

‘Minority’ and ‘Majority’ in the Thought of László Ravasz

In historic Hungary, unlike in Poland and the Czech Lands, Protestantism was a political and intellectual force on a par with Catholicism not only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but right up until the twentieth, even though Protestants were a majority only until the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. After the failure of the 1848 Revolution, the Hungarian national resistance relied on Protestantism, whereas the Habsburg dynasty signed a Concordat with the Vatican in 1855. Protestantism began to be a major force in politics from 1859–1860 onwards, with the struggle to achieve the Protestant patent. The biggest Protestant diocese, that of Debrecen, successfully resisted the absolutist ruler’s centralising and modernising ecumenical reforms, rapidly gaining the support of public opinion in the political nation and indeed the passive goodwill of quite a few Catholic aristocrats close to the Habsburg court. From this time onwards the notion of Calvinism and Protestantism became increasingly synonymous in common parlance, while the ethnic diversity characteristic of the Hungarian Lutheran church prevented it from becoming an active force of Hungarian nationalism. (Half a century later the young writer Zsigmond Móricz declared with brutal frankness what the majority of contemporaries quietly thought: “Calvinism *is* Hungarian Protestantism. The Lutherans are another kettle of fish.”) The weight of Protestantism was also well reflected in the fact that in 1867, when the *Ausgleich* was agreed, the Concordat with the Vatican was immediately rescinded in the lands of the Hungarian crown, and *advowson* (the right of patronage) and with it the right to appoint bishops by ministerial approval, was acquired by liberally-oriented Hungarian statesmen sympathetic to Protestantism. In the first decades of Dualism, this Protestant colouring thoroughly permeated the liberal map of Hungarian politics. This is another reason for speaking henceforward of the liberalism of Dualism as a political configuration of a Protestant character.

Be that as it may, among government ministers and lawmakers, Protestants and especially Calvinists were substantially overrepresented compared with their proportion in the country as a whole. They included, in line with the times, many freemasons, just as in the case of the leading Protestant churchmen. The liberal-emancipatory movement of the late nineteenth century culminated in the 1894 laws on ecclesiastical policy, which established equality before the law for what were called “the accepted faiths”, and also introduced compulsory civil marriage. These laws brought about the emancipation of the Jews. One of the leading proponents of this legislation was the Komárom church leader and former 1848 *honvéd*, Gábor Pap, bishop of Transdanubia, who was already mortally ill when he declared in the Upper House that the Protestants and the Jews shared a common fate.

However, this event came as a shock to the Catholics’ exceptionalist legal status and activated Catholic public opinion which had hitherto remained rather passive. In the

past, Catholic statesmen had been either liberals, like Eötvös and Deák, perhaps also freemasons, like Ferenc Pulszky and Sándor Wekerle, but at all events understanding of the Protestants' cultural superiority. 1895 saw the establishment of the Katolikus Néppárt (Catholic People's Party) and soon political Catholicism, with its unitary organisation and, thanks to its extensive land holdings, its enormous material resources, became an unavoidable political factor, while the Protestant churches were increasingly forced to rely on state support. Additionally, the demographic decline of Calvinism, the "Hungarian religion", was spectacular, just in the decades when "Magyarising assimilation" was at its peak. Not unrelated to these developments was the fact that in the first decades of the twentieth century the Hungarian Protestant churches underwent a conservative intellectual turn, to a large extent caused by their fear of becoming completely insignificant.

László Ravasz: the dilemmas in an exceptional career stemming from the fact of coming from a minority

One of the intellectual forces behind this turn was László Ravasz (1882–1975), one of the most important figures in the "invisible Calvinist pantheon". The most charismatic bishop of the Hungarian Calvinist church in the twentieth century, a spellbinding orator and writer, the most influential public personality of modern Hungarian Protestantism: this is the image of him that lives on in Calvinist public opinion today. In the memory of others, however, he is regarded, contrariwise, as one of the interwar founders of ideological anti-Semitism. No compromise or halfway house exists between these two views: publications about him either praise him passionately or offer an indictment of his activities.

When discussing him it is necessary to make a choice. However, understanding him in historical terms can put an "and" between these contradictory characterisations. Historical accounts of politics that discuss the Hungarian right-wing tradition mention Ravasz, or the names of other Protestant churchmen, only sporadically, which suggests that the influence of former Protestantism since the middle third of the twentieth century has continued to be marginalised and today inspires only a small and ever-dwindling number of those who recall the events, irrespective of the fact that today's Protestant politicians – who are in fact primarily from a Calvinist background – continue to be represented among the political elite in significantly greater numbers than in the population as a whole.

László Ravasz was born into a multiply minority situation. Born in Bánffyhunyard (Huedin, Transylvania) into a Székely family (the Székelys, or Szeklers, are a Hungarian-speaking but ethnically distinct minority, still some half million strong today, in central Transylvania – *trans.*) originally from Marosszék (county Mureş), who had moved to Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, the Transylvanian capital). This strengthened his Székely identity in relation to the highly stratified but isolated western Transylvanian Hungarians of the Kalotaszeg (Țara Călatei) region: "The small Hungarian community of Kalotaszeg is surrounded by a vast Romanian majority. Apart from us, everyone in the village spoke Romanian, the Romanians who came regularly from the mountains each had a house

where they were known, were provided with lodging, food and drink, and where they could leave for safe keeping the goods they took to or brought from the market. Though the Hungarians looked down on them, the two groups rubbed along very well”.⁶²

This is very much a view to which distance lent enchantment, as Kalotaszeg was one of the main sites of Romanian–Hungarian conflict in Transylvania, but the sense of being in danger, passed down from generation to generation, did not affect the Ravasz family, which had settled there in the era of Dualism, and they were even less affected by the Transylvanian Hungarian population’s innate sense of “superiority” over the Romanians, though the Hungarians had been in the minority there for more than two centuries. In Bánffyhunyard the primary social “glue” was the shared confessional identity, that is to say, Calvinism: “Every Hungarian inhabitant of Bánffyhunyard is Calvinist; if he is not, then he is either not from Bánffyhunyard or he is not a Hungarian”.⁶³ He completed his secondary education, however, not in the diasporic environment but in the heart of Hungarian-majority Székelyland, at the Calvinist College in Székelyudvarhely (Oderheiu Secuiesc). Here he found himself in another kind of minority situation: a religious one. Here there was none of the total overlap between faith and nationality⁶⁴ to be found in Bánffyhunyard. Though surrounded by a substantial Calvinist hinterland, Székelyudvarhely itself had a Catholic majority. Ravasz felt that in the “competition” between denominations, the Calvinists were not in a bad position, and this was reflected in his self-awareness as a student, and in this respect, too, he evinced a kind of superiority towards the less educated and, especially, (mostly) less well-off Catholic majority: “The city’s Calvinist minority exhibited a definite sense of superiority towards the Catholic majority”.⁶⁵ When, thanks to his exceptional talent and industry, he was awarded a professorship at Kolozsvár’s Calvinist Theological Academy in 1907, at the tender age of 25, the Kolozsvár press welcomed him thus: “It is his calling to hold together the Hungarians scattered throughout the various parts of Transylvania, to make the church bells that have fallen silent ring out once more, in the interests of freedom of thought and conscience, of the supremacy and future flowering of the Hungarian race”.⁶⁶ This he gladly undertook to do, not only because of his Transylvanian experiences but also as a result of the frustrations he had experienced on his study trip in Germany.

For, as a matter of fact, László Ravasz spent the academic year 1905–1906 in the capital of Wilhelmine Germany, where he not only took advantage of the exceptionally

⁶² László Ravasz: *Emlékezéseim* [Memoirs]. Budapest, Református Egyház Zsinati Iroda, 1992. 31.

⁶³ László Ravasz: A régi Bánffyhunyard [Olden Bánffyhunyard]. In *Isten rostájában II* [In God’s Sieve II]. Budapest, Franklin, 1941. 67.

⁶⁴ ‘Nationality’ in this paper translates *nemzetiség*, a term generally used in Hungarian scholarship for what would now be called an ‘ethnic minority’ or a ‘national minority’, i.e. non-Hungarian ethnicities, such as Slovaks, Serbs, etc., in the historic kingdom of Hungary and often, subsequently, in post-Trianon Hungary – *trans*.

⁶⁵ Ravasz (1992): op. cit. 40.

⁶⁶ Vélemény Ravasz László magántanári dolgozatáról [An assessment of László Ravasz’s *Privatdozent* essay]. *Ellenzék*, 25 May 1907.

rich intellectual milieu – attending the lectures of such scholars as Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), the most distinguished German liberal theologian, the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1858–1918), the historian of art Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), as well as the great classical philologist and Nietzsche’s erstwhile adversary, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1848–1931) – but also encountered negative stereotypes of Hungarians:

“Over lunch Professor Kunze was intent on enlightening me, seeing that I was a ‘Russian’, about the Hungarian crisis. In his view: 1. The Hungarians are an uneducated people financially supported by Austria, yet despite this they would secede if they could. 2. Most Hungarians are Jews. 3. The Hungarian Protestants are useless, as they all support Kossuth’s political party.” The reaction of the young Ravasz was largely one of tragic pathos: “The Olympian hauteur of the great nations, with which they diminish the Hungarians, veritably makes one’s blood boil. If our situation did not exemplify a great truth of world history and the prompting of a Jeremiah, one would totally despair”.⁶⁷ In 1910, the young László Ravasz joined the Unió lodge of the Kolozsvár freemasons and in this the Protestant tradition of the Enlightenment played a role at least as important as his patriotic commitment to “defending the minority”.⁶⁸ In any event, conservative considerations were to the fore in his activity as a freemason, in particular the prevention of the reform of the franchise, in the interests of preserving the leading role of the Transylvanian Hungarians in political life: “However much we sought a democratic franchise, we saw that in the Hungary of the time the Hungarians were in a minority, the nationality question was one big mess, and we feared that under a universal secret franchise in the countryside, the historical weight of the Hungarian community would be lost”.⁶⁹

At the same time, Ravasz did not attempt to conceal the irreconcilable nature of things that were irreconcilable, but rather confronted them head on, not out of cynicism but from conviction. It was precisely for this reason that he expressly highlighted the hardly reconcilable perspective of Protestant liberalism’s optimism and the humanistic conception of education that he brought with him from the nineteenth century, with the pessimism of the “death of the nation” idea that threatened the Hungarians. Of the pastoral work to be carried out in mixed-religion communities (one of the most important features of the distinctiveness of the Hungarian and Romanian nationalities in the mixed-nationality areas of central Transylvania being the Romanians’ Orthodoxy versus the Hungarians’ Calvinism) he wrote:

In contrast to the Greek Orthodox church (and, more generally, the Romanian church), our congregations are the hearths and propagators of national feeling. In these congregations national sentiment must be completely interwoven with religious life, and while I am loath to suggest that

⁶⁷ László Ravasz: Keresztény szocializmus [Christian Socialism]. *Erdélyi Protestáns Lap*, 4 (1906). 33.

