az egyházi harc dokumentumai. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. 22(new vol.), 6. 376–379.

³⁹ JÁNOSY, Imre (1984): Barmen. In: *Confessio*. 1984/3. 102–106.

⁴⁰ SZATHMÁRY, Sándor: A Hitvalló Egyháztól a hitvalló egyházakig. A barmeni hitvallás 50. évfordulójának ünnepei Wuppertalban. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. 27(new vol.), 3. 175–177.

The Declaration of Confession

The DoC written in 1955 is a much more detailed theological treatise than Barmen.⁴¹ It had a major influence on the revolutionary events of 1956 and the 160 pastoral petitions that preceded.⁴² In 1956, Gyula Bárczay's article was published in *Reformáció*, in which he disclosed for the first time the circumstances of the Declaration's creation.⁴³ Géza Németh was interned after 1956. According to him, one of the reasons for this was that he had written the DoC. During his cross-examination, he mentioned that he did not name either the place or the people involved.⁴⁴

The Church leadership also responded to the DoC. I have brought forward a shorter comment published later. In his 1958 Chief Elder's address, Tamás Esze referred to the DoC, stating that "A pamphlet distributed in the summer of 1956 claimed that the Hungarian Reformed Church cohabited with the Hungarian Communist State. This statement, even in this wording, contains a misstatement. [...] We are therefore far from cohabiting with the socialist state, nor do we harbour hostile feelings towards it."⁴⁵ Tamás Esze seems to imply that the authors of the DoC are harbouring hostile feelings towards the socialist state. But that was not the primary purpose of the confession, so his interpretation is highly subjective. Tamás Esze tried to hide his criticism of the state–church relationship behind a philosophical concept by György Lukács, aimed at wrapping up his harsh criticism in an impenetrable phrase. Imre Kádár also commemorated the

⁴¹ The theological evaluation and the circumstances of the origins of the Declaration of Confession will be the subject of another study.

⁴² "Among the initiatives calling for the renewal of the Church, the petition submitted to the Universal Convention on 8 October 1956 under the spiritual leadership of Andor Békési, Jenő Czakó, Aladár Ecsedy, Endre Gyökössy, Sándor Joó, signed by 160 pastors and curates, gained national significance." Kiss, Réka (2007): Bevezetés. In: Kiss, Réka (ed.): *Kelt mint fent. Iratok a Református Megújulási Mozgalom történetéből. (1956–1957)*. Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület. 18.

⁴³ BÁRCZAY, Gyula (1956): Így kezdődött a teológián. In: *Reformáció*. 1, 1(4–10 November). 2.

⁴⁴ NÉMETH, Géza (1993): Megtorlások a reformátusoknál. Egyház az 1956-os forradalom után. In: *Pesti Hírlap*. 2, 155(6 July). 11.

⁴⁵ ESZE, Tamás (1958): *Élő nép, élő egyház. Esze Tamás egyházkerületi főgondnok székfoglaló beszéde a Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület rendkívüli közgyűlésén Budapesten 1958. február 20-án*. Budapest, Református Egyetemes Konvent Sajtóosztálya. 18–20.

DoC in his famous book,⁴⁶ *Egyház az idők viharában* (Church in the Tempests of Time), tendentiously linking its origins and its relationship to László Ravasz and Western church leaders. The most important and most famous document of the official church reaction was János Péter’s article entitled *Újrakezdések idején* (Times for New Beginnings)⁴⁷ published in October 1956. In his article, he referred to the declaration several times, as follows:

From consultations with church district leaders, from statements made at summer pastors’ conferences, from official and private written documents, from legal and illegal documents, from extensive discussions with pastors and presbyters, and then from the convention presidency council’s deliberations, I have gained a comprehensive picture of the symptoms in and around the church, which we must partly nurture, partly heal, partly weed.⁴⁸ [emphasis mine]