⁶⁸ Attila Varga: *Elite masonice maghiare Loja Unio din Cluj (1886–1926)*. Cluj, Argonaut, 2010. 152.

⁶⁹ László Ravasz: *A kolozsvári Unió-páholy* [The Unió lodge of Kolozsvár]. MS in the archive of the Tiszáninneri Református Egyházkerület Tudományos Gyűjtemény, Kt. d. 13.489.

our clerisy should be exclusively nationally tinted, or that religious morality should be wholly subordinated to the idea of patriotism, or that the preaching of the Gospel should amount to no more than the empty parroting of patriotic clichés, I must nevertheless insist that in these venues we provide a religio-moral basis to the national idea and that we especially emphasise that aspect of the religio-moral which sanctifies the life of the nation. Let us not be concerned that racial self-awareness is exclusive in nature and often stands in contradiction to universal love, because it is also certain, on the other hand, that the division of society into nations is also a token of the divine order and for us it is a God-given duty to remain Hungarians. The isolated islandmen in the Romanian sea are stunningly low – below the Hungarian average – as regards morality and intelligence. Since the Romanian’s psyche consists of inspissated stupidity, the vast quantity of these people has, through its mass attraction, drawn into its orbit the soul of the Hungarians living in their vicinity. I know of no harder task than to battle against this. Even the prospect of success is many generations distant. The only ways that this problem can be remedied are: keeping the race pure, the general advancement of education, doubling the number of schools, and robust, one-to-one concern for every single soul.⁷⁰

Ravasz’s language and phraseology reveals with unvarnished honesty the national-characterological prejudices of the age, which sometimes verges on a eugenic stance.⁷¹ Though it is true that Ravasz rejects the use of force as a means of imposing supremacy, or as it was sometimes termed “cultural superiority”, and appeals instead to steady and patient educational work, he is pessimistic, in that he is able to hope for a “result”, that is to say “re-Magyarisation”, only in terms of decades or even generations. By the time of the First World War, all hope of this – the prospect of maintaining and strengthening the remaining Protestant Hungarian population of Transylvania – had finally evaporated. In the hope of acquiring Transylvania, Romania declared war on the Central Powers on 27 August 1916 and its forces launched an attack on Transylvania, which was defended by only a few thousand troops. Ravasz formulated his views about the politics of the Transylvanian question on behalf of the wider public in Hungary as follows: “The essence of the Transylvanian question is that, while Transylvania is politically only one part of the unitary and living body of the nation, it nevertheless requires separate treatment as regards culture and education”. This one-sentence thesis is developed through uncompromising, axiomatic statements. By this time, Transylvania was Hungarian only in those areas where it was Székely: “The Romanians have, over the last fifty years, conquered more than could one of the great powers in a battle lasting three years. The Hungarians of the Transylvanian counties have lost their fight for survival: the ground has slipped out from under their feet, the Hungarian word has died on their lips”.⁷² The use of the – to Romanian ears – pejorative term “oláh” for “Romanian” indicates how ethnicised the discourse on cultural superiority had become.

At all events, for Ravasz it was unequivocal that the inconsistently assimilationist politics of Dualism had failed and Transylvania could remain part of Hungary only if Hungarian nationality policy became tougher than as envisaged in the 1868 liberalism

⁷⁰ László Ravasz: Mit tegyünk? Munkaterv az Erdélyi Kálvin-szövetség számára [What shall we do? Plan of action for the Kálvin League of Transylvania]. *Református Szemle*, 3. (1910), 50. 815.

⁷¹ Ignác Romsics: *Bethlen István*. Budapest, Osiris, 2005. 56.

⁷² László Ravasz: Erdély [Transylvania]. *Protestáns Szemle*, 1916. 480.

of József Eötvös and Ferenc Deák: in Ravasz's view "in Hungary only those can be Romanian in language who are Hungarian at heart".⁷³ The victory of the Central Powers over Romania and the signing of a separate peace with Bucharest in May 1918 augured only a brief future for these illusions, and the awakening was all the more bitter for that. On its Christmas 1918 front page, the paper *Kolozsvári Hírlap* published an open letter in Hungarian and French addressed to Brigadier-General Gerescu, commander of the Romanian forces entering the city that day: "Commander! Romanians! [...] You have stepped onto the soil of the town where King Matthias Corvinus was born. We have laid down our weapons. Our only weapon remains the word with which our people have decorated his bronze statue: Justice. It is with this word that we shall appear before the tribunal of Europe".

The interests of the Hungarian minority in Romania, whose leading lights and middle class were financially depleted and had lost their legal privileges at a stroke, were at first most effectively represented by the churches. But their freedom of action must have often seemed like "that of a wooden sword confronting the muzzle of a canon".⁷⁴ Ravasz had already mobilised at the beginning of 1919, and saw in the fate of the minority the emergence of the outlines of a new kind of Hungarian image: "We are consumed by just one possibility: that we will be permanently attached to Romania. We must organise a lay theology, ordain lay ministers, and march towards the Hungarian future with Bible and hymnal in hand".⁷⁵ Between 1919 and 1921 Ravasz, as a church leader, saw his dilemma in the following terms: "Let us not betray the Hungarianness of the church by being overly accommodating, while let not the church cease to be the church by going underground and desperately fighting an irredentist battle".⁷⁶ Ravasz also played a role in the political organisations of the Romanian Hungarians, but in the autumn of 1921 he too departed for Hungary.⁷⁷ His reason was an invitation to become Bishop of the Dunamellék (the Danube region): Ravasz left his homeland because he "could not turn down such an unparalleled and almost unbelievable honour". At the same time this indicated that, for Ravasz, the irredentism-free protection of the minority that he tried prudently to represent could no longer be an effective option in terms of church politics.

"László Ravasz is of the blood of our Székely kin and fled hither from a severed Transylvania. He is steeped in the conviction that our profoundly humiliated nation can arise anew only through a commonality and undivided unity of spirit."⁷⁸ These laudatory words come from the nomination of Ravasz for membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1925 and is a reminder that the person of Ravasz also came to

⁷³ Ibid. 484.

⁷⁴ Gyula Szekfű: Az erdélyi probléma [The Problem of Transylvania]. *Napkelet*, May 1925. 458.

⁷⁵ László Ravasz: Kilátásaink [Our Prospects]. *Református Szemle*, 10 January 1919. 11–12.

⁷⁶ Ravasz (1992): op. cit. 136.

⁷⁷ Dr. Ravasz László budapesti papsága [The priesthood of Dr László Ravasz in Budapest]. *Református Szemle*, 1 April 1921. 60.

⁷⁸ *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia tagajánlások 1925-ben* [Nominations for membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences]. Budapest, 1925, 3–4. MTAKK, MS 327/f.

symbolise Hungarian revisionism. For the most part Ravasz’s statements on Transylvania are concerned with Hungary’s problems. “In Hungary Protestant and Catholic are further apart than perhaps anywhere on the continent.” In Transylvania, however, Ravasz argued, the evolution of society generated not sharp conflicts but rather sensible compromises: national liberalism is “the noblest and purest passion” in Transylvania’s history. It is no wonder, asserts Ravasz, that social mobility functioned better in Transylvania: “Discounting only the Jews, of the races inhabiting Hungarian soil the Székelys have been its greatest intellectual export”.⁷⁹ Thus, the “Transylvanian spirit” possessed for Ravasz an educative function and this is a diagnosis in which he concurred with the historian Gyula Szekfű, a Catholic, in whose view the great success of the Transylvanian minority movements “is to be sought in the unleashing of societal forces”.

Under the auspices of Hitler and Mussolini the second Vienna Award of August 1940 partly revised the peace treaty of Versailles with respect to the Hungarian–Romanian border. The “return” of northern Transylvania to Hungary obviously filled Ravasz with joy. But his specific suggestions were focused on trying to ensure that in this region Romanian chauvinism was not replaced by chauvinism of a Hungarian kind. For in the Transylvanian (and Partium) territories restored to Hungarian sovereignty more than one million Romanian inhabitants became, once again, citizens of Hungary; in other words, the balance between the nationalities was delicate. Ravasz’s suggestion was to respect the regional separateness of Transylvania. He wrote to the prime minister, Pál Teleki, when the Romanian army entered the country in early September:

During the Trianon years Hungary became alienated from the concept of nationality, its entire spiritual world revolving around the question of how our kinsmen were treated in the successor states. The three nations of Transylvania [i.e. the Hungarians, the Romanians and the “Saxons” (Germans) – *trans.*], particularly those in their younger generations, offer a far better guarantee of realising correct nationality policies than the ways of thinking in Rump Hungary, which have become one-sided.⁸⁰

Indeed, the conservative Ravasz also points out that Transylvania was always more left-wing than the right-wing Hungarian Motherland. “In 1919 the most ardent Hungarians awaited the Red Army, about which they knew only that it was Hungarian and brought liberation.” Ravasz rejected the notion that the Hungarians should wreak vengeance for the wrongs visited upon them in their twenty years as a minority: “No decent Hungarian can think in terms of us doing to the Romanians what they did to us. The question is not what Romanian politics deserves, but rather what policies are worthy of the thousand-year-old moral dignity of the Hungarian nation”.⁸¹ This hope, however, soon evaporated. The “little Hungarian world” was allotted a span of only four years and these four years did not prove long enough for Hungarian policies to convince the Romanian populace

⁷⁹ Ravasz (1992): op. cit. 58–59.

⁸⁰ László Ravasz: Az erdélyi kérdés [The Question of Transylvania]. In *Korbán*. Budapest, Franklin, 1941. 224.

⁸¹ László Ravasz: Erdély [Transylvania]. *Magyar Szemle*, 39. (1940), 4. 229–230.

of the glories of the Hungarian world. Certainly, it was not the people who decided on borders between countries but, once again, the imperialism of the great powers, and Stalin “gave back” Transylvania to Romania, which abandoned Hitler sooner than did the Hungarians, who were branded “Hitler’s last ally”. In the Paris peace treaty of 1947, the Atlantic powers gave the Soviet Union a free hand to settle questions relating to borders in Central and Eastern Europe.

László Ravasz’s image of Transylvania in his old age

The last time László Ravasz visited the land of his birth in his capacity as a bishop was in 1943. After 1945 he fought long-drawn-out rearguard actions against a Communist regime that sought to smash the influence of the churches. These he lost. In May 1948 he resigned his leading posts in the church and in 1952 he was forced to retire even from his ministry, whereupon his life became that of an internal exile: neither orally nor in print was he allowed a voice in Stalinist Hungary. But the bishop was not forgotten: in the eventful and hope-filled summer of 1956 he rejoined Calvinist public life and travelled to Transylvania.⁸² He sensed that the situation of the Transylvanian Hungarians was far more hopeless than it had been between the two world wars. “The Transylvanian Hungarian is virtually as cut off from his brethren in Hungary as from the United States.” The fate of the Hungarians there was in doubt, he went on, because of the “two persecuted races”, the Hungarians and the Jews, a much higher percentage became active Communists than in the case of the Romanians. “Compared with a vast, silent, threatening, patient Romanian majority, it is the Hungarians and the Jews who together bear all the responsibility for Communism.”

The Calvinist church grew grey, seeking its place by toadying to Orthodoxy, which managed to preserve its influence in the Communist state, while the two great Hungarian churches failed to find each other, despite the fact that Áron Márton, the bishop of the Hungarian Catholics, with his “unbending Hungarianness”, was “the leading figure among the Hungarians of Transylvania”. Headlong assimilation raised the painful dilemma of preserving Hungarianness versus the spreading of the Gospel, with the priests in the Hungarian diaspora having to face up to a demand for evangelical work in the Romanian language and people’s “eyes lighting up” at Romanian-language exegesis, while most, apart from the older generations, drifted away from services held in Hungarian. Ravasz advised his young Hungarian friends, who accompanied him in their droves, that “the Hungarian Calvinist should see in his Hungarianness a task furnished by God”. Let them set up reference libraries in their homes, let them make it fashionable to furnish their flats and churches by making direct use of Hungarian folk art. That is, let them keep alive national feeling on a purely cultural basis, which of course helps, as a kind of underground stream, to preserve historical continuity with the essential elements of the

⁸² László Ravasz: *Erdélyi utam* [My Transylvanian Sojourn]. Typescript, Manuscript Archive of the Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerület Tudományos Gyűjtemény Kt.d. 12.967.

Hungarian nationalism that it had been possible to avow openly in the past. A few months after his return to Budapest, Ravasz became head of the Calvinist Renewal Movement that arose in the wake the 1956 Revolution, which after a period of short but intensive activity was eliminated by Kádárist terror in the spring of 1957. Ravasz’s renewed internal exile lasted almost two decades, until his death in 1975. The aged Ravasz paid his final visit to Transylvania in 1966. In 1968 he told the writer Erzsébet Vezér that he considered himself a Transylvanian through and through.⁸³ The legacy of his Transylvanianness lives on primarily in the notion of an ecumenical Hungarian Calvinism. His career more broadly provides evidence that the construction of identity discourses cannot be isolated from the existential richness of individual experience.

“Being in a minority is no bed of roses” – László Ravasz and Catholicism

The emblematic historian of the period between the two World Wars, the Catholic Gyula Szekfű, described the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism as one of the most potent sources of tension in society.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Szekfű’s critic, the Protestant writer and thinker László Németh, who took issue with “the Psalmist’s unbelief”, regarded this problem as a confrontation “more delicate than grave”. Probably, they were both right, but one of the dark sides of the religious renaissance of this period was undoubtedly the rivalry between Catholicism and Protestantism, which from today’s perspective often seems risible.

The escalation of the conflict was, in fact, coded: László Ravasz considered that in the age of religious revival the situation between the denominations would of itself become increasingly tense, chiefly because both religious narratives sought to appropriate for their own purposes the entirety of “the nation’s soul”.⁸⁵ The Calvinist bishop of Debrecen Dezső Baltazár, the “last warhorse” of the liberal period, saw behind every political manoeuvre the work of “dark reaction” and the Jesuits, while although bishop Ottokár Prohászka of Székesfehérvár spoke of a “rainbow bridge” between (the Benedictine Abbey of) Pannonhalma and Debrecen, in his diaries he called these statements tactical in nature and held Protestantism responsible for the “age-old schism” and the spread of Communism. In crossing swords with the bishop of Debrecen, Dezső Baltazár, Ravasz only rarely allowed himself the luxury of a confident reproach, but if he had to, he was prepared to go out on a limb. In 1926, in a widely circulated statement, he voiced the following criticism:

⁸³ Erzsébet Vezér: Beszélgetés Ravasz Lászlóval [Conversation with László Ravasz]. *Ráday-Gyűjtemény Évkönyve VI*, Budapest, 1989. 313.

⁸⁴ Gyula Szekfű: *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik* [Three Generations and What Follows Next]. Budapest, 1989, (Reprint). ÁKV/Maecenas. 433–434.

⁸⁵ *Ravasz László XIII. püspöki jelentése* [13th Report on his work as a bishop by László Ravasz]. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1934. 16.

The notion that the Roman Catholic religion is the state religion and beside it we can be only a tolerated *religio*, resounds ever more loudly in public fora and is heard even from the highest echelons; but this is a mistake, since just because something is shouted very loudly or from on high, that does not make it true. People should not praise Catholicism as the only state-forming element at the cost of denigrating Protestantism, because, after all, let us recall that the United States was moulded better by ‘disdained’ and ‘destructive’ Protestantism than was Mexico and many of the states of South America.

Returning from his trip to America in 1929, he applied the principles of minority protection to confront Catholic “majority” politics:

We oppose all efforts – whether pursued consciously or unconsciously – to reconfigure any single church as the state church, whether on the basis of numerical superiority or aspirations to power [...] the principle of relative numbers is a legal guarantee only if and when a minority, protecting itself in a natural way, uses it to guarantee its minimal demands, but it is a *numerus clausus* if and when the majority deploys it against the minority. We demand that a principled distinction be drawn between church and state, so that practical assistance and cooperation may take place without hindrance and on the basis of principles of equity.⁸⁶

Ravasz correctly realised that Protestantism in Hungary certainly meant being condemned to a minority fate, which state assistance may ease but not eliminate: “Being in a minority is no bed of roses, whether at the national or the religious level. But there is an obvious straight path leading out of it: on the one hand, the development as fully as possible of its own unity, of its efficaciousness, of its watertight and impactful nature. On the other, the preservation and development of the interconfessionality of the state and of the laws guaranteeing equality and reciprocity.” At the same time, the anticlerical reflexes of liberal ecclesiastical policy, inherited from the period of Dualism, were also at work in Ravasz. When, following the dethronement of the Habsburgs, the Vatican questioned the right of patronage (advowson) and, specifically, prior ministerial approval for nominations to bishoprics, of which the most spectacular manifestation was the appointment of Jusztinián Serédi to the see of Esztergom in 1927, Ravasz protested publicly *post festa*, fearing that state sovereignty was threatened by “an international power”. Serédi never forgave Ravasz for this public act, nor did he forgive him for the fact that the head of the Protestant church moved in the highest echelons of political power with greater ease than he did. He always addressed him without his titles as “Mr Ravasz”, while the latter, faithful to his polite nature and the age’s obsession with titles, never omitted the former’s full and extravagant form of address: “His Grace, the Cardinal Prince-Primate of Hungary!” In any case, he always aspired to peaceful, indeed cordial relations. He was on friendly terms at the personal level with many members of the episcopate: for example, it was Ravasz who nominated Ottokár Prohászka for membership of the prestigious but largely Protestant Kisfaludy Society, and he also gave an influential eulogy after his death. In the spring of 1940, he even visited the well-known Catholic writer and editor Béla Bangha

⁸⁶ *Ravasz László V. püspöki jelentése* [5th Report on his work as a bishop by László Ravasz]. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1926. 14.

on his deathbed. When it came to interdenominational relations, the bishop positioned his church in the middle of the road:

In a lot of important matters, perhaps in the most important ones, we stand shoulder to shoulder with Catholicism; in a number of issues we consider that we are at one with the tide of liberty, swept along by the eternal human ideal, the purity of humanity. When it comes to realising moral seriousness, the life-shaping passion of prophetic faith, of Christ’s kingdom, then there is none more conservative than we. But when the issue is the fulfilment of human dignity, liberty of conscience and politics, equality, and the value of the individual, there is none more liberal than we.⁸⁷

In line with the vision of the Reformation that he outlined between the wars, Ravasz thought that the religious movements of Luther and Calvin led not only to the birth of Protestantism but also to the “Tridentine renewal” of Catholicism: “The Cluniac reforms of the Middle Ages must be called a reformation in the same way as, from the Catholic point of view, the greatest and most characteristic reformation carried through by the Council of Trent”.⁸⁸ Hence Ravasz frequently reminded his co-religionists that the Catholic church was not simply a power bloc and saw Catholicism as possessing vast reserves of intellectual and spiritual power, even speaking, after his visit in 1937 to the abbeys of Pannonhalma and Zirc, of Catholicism’s “thousand-year-old educative force”. Ravasz considered that Protestantism could no longer harbour the illusion that it was capable of defining the culture of an entire age, but it was a matter of swings and roundabouts, as it could still achieve an independent intellectual profile: “Before the war Protestantism was a confused element in the intellectual atmosphere, that we could neither distinguish nor eliminate but only inhale, the way we inhale oxygen with the air we breathe. After the War it starts to become a free-standing, clearly distinguishable factor, a cross-section or swathe of Hungarian intellectual life”.⁸⁹ This also chimed with his conviction that “it is never possible to build a world or a society on the thesis that everyone is Christian”.⁹⁰ Hence the ecumenical dialogue with Catholicism was for him an attempt at creating a kind of religious united front against the irreversible advance of secularisation. Ravasz, even if he did not create the kind of “rainbow bridge” that many contemporaries would have preferred to see, nevertheless reached a point where he was able to declare that “Christianity shares certain concealed foundations which are bigger, more essential and more important than the cracked or divided carapace”.⁹¹ But this united

⁸⁷ *Ravasz László püspöki jelentése* [Report on his work as a bishop by László Ravasz]. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1922. 25.