⁴⁶ “People opposed to the church government, and objecting to the positive social service of the church began their open attack on the higher church authority when it was almost completely busy with the preparation of the visit of the World Council of Churches to Hungary. As a signal rocket [!], a manuscript version of a statement entitled *The Confessing Church in Hungary* appeared in the foreign press, which, in addition to ‘confessing’ a few theological generalities, essentially slandered the Church government and repeated the gambit that had been going on for years: it tried to discover – or rather to stir up – a conflict between the ‘renewed congregations’ and the ‘opportunistic leaders’. There were some statements in the Declaration that were claimed to be original, but these were mere repetitions of the theological tenets of the church authority. (This feature is in many ways characteristic of the ‘renewal’ movement and of László Ravasz’s circulars.) It was a strange document: a ‘confessional’ declaration – anonymous: only afterwards, ‘on the day of victory’, was it boastfully admitted to have been born in the Reformed theology of Budapest, which had been the centre of resistant Reformed youth throughout the repression.” The purpose of the statement was to cast suspicion on the bishops in the eyes of the two hundred foreign guests who were about to visit Hungary and to try to turn the attention of the foreigners to “the teachers gathered according to their own desires” (2 Tim 4:3). The visit of the World Council of Churches to Hungary was well used to intensify and widen the attack. KÁDÁR, Imre (1957): *Egyház az idők viharában. A Magyarországi Református Egyház a két világháború, a forradalmak és ellenforradalmak idején*. Budapest, Bibliotheca Kiadó. 219–220.

⁴⁷ PÉTER, János (1956): *Újrakezdések idején*. In: *Az Út*. 9, 41 (7–13 October). 1. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/AzUt_1956_07-12/?pg=56&layout=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

This is a subtle indication that the Bishop of Tiszavidék had received the secretly circulated writings and was aware of them. On the other hand, he did not send a good message to the authors and distributors by calling them illegal and something to be weeded out of the church. In any case, the supposedly penitential and self-critical article began with a veiled threat from Bishop János Péter. His assessment of the statement was twofold. On the one hand, he neutralized it by saying that it contained wording that he believed others had said. On the other hand, it was ambiguous and hostile.

For months now, there have been discussions both at home and abroad, in various forms, about a so-called ‘creed’ in connection with the Hungarian Reformed Church, as a manifestation of a confessing church movement that is supposedly being organized. This document, circulated under the said title, contains partly testimonial sentences that are alive and well in the congregations, among the leaders and theologians of the Hungarian Reformed Church, and partly ambiguous references. The document itself is anonymous. But not only is it anonymous, it can also be said to have no owner (i.e. author) in the Hungarian Reformed Church.⁴⁹ Pastors of the most diverse theological tendencies, sometimes together, sometimes separately, without any questioning, voluntarily say and write that they have nothing to do with this document.

In his article, Bishop Péter built his argument around the idea that the DoC was written by an invisible, hostile, unchurched, uninformed, yet organized group.

After 1956, the Declaration was not allowed to be published. Besides Imre Kádár, we can read about the DoC in the book by József Poór: “The anti-socialist forces in the Reformed Church expressed their views in the publication *A magyar református egyház útja* [The Path of the Hungarian Reformed Church]. This publication denounces the actually progressive and realistic church-theological decisions that were made in the church after the liberation and describes the new theological teaching as a ‘fatal and intolerable error’.”⁵⁰ The words “fatal and intolerable error” are not used in the 1955 document.

⁴⁹ János Péter may have referred to this Word, although it is not referenced in the text, “and makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them” Habakkuk 1:14 (KJV).

⁵⁰ POÓR, József (1986): *A protestáns teológia Magyarországon 1945–1985. Fejezetek a magyarországi református és evangélikus teológia 1945 utáni történetéből*. Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó. 73.

Poór describes the church policy of the 1950s as a series of “realistic” decisions, while some of them had already been condemned by János Péter in his Pharisaical manner. Poór forgot about de-Stalinization.⁵¹

The Declaration of Confession after 1989

The text of the DoC was first published in Hungary in 1989 by *Confessio*.⁵² The brief introduction correctly dates its creation to the spring of 1955, but the location is still not accurate.⁵³ The text suggests that the document was drafted in one meeting, in the spring of 1955. Ferenc Szűcs spoke about the creed in detail for the first time in his interview with *Magyar Nemzet* in 1990.⁵⁴

It is also worth mentioning that many people call it the Hungarian Barmen, the Hungarian Barmen confession, as if the two documents were closely related. The correlation is there probably only in terms of inspiration, but it goes no further.⁵⁵ Have they drawn parallels between the Barmen Confession and the DoC in the official papers? As mentioned earlier, the analogy is logical. István Bán tried to create tension between

⁵¹ “The defining phenomenon of the post-Stalin era was the process of de-Stalinization, affecting and changing almost every aspect of life. Methods of political practice, economic and social priorities, cultural life and the relationship between power and citizens all underwent changes.” MITROVITS, Miklós (2014): Együtt vagy külön utakon a szocializmushoz? A desztalinizáció első szakasza Kelet-Közép-Európában. In: *Századok*. 148, 1. 91. See also: FÖLDES, György (2012): Kádár János és a magyar desztalinizáció. In: *Múltunk – politikatörténeti folyóirat*. 57, 2. 192–214.