⁸⁸ László Ravasz: Október 31 [31 October] (1935). In *Legyen világosság* [Let There Be Light]. Budapest, Franklin, 1938, I. 503.

⁸⁹ László Ravasz: A protestantizmus lényege és sorsa [The Essence and Fate of Protestantism] (1934). In *Legyen világosság* [Let There Be Light]. Budapest, Franklin, 1938, I. 494.

⁹⁰ László Ravasz: A helyes egyházpolitika [Appropriate Ecclesiastical Policy]. In *Isten rostájában* [In God’s Sieve]. Budapest, Franklin, 1941, II. 432.

⁹¹ László Ravasz: Egység vagy barátság. Válasz Bangha Béla cikkére [Unity or friendship. A reply to Béla Bangha’s article]. *Protestáns Szemle*, 4 (1937). 161–166.

front he saw in terms of practical cooperation and the communality of prayer, and not in terms of the churches abandoning their dogmatic identities and organisational autonomy:

As long as the question is posed as ‘Protestantism should return to the bosom of Catholicism’ or as ‘the Catholics should adopt the principles of the Reformation’, the whole issue is quite hopeless, nothing more than a pious utopistic hope. If, however, the question is: how many of the tensions between the churches are without foundation or ‘surplus to requirements’, how might it be possible to reduce this tension by getting to know better the opposite side’s ideas and position, what means could be found whereby – while maintaining fully the dogmatic nature of the churches – we can still ensure a common practical stance in relation to certain shared questions, demands, and threats, and – finally – how we might be able to regularly direct our generation’s attention to getting to know the shared contentual aspects of all of Christianity and try to understand historical developments not merely from our own dogmatic point of view but in terms of the internal logic and essence of the historical developments involved: then, for several generations to come, we would be setting ourselves a positive agenda and a tangible task, one with which we would be able to pave the way for churches to get closer to each other.⁹²

With the approach of war, Ravasz increasingly felt the necessity for the churches to express solidarity with each other. In 1939 he notes: “Every church is an ally of old of every other [...]. How small are the disputes that separate us from one another, and how great the interests that unite us!” The shared trauma of the Hungarian Christian churches, one that has to this day not been adequately researched, is that this rapprochement was realised during the evolution of anti-Jewish public sentiment and with the support of anti-Semitic legislation. A characteristic document of this is László Endre’s double-edged New Year greeting of 1936, in which he wished a happy new year not just to the high minister of the Hungarian Protestants but to the “repository of the late Ottokár Prohászka’s spiritual heritage”. This “spiritual heritage”, in the case of László Endre, a racist who later played a key role in the deportation of the Jews, already alluded unequivocally to the churches’ support – irrespective of denomination – for political anti-Semitism. When in 1944, at the time of the catastrophe of the Holocaust, Ravasz finally recognised the gravity of the situation and, reversing completely the anti-Semitism of his career hitherto, attempted to gain the cooperation of the Christian churches in making a public protest, the effort at creating a united insitutional front foundered on mutual mistrust and battles for prestige.

László Ravasz and the Jews

László Ravasz’s attitude to the Jews, too, was seriously conflicted: he was the first, on the Protestant side, to dissolve the liberal consensus, the solidarity and emancipatory alliance between the two “minorities”, the Jews and the Protestants, in his aggressive public pronouncements from 1914 onwards, which enjoyed nationwide influence. Then, at the end of the 1930s, he also supported the first two items of Hungarian legislation

⁹² *Ravasz László XXII. püspöki jelentése* [22nd Report on his activities as a bishop by László Ravasz]. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1943. 8–9.

that discriminated against the Jews, and although from the 1940s onwards he rejected the more radical anti-Jewish legislation, and during the period of the catastrophe repeatedly protested against the deportations, he did not, even at this time, entirely discard his prejudices concerning the “separate fate” of Hungarian Jews, as opposed to Hungarians in the narrow sense. After the War he was the first to call for collective remorse and reconciliation, yet in the ever more restricted political life of the time he did not abandon the political path of self-exoneration, and is thus partly responsible for the inability of the church to process the tragedy of the 1944 Hungarian Holocaust.

László Ravasz’s first encounters with the Jews took place in primary school. He gives a moving account of these in his memoirs. The young Ravasz called his poor Jewish classmate, Dávid Goldstein “rheumy eyed”. When the boy complained about this to the teacher, who happened to be Ravasz’s father, the latter forbade him from sitting at the table at home or at his school desk until he publicly apologised. An important aspect of the story is that the teacher/father tried to make the apology easier to make by explaining how hard and wretched was the life of the boy he had offended. The dialogue between father and son is extremely instructive:

“After dinner my father turned to me:

‘My boy, do you know Dávid Goldstein?’

‘I do.’

‘What do you know about him?’

‘I know that he is a rheumy eyed Jew.’

‘That’s not very much. You see, I know rather more about him. I know his father died this summer. He left ten children. Dávid is the oldest. His mother is seriously ill. Some of the children are being looked after by relatives, but five of them are still at home, and Dávid is their chief means of support.’

‘How do you mean?’ I said, astounded.

‘Well, he gets up at half past three in the morning. He fetches water, makes the fire, and follows his mother’s directions to make his brothers and sisters a soup of some kind. Then he hurries off to the synagogue. A Jewish service can be held only if there are 12 men present, but they no longer have that many. They get over this by paying for 12 men. Not even men, just boys, who are paid for being present. This custom has long become a kind of indirect scholarship, a means of helping out the poorest, Dávid among them. [...] By the time you turn up in school at 8 o’clock, rested and having enjoyed a decent breakfast, Goldstein has already done four hours’ work. Only then does he start school. At noon he hurries home. He makes lunch, washes up, helps out his mother, then he comes back to study with you from 2 to 4. You have often seen him at half past five on his way to the station, rain or shine, with a big basket full of rolls and other baked goods. He gets on the train and sells them steadily, as the train goes all the way to Kolozsvár. At half past eight, on the way back, he carries the basket and at 11 o’clock dumps the money in his mother’s lap and collapses into his father’s bed, next to two of his brothers already asleep there. You see, that’s why Dávid Goldstein is rheumy eyed, that’s why he is pale, fearful, unsure of himself, down-at-heel and neglected. Have you, ever in your life, earned a single forint? Have you ever had to work even for an hour? Now do you see how much better your “rheumy eyed” classmate is than you? Compared to you, he is a true hero [...] My boy, you are a kind-hearted, decent and fair-minded person. It would please me greatly if you could once again sit by my side.”⁹³

⁹³ Ravasz (1992): op. cit. 15–16.

And the next day the young Ravasz, his cheeks burning, asked in front of the whole class for the forgiveness of the Jewish boy he had humiliated. This story is instructive not only as an illustration of how a child was brought up in those times, though it is a good example of that, too. This scene, played out in the late 1880s, brings to life the time when Hungarian liberalism successfully overcame the wave of anti-Semitism that had swept the country following the Tiszaeszlár blood libel of 1882–1883, Hungary's version of the Dreyfus affair. But the instructive words of Ravasz's father reflect not so much the liberalism characteristic of the Hungarian nobility of the second half of the nineteenth century, the paternalistic attitude to the poverty-stricken Jew familiar from the works of Kálmán Mikszáth and Károly Eötvös, as the more puritanical pathos of Transylvanian liberalism.

The adult Ravasz did not, however, follow his father's example. When in early 1914 László Ravasz took over the editorship of *Protestáns Szemle*, a periodical with a nationwide readership, he abandoned the lukewarm liberalism laced with pietistic devotion that had characterised the journal hitherto for a militant – as we would now say: *Kulturkampf*-like – profile. The stamp of Ravasz's editorship could be seen in almost every issue and under the veil of an ironic tone, established an ever more clear-cut anti-Semitic rhetoric in a journal that had, until then, been free of it.

Ravasz focused primarily on cultural and intellectual changes in the rapidly transforming society, which he encapsulated in easily digestible and emotional slogans and then organised into a constellation in which the terms “Jew” and “Judaism” were loaded, negative terms:

By Jews and Judaism we mean neither a religion nor a race but an intellectual current that, in its world view, in its contacts, in its moral compass and social behaviour is [...] diametrically opposed to those of Christianity. It is not unequivocally bound to race and religion, because we are aware of quite a few noble individuals among the Jews who are suffering the curse and repulsiveness of Judaism, even though historically many external links connect this disposition to the Jewish race, or rather to its cultural-historical course. Thus the Jewish question is not a denominational one [...] nor is it a racial one [...], for we know of hundreds and hundreds of individuals who are racially pure Jews while their souls are filled with a Christianity ready to be kindled. It is, then, an intellectual tendency that is a fusion of hedonism and utilitarianism which manifests itself in the world of the intellect as a destructive force, in commerce as usury and untrustworthiness, in art as licentiousness and sensuality, in sexual relations as lasciviousness, and in society as pushiness and arrogance. These sins do, of course, exist even without the Jews, but since the Jews are, for historical and biological reasons, the most inclined to commit these sins, they would, without the Jews, be isolated features unconnected with each other, but through the Jews they have become a homogeneous tendency [...]. It is profound and brotherly love for the Jews that makes one truly anti-Semitic, should one wish to free these outstanding individuals of the Judaism that has become attached to them, of the fundamental features of the sick consequences they have been disposed to by their race.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ László Ravasz: Mikor a zsidó antiszemita [When the Jew is antisemite]. *Protestáns Szemle*, 6. (1926). 386.

This rhetoric renewed the age-old dichotomy between Christian and Jew, though this time through the secularisation of its religious content. The “sins” of modernity are intangible, the “perpetrator” and the “victim” both partake of them, for Ravasz criminalises social relations based on consensual relationships and projects them directly onto the concept of Jewry that he has formulated, in which the casuistic caveats have little significance. Though he strove to keep his views distinct from theories based on racial difference, neither at this time nor subsequently did Ravasz make more specific what were those “historical” and “biological” reasons that “predisposed” Jewry to these atavistic sins. At the same time the view of Jewry that he represented was, in one way, “new”: while no respected ecclesiastic on the Protestant side had before him challenged the barely half-century-old heritage of civil rights in Hungary, Ravasz made this challenge one of the cornerstones of his programme from the very outset.

The poetic genius of the age, Endre Ady, who was both its best-known literary celebrity as well as the proud proclaimer of his “Calvinist” identity, was one of the first to call attention to the “new tone”: “In Hungarian Calvinism’s [...] literary journal the most vehement anti-Semitism is being pursued by one László Ravasz, who is worthy of a better fate”. But this pertinent warning went unheeded by Ravasz. He continued to claim that his anti-Jewish statements were based on his “ethical idealism”, which, however, increasingly anticipated the arguments of the affronted ethnic nationalism that came increasingly to the fore from the 1920s onwards:

We hasten to protest against being labelled ‘anti-Semitic’. We are absolutely not. We demand that Hungarian intellectual life be organised on the basis of ethical idealism. [...] We make no secret of the fact that we regard as disgraceful and unworthy of a Hungarian the presumptuous, overconfident, overfamiliar, and cynical manner with which they threaten to extinguish our ancestors’ modest and respectful norms of communication. We honestly declare that from the point of view of national education we regard as a desirable element neither the Galician Jew, who starts the day with fruit brandy and formic acid, nor his son, the commercial traveller, who advances in life to become an army contractor and millionaire, nor his grandson, the sociologist, who propagates a ‘visionary and libidinous’ philosophy in the press, in much the same way as we do not regard as such the Romanian priests burnished in Bucharest, nor the alien clergy that have been smuggled into our country, nor the hollow bumpitiousness of the aristocracy’s offspring making their home in Vienna’s Jockey Club. None of these do we condemn on the grounds of their religion. Every religion, even those that are extinct, is a great, powerful, and sacred thing that, should be taken truly seriously, can sanctify a person and hone a masculine character of distinction and firmness. What we are against are spiritual and intellectual turns of mind and ways of passing judgement, what we are battling is the destructive force of the Antichrist. As a race and religion, Judaism would be for us something to which we are totally indifferent – since the demise of the world is to be sought not in Jews as a race, and even less so in Judaism as a religion, but in people themselves – were it not the case that some strata of the Jews and of Judaism, with their distinctive inter- or trans-culturality, currently carry the rather worrying bacilli of certain seeds of this demise: hedonism, utilitarianism and ahistoricism. Because that is indeed the case. Either we give up the struggle against the decline of the world because we are liberals and do not wish to offend anyone’s sensibilities, or we launch a general campaign of anti-Semitism and declare: strike the Jew, because he is a Jew! Perhaps we shall have the good fortune not to be wounded by any dagger. We declare: stigmatise the unworthy, even if they happen to be Jews! It is our hope and expectation that those Jews of great and noble heart, the men pure of soul, rigorous of morals, and great in faith, the suffering servants of Israel

who carry the sins of their race and bear the defeat of their people (Isaiah 53), will offer us their hand and learn justice and truth from us, that they might look upon us in love.⁹⁵

In the image of “the Jew” that he has thus constructed Ravasz deploys the metaphor for the generations that was so fashionable in his time, depicting Hungarian Jewry’s both socially and culturally pluralistic world as having an organic structure: the first generation is the poverty-stricken immigrant Orthodox Jew, the second the Neolog Jew identified with capitalism’s entrepreneurs, while the third carries the negative image of the assimilated radical intelligentsia of non-Hungarian origin – yet they share a common root. Their crime (or sin) is that they embody all the corrupt practices of the modern world of capitalism – from pauperisation to the relativisation of moral values – but chiefly that they have remained alienated from the values of the Hungarian world of olden times, just like the agents of the Romanian national movements, or – in a sideswipe at Catholicism – the “alien priests”. The diagnosis is not religious but sociological, and as such it is arbitrary, but it is undoubtedly rhetorically effective. For precisely this reason Ravasz’s condescending extension of his hand to the “suffering servants of Israel” does not – because it cannot – be taken up by anyone, except those prepared to deny their ties to the Jewish community, those traditional bonds whose disintegration in Hungarian society Ravasz ascribed to Jewry’s damaging influence.

His strident view was not unremarked. He was asked to contribute to the 1917 debate on the Jewish question in the periodical *Huszadik Század*. In contrast to other Protestant contributors, such as the Buda Calvinist cleric Benő Haypál or professor of theology Jenő Zoványi, who denied that the Jewish question had any relevance and interpreted it as the upending of emancipation and the liberal consensus, Ravasz placed himself squarely in the camp of those who asserted that a Jewish question did indeed exist and demanded a solution at governmental level. That solution could be nothing other than “complete racial assimilation”. In order to realise this assimilation Ravasz also demanded both the reformation of Judaism as a religion and also the reorganisation of its institutional foundations:

It is necessary that the Jews’ opaque synagogal organisation be transformed into a national ‘church’ that is regulated by common law [...]. It is essential that an orthodox and modern Jewish national ‘church’ be organised, with Hungarian as the language of instruction and a Hungarian-language liturgy, rabbinical training, dioceses, and a universal presidium, as well as the possible representation of its theological literature in Hungarian at university level.⁹⁶

At the end of this piece of writing, having listed what he expected of the Jewry – the renunciation of its popular character, the root-and-branch reform of its religion, the willingness to make sacrifices at the collective level – he briefly indicated that promotion of this assimilation was also a task for the Hungarians as a whole: “The historical spell of the Hungarians, the all-conquering truths of the life- and world-view of Christianity

⁹⁵ Antiszemitizmus? [Antisemitism?] *Protestáns Szemle*, 4. (1916) 270–271.

⁹⁶ László Ravasz: *Zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Körkérdés* [The Jewish Question in Hungary. A survey.] *Huszadik Század*, 1917. p. 128.

must be made so strong that it is impossible to resist their power”.⁹⁷ But the essay ends on a somewhat sceptical note: “It is this that will prove most difficult to achieve because of the fragility of the representatives of these glorious truths”.⁹⁸

Thus it can be seen that the anti-Jewish *ressentiment* of the conservative religious regeneration between the wars had already developed by the time of the outbreak of the First World War. As with the highly influential representative of Catholic religion, Ottokár Prohászka, so in the case of Ravasz, the genesis of Hungarian political anti-Semitism is not to be sought in the situation of the revolutionary period of 1918–1919.

From the Jewish Laws to the Holocaust

The regime that came to power in 1919 began with appalling anti-Semitic excesses and atrocities and although as it consolidated it managed to eliminate anti-Semitic street violence, by passing the universal *numerus clausus* legislation that particularly affected the Jews, it signalled that it was breaking with the emancipatory efforts of the liberal, Dualist period. Ravasz played no part in any of this, occupying in the autumn of 1921 the bishopric of the Cis-Danubian Calvinist diocese and during the first 15 years of his service as head of the church he did not poke the incandescent embers burning beneath the ashes. After this decade and a half of relative calm, the Szeged speech of Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi, assessor to the dioceses of Vértesszőlő and Budapest, and an active, practising Calvinist, nevertheless informed the Hungarian general public that “there is indeed a Jewish question, as everyone is aware”.

From this point onwards anti-Semitism became part and parcel of official discourse and, in barely a year, government policy. The First Jewish Law, which reflected its sponsors’ views in its title, “For a more effective safeguard of equilibrium in social and economic life”, was developed by a committee under András Tasnádi Nagy, president of the party in power. Tasnádi Nagy was the lay head of the most important and most populous diocese in the Danube region, that of Budapest. In parliament, the liberal opponents of the bill, a tiny minority, trusted in the wisdom of the chief prelates of, especially, the Christian churches in the Upper House – in vain, as in the course of the debate on the bill on 24 May 1938, the representatives of the Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran churches unanimously supported it. Of these the one who made the most substantial contribution to the debate happened to be László Ravasz. Until the second half of the 1930s, the bishop rarely expressed his views on the Jewish question, in contrast to his distinctly polemical behaviour during the First World War. He was also clear that between the wars the “denominational equilibrium” of the Calvinist church towards the Jews was positive, and only half of the Jewry were positively inclined towards it. So much so, that in some of the capital’s parishes, for example in the congregations of Albert Berzeviczy and János Victor, the pastoral care of the faithful of Jewish origin became

⁹⁷ Ravasz (1917) op.cit, p. 129.