⁵² Hitvalló Nyilatkozat. (1955–1956). In: *Confessio*. 13(1989/2). 118–121.

⁵³ “The Declaration of Confession was written in the spring of 1955 in a parish near Budapest with the participation of young Reformed pastors.” Op. cit. 118. According to Tivadar Pánczél, they met several times and in several locations, but the opinion is widespread that the document as a whole was drafted in the parish of Szentendre. BOLYKI, János (2007): Megemlékezés Pásztor Jánosról. In: *Confessio*. 1. 101–103.

⁵⁴ BOROS, István (1990): 1955-ös Hitvalló Nyilatkozat. Az Ige elleni lázadás? Interjú Szűcs Ferencsel. In: *Magyar Nemzet*. 20 October. 6.

⁵⁵ Thus, we feel the inaccuracy of Béla Árvavölgyi’s following wording: “The so-called Declaration of Confession of 1955, which is also the subject of study, was a specific domestic refinement of the Barmen Theological Declaration.” ÁRVAVÖLGYI 2021, 2. <https://derep-di.drhe.hu/39/2/Arvavolgyi-Bela-Phd-Teziszfuzet-arch.pdf> (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

Debrecen and Budapest along these lines when he compared the two creeds in a harsh remark in 1989. “The authority of this Confession was given, sealed, by the suffering or death of thousands. Here in Debrecen, we did not smuggle a hastily prepared translation of the Confession into the pocket of General Secretary Visser ‘t Hooft, but in 1956 Professor István Török proclaimed the contemporary Confession of the non-politicizing Church as a pastoral examination paper for the Second Pastoral Examination in the Department of Systematic Theology.”⁵⁶

According to my research, Sándor Ladányi was the first who described the DoC in 1991 as “the Barmen Confession of the Hungarian Reformed Church”.⁵⁷ Apart from Ladányi, all other publications are more cautious about the connection between the two documents and rather try to show that the 1934 creed influenced the 1955 declaration. That is why, they use the following phrases: “in the manner of Barmen” (Botond Péter Koppándi⁵⁸ and Réka Kiss⁵⁹), “written in the spirit of the Barmen confession”⁶⁰ (Ferenc

⁵⁶ BÁN, István (1989): Csak álmokat üzünk? A REMM debreceni konferenciáján elhangzott hozzászólás. In: *Reformátusok Lapja*. 33, 46(12 November). 7.

⁵⁷ “The desire for expansion, for freedom, was growing everywhere. By 1955-1956, partly as a reaction to the growing tensions, a declaration was made under the title of *Confessing Reformed Church in Hungary* or *Barmen’s Confession* of the Hungarian Reformed Church, which was completed at the Academy of Theology in Budapest and was also sent abroad.” LADÁNYI, Sándor (1991): A református egyház a II. világháború után. Vázlatos áttekintés. In: *Új Forrás*. 23, 5(23 May). 33.

⁵⁸ “In the afterlife of the Declaration, some students of the Reformed Academy of Theology in Budapest, pastors and curates, drafted a 4-point ‘Declaration of Confession’ in 1955, modelled on Barmen, in which they called for the renewal of the church, criticized the loss of mission and the fact that the church was forgetting about the prophetic approach without which it would become a mere ‘servant church’.” KOPPÁNDI, Botond Péter (2011): Recenzió: FEKETE Károly: *A Barmeni Teológiai Nyilatkozat. Vezérfonal a dokumentum tanulmányozásához*. In: *Keresztény Magvető*. 117, 1. 97.

⁵⁹ KISS, Réka (2006): 1956 és a magyarországi egyház. *Református Szemle*. 99, 5(September–October). 566.

⁶⁰ “It is obvious that Barna Nagy’s clear theological thinking is also reflected in the aforementioned Declaration of Confession, which was largely edited by his disciples and was written in the spirit of the Barmen Confession and revealed the miseries of our Church and theology at that time with a similar theological grounding.” SZÜCS, Ferenc (2007): Dr. Nagy Barna és a Budapesti Református Teológia. In: *Confessio*. 37, 1. 36.

Szűcs), inspiration (Károly Fekete),⁶¹ “it was born on the grounds and by the methods of [...]”⁶² (Béla Árvavölgyi), while Géza Németh uses the phrase “it objected on the grounds of the Reformed biblical perspective as well as based on the Barmen principles of the German Confessing Church”.⁶³ The term “Hungarian Barmen” is incorrect, and the term *model* in the comparison of texts is also inaccurate. The most accurate way of connecting the two documents is to use the phrase “Declaration of Confession designed in the spirit of the Barmen Declaration of Confession”.