⁹⁸ Ravasz (1917) op.cit, p. 129.

a task of the first order. Of the leading clerics of the official church the most active in dealings with such Jews was Bereczky. In the first debate on the First Jewish Law in the Upper House, Ravasz's rejection of divergence from the equality of all citizens before the law was not yet based on principle but seen primarily as a compromise that should be made in the interests of social amity. "It is my conviction that the passing of this law will not only serve the peace, tranquillity and security of the country, but will be ultimately to the advantage of those who – quite rightly, I admit – protest most vehemently against its adoption".⁹⁹ By this he meant that the legal regulation of the "Jewish question" was intended to prevent the explosion of virulent anti-Semitism: "The tranquillity of the nation [...] will by no means be best served if we attempt to suppress a universal sentiment like anti-Semitism by sheer force".¹⁰⁰ The repeated raising of doubts about the conversion of the Jews to Christianity was music to the ears of the extreme right, too: "If [...] all of Hungary's 443,000 Jews were to convert to Christianity and there were no longer a single individual of the Jewish faith, not only would the Jewish question not be solved, but it is likely that it would be even more problematic".¹⁰¹ From which it followed logically that he was calling upon the Christian churches to make conversion more difficult. "Let the Christian churches exercise sensible restraint in accepting Jews. We already have enough bad Christians of our own kind, so why should we import a large number of our Jewish kinsmen?"¹⁰² Behind the ironic tone serious considerations were rising to the surface, and Ravasz's point of view also had consequences for the internal legal regulation of the Calvinist church itself, as it soon became more difficult to join that church, which had, until then, traditionally been welcoming of baptisms.

It is possible that he thought discrimination would thus be limited to those who were Jews, and would not be extended to those who had converted earlier. Zionism, the isolation of Jewry on the basis of nationality, was something Ravasz had encouraged earlier, and continued to do so, but only the kind of Zionism that had as its goal "the establishment of a vigorous nation state somewhere beyond the borders of our country". These declarations of principle all laid the theoretical foundations of exclusion on the basis of ethnicity and religious entrenchment. But the influence of the speech was most palpable in those mocking turns of phrase with which one of the most highly educated people in the land

⁹⁹ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, III, p. 308.

¹⁰⁰ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, III, p. 308.

¹⁰¹ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, III, p. 309.

¹⁰² Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, t. III, p. 311.

expressed the unworthiness of the relationship of the Jews to Hungarian culture: “The Jew is Hungarian, it has been claimed, and I have even heard it said that the Jewish denomination is, after the Calvinist, the most Hungarian of all. Let anyone get into the third-class carriage of a train to Nyíregyháza [in the north-east of the country – *trans.*], in which there are 60 to 70 caterpillar-kippah-ed, becaftaned, Yiddish-spouting Jews, and ask himself: are these Magyars, the people of Árpád, the people of the poet János Arany?”¹⁰³

Though he was not without a few positive words for those Jews loyal to the nation, according to the parliamentary minutes it was the above-cited turns of phrase that were especially widely appreciated. And not just by the right wing of the illustrious Upper House. László Endre, by this time sub-prefect (*alispán*) of Pest county, who in 1944 was the undersecretary of state at the Ministry of the Interior responsible for the deportation of the Jews, quoted these words virtually verbatim at his trial at the people’s tribunal, as ones that especially strengthened him in his anti-Semitic views. As one of those affected, the well-known philanthropist and president of the National Association of Industrialists Miksa Fenyő pointed out in 1946:

Bishop László Ravasz, in the speech he made in May 1938 accepting the despicable law that deprived Jews of their rights [...] not only stood foursquare behind the proposal but supported its goals with such lavishly embellished language, dressing up in splendid metaphors his contempt for the Jews, leading the Jews with inquisitorial hauteur to further deprivations of rights (which soon turned into deaths), that the doubters’ spines were stiffened and the government could be justified in thinking that it had been warned by a high cleric that it had been only too generous in its thinking and must continue further along the path to the crushing of the Jews [...].¹⁰⁴

And the process of deprivation of the Jews’ rights continued apace. In vain did Béla Imrédy, Darányi’s successor as prime minister, promise in September 1938 that with the “equilibrium law” the legal regulation of the Jewish question had peaked: at the end of the year András Tasnádi Nagy, his minister of justice, proposed the law “On limiting the expansion of the Jews into the public and economic sphere”, or the Second Jewish Law as it is widely known, which was openly based on race and whose provisions also affected those members of the Christian churches who were of Jewish origin. At first László Ravasz was against the law, most influentially in his 1939 New Year sermon. He reminded his audience that the existence of the Jewish question was also a Christian question, as the Christians had not fulfilled their mission from Christ to convert the Jews. The solution to the Jewish question was possible only with the educative transformation of the nation, and further legal restrictions would result not in a natural, inner transformation but would at breakneck speed, overnight, change the entire stratification of society. He

¹⁰³ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz’s intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, t. III, p. 310.

¹⁰⁴ Miksa Fenyő: Levél Ravasz László védőbeszédéről [Letter on the subject of László Ravasz’s apology] *Haladás*, 1946. január 5, pp. 3–4.

was not alone in having serious reservations about this proposal. This time in the Upper House there was far stiffer opposition than there had been to the First Jewish Law.

In the end, however, the renewed support of the churches' leading clerics, among them László Ravasz, in return for a few exemptions for Christians of Jewish descent, finally led the government, now headed by Pál Teleki, to pass the Second Jewish Law. In his contribution to the debate in the plenary session on 17 April 1939, Ravasz introduced his views with obvious self-laceration: "It would have been easier and more comfortable to reject the proposed law and if perhaps it would not, at this point in time, have been a popular thing to do, we can be quite certain that with the passing of time historians of this period would have been increasingly understanding of such a position".¹⁰⁵ But in his view the proposal married "the maximum degree of national security with the minimum degree of injustice to the individual". In the course of his speech, however, Ravasz repeatedly made momentous assertions. He stated, categorically and also with respect to the future, his negative view of the historico-cultural interplay arising out of Hungarian–Jewish coexistence: "It is impossible to alter the fact that Jewishness is different from Hungarianness. The Jewish race is different, in terms of religion, fate, historical situation, and as the result and in the framework of all this, the Jewish mentality is different".¹⁰⁶ This amounted to the complete rejection of faith in assimilation.

As to why this should be the case, he offered a long theological excursus which concluded that the Jews bear eschatological responsibility for their historical fate: "The people of the sacrament abandoned the ideal of the sacrament. They stood not knowing what to do, alienated, almost superfluously before the altar, before the table of the Lord", which virtually justified the catastrophe visited upon them: "Here stands the Jewish soul, amidst the new chaos, confronting the laying of the foundations of a new world, organised on new principles". Having theologically "put them in their place", Ravasz even had the energy to "warn" the Jews against seeking support from overseas in challenging their legal deprivations: "In the western democracies there is unbridled agitation by the expelled Jews against all those states that have introduced Jewish laws, including Hungary. I consider it very important that it should be, above all, for the affected Jews of Hungary to reject this form of protection offered to them". (How familiar a Hungarian situation!) But the western democracies also received their share of the reproof, as they, too, would encounter this problem: "I repeat standing here that the western democracies will one day have a reckoning with the Jewish question, because if they have Jews, they

¹⁰⁵ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1939. április 17-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 86.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 17h of April 1939] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, t. IV, p. 159.

¹⁰⁶ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1939. április 17-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz's intervention in the 86.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 17h of April 1939] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, t. IV, p. 161.

will have a Jewish question; the two are in lockstep: never in the history of the world have there been Jews without a Jewish question, or a Jewish question without Jews”.¹⁰⁷

Ravasz’s 1938–1939 parliamentary speeches on this topic had a greater effect on Hungarian public opinion than perhaps any other of his public statements. He claimed to be speaking not just in his own name: according to his 1944 memoir, his view was “more or less shared” by the entire leadership of his church. His extensive correspondence provides evidence that the inflamed anti-Semitic mood of his own church did indeed exercise considerable influence on his oratorical ego. There is no getting round the fact that already in his first speech in the Upper House, Ravasz called upon his supporters to deal fairly with the Jews: “We are enacting a law that for many of Jewish origin – whether Christian or Israelite (Jewish) – will cause anguish, and the most profound anguish will be caused to those who are their noblest and finest. We Christians should not forget this: let us think of them with gentleness and let us feel towards them love”.¹⁰⁸

As for Law XV of 1941, passed in the summer of that year and commonly called the Third Jewish Law, entitled “On marriage rights, being the supplementing and modification of Law XXXI of 1894 and the racial protection provisions connected therewith”, this was unequivocally rejected by the leaders of the Christian churches; indeed, the leaders of the Calvinist church protested against it in a joint memorandum. Ravasz rejected the racial foundations of the law as scientifically unproven and declared that the legislative intention was a corrupt practice that went against the ethical character of the Christian religion and Christian ethics.

At the same time – and we are now in the spring of 1941, when Ravasz sees that the Soviet Union is “creaking and crumbling” and most of Europe is under either German rule or German influence – he would have been prepared, even in the debate on the bill in the Upper House, to accept a compromise that forbade marriage between Gentiles and Jews on a racial basis – but only in the future and with the preservation of the rights that had been granted earlier. Unfortunately, as the war wore on, Ravasz tended to increasingly relativise his “brotherly love” for the Jews, the desire for which he had previously frequently expressed: “Just because I see in the Jew my brother does not mean I wish to marry him [...]”.¹⁰⁹ Yet Viktor Karády’s research has shown that the application of the 1930s Jewish Laws did not significantly diminish the number of those affected or marital relations between the “Christians”, and even in the – for the Jews – increasingly oppressive climate of the early 1940s, there were hundreds of Christians who, despite the grave legal difficulties, were prepared to – and even actively sought to – bind their

¹⁰⁷ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1939. április 17-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz’s intervention in the 86.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 17th of April 1939] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, t. IV, p. 163.

¹⁰⁸ Ravasz László felszólalása a a felsőház 1938. május 24-i ülésén [Bishop László Ravasz’s intervention in the 67.th session of the Upper Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament on the 24th of May 1938] *Felsőházi Napló*, Budapest, 1935, III, p. 312.