The analogy between the two documents is the *kairos* of resistance to a dictatorial, totalitarian regime and the *status confessionis*. Both declarations came in different forms, with different antecedents and different implications, but both came from within the Church. As István Török wrote in 1947:

The Church is the mother of the confession; its birth is a remarkable church event for generations. There is a time for such an event. There are times when it would be a futile human effort and times when the Church cannot escape it. The time for the confession of faith comes when pressing questions arise, when a flood of misapprehensions besieges the faith. In this crisis, the Church has only the Scripture to turn to. But confessions of faith only appear when it is not the Church that seizes the truth but the truth that seizes the Church.⁶⁴

⁶¹ In his book on the Barmen Declaration, Károly Fekete makes a connection between the two documents: “The Barmen Theological Declaration became one of the most important guiding and teaching documents of the 20th century, and it had a great influence on other later Protestant declarations and confessional documents. It also had an impact in Hungary, where the authors of the ‘Declaration of Confession’ of October 1955 were inspired by the text of the Barmen Declaration.” FEKETE 2009, 22.

⁶² ÁRVAVÖLGYI, Béla (2021): *Kereszténység – Egyház – Közélet. Karl Barth személyének és ekleziológiai gondolatainak hatása a XX. századi magyarországi református teológiára. Doktori értekezés.* Debrecen, Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem Hittudományi Doktori Iskola. 67. <https://derep-di.drhe.hu/39/1/Arvavolgyi-Bela-Phd-dissz-arch.pdf> (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

⁶³ “The Declaration of Confession objected to the intrusion of communist ideology and practice into theological thought and practice of the church based on the grounds of the Reformed-Biblical and Barmen Principles of the German Confessing Church.” NÉMETH 1993, 11.

⁶⁴ TÖRÖK, István (1947): A tanbeli reform kérdése. In: *Theologiai Szemle Nyári körlevél.* 1947. 34. https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/TheologiaiSzemle_1947/?query=barmeni&pg=36&layout=t=s (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

In his 1980 article criticizing the theology of ministry, István Török equally mentioned the Barmen Confession. Although “there is no room for identification and matching”, he nevertheless compares the two situations along the lines of the cult of personality. In 1957, however, the consequences of the cult of personality were still a fresh reminder that in the Barmen Declaration there had been not just an occasional resolution designed to a particular historical situation but a universal setting of boundaries.⁶⁵

János Bolyki considered it stewardship and prophetic service that Pásztor János and his colleagues designed the DoC.⁶⁶

But can we even call the DoC a creed?⁶⁷ I will answer the questions raised at the beginning of the paper in the words of Ferenc Szűcs at the end.

Obviously the Barmen Confession also inspired the Hungarian Declaration of Confession, which was written in 1955 in a parish near Pest (probably in Szentendre) and was handed over in a somewhat adventurous way to foreign guests arriving for the centenary of the Theology in Budapest. Although it formally follows the pattern of the creeds, which consists of a parallel between a biblical statement and a delimitation from false teaching, there are several problems with the credal character of the writing. The perception of the status confessionis is obvious although the ‘we cannot remain silent’ is primarily intended to make it clear to our sister churches abroad that not everyone in Hungary agrees with the historical-theological errors and dictatorial clique rule⁶⁸ of the church leadership of the time. Indeed, it is certain that it was the voice of a hidden majority, with which many would have agreed had they been able to do so. But it is precisely this lack of publicity resulting from dictatorship that makes it questionable whether it can really be called a church confession in terms of its origin. In fact, it was the events of the following year that raised it to that status, when hundreds of congregations in the Renewal Movement joined, if not to the text of the Declaration, at least to the spirit of renewal.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ TÖRÖK 1990, 98.

⁶⁶ “He considered preaching a prophetic ministry, and as a watchman he did not remain silent when he saw danger in the thinking and behaviour of the Church. It is no coincidence that the basic text of the Declaration was written in the parish of Szentendre in 1955.” BOLYKI 2007, 102.

⁶⁷ István Juhász on the relationship between faith and confession: JUHÁSZ, István (1969): A hitvallás és a hit. In: *Református Szemle*. 62, 3–4. 196–201.

⁶⁸ The phrase “dictatorial clique rule” is quoted from the last paragraph of the Declaration. See: <https://www.parokia.hu/v/hitvallo-nyilatkozat-1955-56/> 2024-02-08 (accessed on: 4 May 2023).

⁶⁹ SZÜCS, Ferenc (2013): A Heidelbergi Káté legújabb magyar nyelvű magyarázatai. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. 56, 4. 226.

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