¹⁰⁹ László Ravasz: Koreszme és kijelentés [Spirit of the times and Revelation] In László Ravasz: *Korbán* [Corban]. Budapest, Franklin [1942], I–II, p. 210.

fate to the Jews'. In one of his sermons broadcast on the radio in February 1942 Ravasz nevertheless implicitly approved the modification of the marriage law on racial grounds, and indeed questioned why the authorities failed to enforce the strict separation of the Gypsies (Roma) from the Hungarians:

“Science has not yet determined whether mixing the Jewish race with the Hungarian is advantageous or disadvantageous. In so far as individual experiences may be regarded as arguments one way or the other, the latter may rather be the case. Hungarians and Jews separately produce more valuable entities than if they are intermixed. [...] Let the study of the Hungarian people examine this systematically, and if it should be found that the Hungarian–Jewish admixture is not fortunate, appropriate protective steps must be taken. We can already see that the Hungarian–Gypsy admixture is harmful, yet no appropriate measures have so far been taken.”¹¹⁰

In 1943 the church passed a by-law that broke with the freedom to provide baptisms as hitherto regulated by the ecclesiastical laws by demanding of those wishing to join the Calvinist church twelve (or, in “suitably worthy cases”, six) months of prior religious study, and furthermore any application had to be approved by the congregation’s entire presbytery and not, as hitherto, by the minister alone. (And the presbyteries were often led by racist politicians even where the minister was no anti-Semite, as in the case of the Budapest Fásor Calvinist congregation where alongside Minister Imre Szabó, who was active in rescuing Jews, the presbytery was led by András Tasnádi Nagy.) The only one to raise his voice against the by-law was the delegate of the Transtiszanian diocese, Sándor Nagy-Juhász of Debrecen, who had been Minister of Justice in the government of Mihály Károlyi. Juhász-Nagy pointed out, quite reasonably, that the new by-law contradicted Calvinist teaching on baptism, but the Convent’s other members unanimously ignored his point of view. Ravasz disingenuously claimed that the by-law was necessary to prevent “unserious conversions” and that it had been a desideratum for some time. He insisted to the end of his life that the leaders of the church were right to protect themselves against the “terror of those seeking refuge”, who regarded baptism as merely a “contract with a firm offering first-class life insurance”. Ravasz offered no explanation for the kind of message that such a rigid, formal by-law sent to the persecuted Jews and the “racist” Christians, or for how fatally it damaged the credibility of the evangelical mission towards the “rump Jewry”, and – contrariwise – how it reinforced the anti-Semitic members of the church in their convictions, members who in the absence of a more profound theological education could see only the parallel between the tightening of the legislation of church and state. Nor can we know for certain how effective the by-law was in restricting baptisms. A recently published document shows the crisis of conscience of a Calvinist village minister in Transtiszania, who carried out an irregular baptism of Jews and was taken to task for it. And however incredible it may seem, even after 1945, in full knowledge of the tragedy that had befallen the Jews, the church, and László Ravasz personally, launched disciplinary proceedings against those who violated the by-law. However, as the war dragged on and the prospect of the Germans’ defeat became ever

¹¹⁰ Faj, nép, nemzet, [Race, peoples, nation] In *Korbán* [Corban]. I–II, Budapest, 1943, II, p. 300

more likely, steps were also taken to protect Christians of Jewish origin. In the autumn of 1941, Ravasz intervened at the Ministry of the Interior on behalf of those Jews of Kőrösmező [now Yasinya, Ukraine – *trans.*] who had escaped deportation. Modelled on the Catholics’ Holy Cross Association, the Calvinist church’s Universal Convent established on 20 October 1942 its Good Pastor Mission subcommittee, with Gyula Muraközy as president but with the 28-year-old assistant minister József Éliás, himself a Jewish convert, as its secretary and leading driving force. The organisation was tasked with the spiritual and material protection of those members of the church who were persecuted because of their heritage.

The Good Pastor Mission particularly came into its own during the Holocaust, when it very rapidly became the central Calvinist body for people’s rescue, with almost a score of determined and well-prepared colleagues (among them the Lutheran pastor Gábor Sztéhlo, János Szentágotai, later to become a distinguished brain scientist, and Imre Kádár) with an effective informational network both within and outside the country, despite the wartime conditions. Its activities were financed, for the most part, by voluntary gifts and income from abroad; officially the Calvinist church provided merely moral support, though unofficially it offered much more: both the channelling of the material aid and the infrastructure of the organisation was developed with the assistance of the church. Éliás did not take a sympathetic view of Ravasz, seeing in him the “His Grace” that stood upon his dignity, a man who wielded important power, but recognised his considerable presence and his tenacious determination. The first time they met Ravasz told him two parables: “The tired migratory birds settle on the Venetian galleys and there have been cases where there were so many of them that the galley overturned. Reflect on this”¹¹¹, Ravasz told Éliás, and continued with the other parable: “If in a boat there are nine who can be saved but a tenth wants to climb aboard, what mathematical operations should the leader of the boat apply?”¹¹² Éliás claimed that what Ravasz outlined to him was the “mathematics of death”, but we may also imagine that he was suggesting that the church could not assume the protection of every single Jew when it took on the effective protection of Christians of Jewish origin. Ravasz was well-informed on foreign policy issues. Perhaps this, too, played a role in the formulation of his parables. At this time of this conversation, in the autumn of 1942, Hungary was – if we disregard the deportation of the Jews of Kőrösmező which ended with their mass murder, the massacres in Novi Sad, as well as the ever-increasing suffering of those in the labour battalions – the last, relatively safe haven for hundreds of thousands of Jews in Europe. Though in 1942 the rhetoric of the government of the newly elected prime minister, Miklós Kállay, was

¹¹¹ József Éliás: „A embermentés volt a fő feladat... [The main task was to save Human Life...] In Sándor Szenes: *Befejezetlen múlt. Keresztények, zsidók, sorsok* [Unfinished past, Christians, Jews, Destins], Budapest, 1986, pp. 37.

¹¹² József Éliás: „A embermentés volt a fő feladat... [The main task was to save Human Life...] In Sándor Szenes: *Befejezetlen múlt. Keresztények, zsidók, sorsok* [Unfinished past, Christians, Jews, Destins]. Budapest, 1986, pp. 37–38.

anti-Semitic, it consistently rejected the demands of the Germans for the Jews' radical "settlement", that is to say, their extermination.

The German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944 brought about a new turn of events in this respect, too. Eichmann's commandos came with the occupiers, Kállay fled to the Turkish embassy, and the puppet regime of the new prime minister, Döme Sztójay, issued decree after decree concerning Jews: the wearing of the yellow star of David and ghettoisation; and – less than two months after assuming power – the death wagons starting rolling towards the extermination camps.

We know from the memoirs of the writer Sándor Török, deputy president of the Alliance of Christian Jews, that Ravasz was profoundly moved by what was called the "Auschwitz report", to which he gained access, with the assistance of Albert Bereczky, through colleagues at the Good Pastor in May 1944. This resulted in a very significant change in his behaviour. Whatever role he may earlier have played in the passing of the Jewish Laws, there is no question that of the leaders of the Christian churches Ravasz was the most dynamic in organising the protests and the rescue missions. In April he twice intervened with Governor Horthy, bombarding the prime minister and the Calvinist Ministers of the Interior and of Culture with appeals. In the first place he sought exemptions and concessions for the Christians of Jewish origin, as well as humane treatment for all. A few days after the deportations began on 15 May, he was the one who composed the deposition of the Universal Convent to Prime Minister Döme Sztójay: "We must draw Your Honour's attention to those sad events which led to the final demise of the deported Jewry in other countries, and plead with Your Honour to do everything in your power to prevent such events from happening here and thus be good enough to kindly deflect the responsibility for their occurrence from the Royal Hungarian Government and, thereby, from the entire Hungarian nation."¹¹³

The diplomatic restraint of these closing words did not disguise the essence: László Ravasz was the Hungarian church leader to spell out, in writing, to the head of the executive that deportation meant the end, that is to say, mass murder. At the same time, even at this time, he viewed the behaviour of the imperilled Jews with the reservations of old: in the wave of mass conversions, in his view, "the converts typically seek a safe haven in the church to protect them from every danger: socially, spiritually, and as regards their financial assets, too". This argumentation itself comes from the arsenal of traditional anti-Semitism. Seeking the causes of this attitude, the political thinker and politician István Bibó, in his well-known work *The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944* (1948), argues that in the Christian churches "anger had been quite understandably mounting for the previous century about the fact that a significant portion of the Jews who convert do so not in order to join the community of the Christian faith and religion but, equally understandably, in order simply to abandon the Jewish religious community

¹¹³ A Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület 1944-45. évi tanácsülési jegyzőkönyvei, [Records of the 1944-1945 Plenary Sessions of the Hungarian Reformed Church's Danubian District] In *Ráday Gyűjtemény Évkönyve*, XI. Budapest, 2005, p.306.

and enter a civil community unconstrained by ritual”.¹¹⁴ According to Bibó, however, the reservations of the churches’ leadership to the offering of baptism did not take into account the fact that in the spring of 1944 “the theological problem, too, underwent a change in the new situation: with the launching of the gravest persecution of the Jews the question became whether it was right to offer baptism [...] without considering whether there was sufficient time and opportunity to convince and convert, solely in order to obviate the immediate and real danger of a threat to someone’s life”. This was not the sole serious ethical deficit in Ravasz’s stance: there was also the delay in publicly protesting, attempting to do so only after the deportation of the Jews from the countryside had been completed. On top of this, Prince-Primate Serédi rejected a joint protest from the Catholic and Protestant churches. In fact, Ravasz could not convince even the Protestant churches – or even his own bishops – to publicly and openly condemn the government’s policy of mass murder. The plan for the protest, composed by Ravasz at the end of June 1944, was frustrated by his own former student, by this time bishop of the Transylvanian diocese, János Vásárhelyi (or rather by the diocese’s chief warden, the famous writer, author of *The Transylvanian Trilogy*, Miklós Bánffy), while on the part of the Lutheran church it was thwarted by Sándor Raffay, who demanded that the text should include a condemnation of the British bombings as well.

When listing these failings one should not fail to point out that his serious, indeed life-threatening illness over the spring and summer of 1944 gravely hindered the bishop in energetically pursuing his goals. With hindsight he tried to justify his attitude with the impossibility of the dilemma: “We were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. It was necessary to openly and firmly confront the government in the interests of all Jewry, while in the interests of rescuing individuals we had to gain the goodwill of the appropriate minister or general with humble petitions”.¹¹⁵ This attitude mobilises the topos of “the tragic misdeed”. The real contradiction in the fundamental injunction of Christian ethics – and on this issue Ravasz was silent – lay in the fact that while Ravasz continued to maintain a rigid stance on baptism, he did not himself face up to the aspects of his own approach and tactical thinking that justified this process, nor to the church that denied its prophetic calling, which he himself so frequently voiced. That the situation demanded the *ultima ratio*, Ravasz realised only after the Arrow Cross came to power on 15 October 1944. When his letter to Prince-Primate Serédi calling for a joint church protest against the “sufferings of the Jews that cry out to heaven” again met with no response, he remonstrated with Szálasi against the persecutions once more.

This, too, went unanswered. By December he had himself gone into hiding, as in the general chaos the Arrow Cross’s guttersnipes sought him in his flat and proceeded to smash his pictures. He turned down the chance of fleeing to the west along with “the leader of the nation”. Christmas found him still preaching in Kálvin Square, after which

¹¹⁴ Bibó István: Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után [Bishop The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944]. In Péter Hanák (ed.): *Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus* [Jewish question, assimilation, antisemitism], Budapest, Gondolat, 1984, p.155.

¹¹⁵ Ravasz, 1988, o. cit, p. 359

he broke with his wife and family and walked to the Zsuzsanna Lórántffy sanatorium in the City Park, through streets strewn with the bodies of Jews murdered the previous night. He hid in the cellars of the sanatorium, whence he returned on 2 February 1945 to the theological seminary, which had been bombed. His mother died during the siege of Budapest and was buried in a temporary grave.

“What the Gospel promises, let democracy bring to fruition” – László Ravasz seeking a way forward between 1945 and 1948

He held his first service in the church in Kálvin Square on 11 February 1945. The walls still shook from the sound of the Russian mortars pounding Buda, while German missiles smashed into the building next door, and Ravasz was trembling in the pulpit as he preached his sermon. What he had to say was apposite: “We were thrown against the body and reaped death”, said Ravasz to a congregation fearful equally of the sound of cannon and of the future, and it was in this sermon that the church issued its first clear call for repentance: “There will be no national renewal if this generation continues to blame only others and dares not accept responsibility by having the courage to confess our sins”. In April 1945, awakening from the horrors of the siege of Budapest, he averred that “God has chosen this generation to live through the gravest period of the history of Hungary [...]. There happened to be a camp among the sons of this country that discarded a thousand years of civilisation. The world has never before seen a policy more unscrupulous, more foolhardy, and more evil”.¹¹⁶ Between 4 and 10 June 1945 every congregation in the Danubian diocese held a week of repentance and according to the contemporary information sheet distributed the lectures “were to reveal the sins, the debts, and the responsibility of all of us, without seeking excuses or trying to defend what happened”. Repentance came to define the discourse of the Calvinist church during the first decade after the war, and as such it was rapidly politicised, becoming an instrument in the struggle to define the direction and leadership of the church. In August 1945, the bishops of the four dioceses issued a joint pastoral letter asserting that the cause of the ruin of the country was moral decline. The formulation echoed Ravasz’s sermons:

The leaders and the people of the country forgot God, forgot His eternal Word and Law. Never have the Ten Commandments been mocked on the scale that they have been on this planet over the last decade. The word ‘Christian(ity)’ has been dreadfully abused, appropriated for the support of a tyrannical system, an ideology almost entirely anti-Christian and anti-biblical, and in many cases it was turned into something tantamount to anti-Semitism.

(This was a tone quite different from that adopted by the Catholic church: at the first meeting of its bishops on 24 May 1945, the interim president József Grósz said that “it

¹¹⁶ A Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület 1944–45. évi tanácsülési jegyzőkönyvei, [Records of the 1944–1945 Plenary Sessions of the Hungarian Reformed Church’s Danubian District] In *Ráday Gyűjtemény Évkönyve*, XI. Budapest, 2005, p. 284–287.

is not prepared to execute people who have gained merit in the past merely because they do not please those whom we opposed in that past and, indeed, still oppose in the present [...]. That they loved their own race more than the Jews, and gave expression to this view, should be resented by no one. If that is anti-Semitism, then he who was an anti-Semite then remains one now and will be one in the future – indeed: more so than ever. Because our Jewish compatriots have learned nothing from the events of the recent past”.¹¹⁷) Ravasz, in spite of the enormous destruction and terrible failings, thought that “the entire heritage of the church remains intact” and “upon the murderous layer of sludge of the shattered world” it can nevertheless “ignite the first sacrificial candles”, whereafter “a new chapter on us can open in the history of the world”. This new chapter cannot be simply the continuation of the old one.

Ravasz recognised that the world in which his last public declaration as bishop had been made in 1943 “now lies centuries behind us”. However, he was of the opinion that there was room for manoeuvre. The churches were full, not even all the concerns about the paper shortage, inflation and general poverty, could make people forget that the new start in 1945 was accompanied by enormous social confidence in the churches. In the autumn of 1945, Ravasz also articulated a political stance. According to his much-quoted assessment: “In Hungary, with defeat in the war the entire political system has swung from the extreme right to the extreme left with such force that we may rightly call this swing one of the greatest revolutions”. This “revolution”, in Ravasz’s view, fed off the crimes of the past and polarised a society in which hatred and envy are as of old, only the name of the enemy has changed: it is no longer called destruction, but reaction. Ravasz gave voice to the feelings of hundreds of thousands of frightened people in bourgeois society when he said that “often we have the impression that right-wing fascism has been replaced by left-wing fascism”.¹¹⁸ In sharp contrast to his interwar pronouncements, the conceptions of freedom in a democratic tradition and the liberalism of the nineteenth-century Age of Reform became his new points of reference.

He called for ethical government leadership, and strove to supplement the new governmental set-up with the great teachings of western – especially Anglo-Saxon – democracy. As his pastoral letter in August 1945 put it: “What the Gospel promises, let democracy bring to fruition”. He wanted a free church in a free state, but asked for time to allow the church to stand once again on its own feet. His ideal was the complete financial freedom of the church “from the state, from all politics, from all worldly powers”. He also put out feelers to Catholicism, though in his immediate circle he called Cardinal Mindszenty someone “hungry for martyrdom”. In public, however, political ecumenicism was functioning better than ever, and Ravasz gave up his earlier

¹¹⁷ Beke Margit (ed. by): *A magyar katolikus püspökkari tanácskozások története és jegyzőkönyvei 1945–1948 között*. [The Records of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference 1945–1948] Budapest–Köln, Argumentum, 1996, 37.

¹¹⁸ *A Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület 23 és 24 tanácsülésének jegyzőkönyve*, [Records of the 23rd. and 24th Plenary Sessions of the Hungarian Reformed Church’s Danubian District, Budapest, Bethlen Gábor, 1945, 18.

concerns about Catholicism being overdominant, spoke almost exclusively in terms of the “spiritual solidarity”, “the existential links”, “the shared interests of the universal burden” that bound the Christian churches to one another. In the autumn of 1946, he declared that it was no longer a question of how individual denominations related to the state: “Today all Christendom sinks or swims together”.¹¹⁹ The government’s initiative of introducing optional religious education at the turn of the year 1946–1947 was frustrated jointly by the two Christian churches, and the Catholic weekly *Új Ember* published a long interview with László Ravasz on its cover: something that had never happened before. The united front of the churches presented a more effective opposition to the strivings for one-party rule by the Communists than the steadily crumbling forces of the bourgeoisie, but Ravasz was under no illusion that the church would “in the not too distant future be forced to retreat from its positions in public law and public life”.

The heaviest burden borne by the leadership of the church was, however, that during the Holocaust it did not rush to protect the persecuted “with sufficient vigour”, “in a way that would have been worthy of the Lord’s command”. Thus wrote, in a private letter, the pro-Ravasz bishop of Budapest, Imre Szabó. Nor was Ravasz trusted by Sándor Karácsony, the influential pedagogue and philosopher, who enjoyed greatly respect in the church youth movements. He and his followers represented a sort of spiritual branch of the “people’s left” and, after the war, “plunged into politics with a naive but enthusiastic goodwill, sometimes swimming far out to the left wing, near the Communist Party”.¹²⁰ The majority of the opposition was, nonetheless, made up of those who had “crossed over” out of sheer careerism, as typified by that János Péter who from the end of the 1930s was a rising star of the ecclesiastical press and now, as personal secretary to the president of the republic Zoltán Tildy, became a Communist stooge who worked assiduously behind the scenes to compromise the old leadership of the church and indulge his own ambitions for power.

During these months, an urgency was lent to the repentance topos by the flaring up of anti-Semitism, which on occasion descended into pogroms. In the spring of 1946, Ravasz informed Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy that “young people are no longer on the side of the government, the greater part of the intelligentsia, too, is against them, the workers are bitter, everyone is anti-Semitic”.¹²¹ At the same time, the church leadership unequivocally ascribed the resurrection of anti-Semitism to the aggressive expansion of the Communist party: indeed, echoes of the anti-Semitism of old could once again be heard in their midst. In his diary, the bishop of Budapest Imre Szabó wrote that the police were full of Jews, while according to Cisztizanian Calvinist bishop Andor Enyedi, the

¹¹⁹ Ravasz László: A magyar refomátusok ma, [Hungarian Calvinists Today] *Élet és Jövő*, 1946, szeptember 28., 1.

¹²⁰ Gyula Gombos: *Szűk esztendőök. A magyar kálvinizmus válsága* [Straitened Years. The Crisis of Hungarian Calvinism]. Washington, Occidental Press, 1960. 20–21.

¹²¹ Szovjet–magyar viszony. Feljegyzés Nagy Ferenc és Sztálin találkozójáról (közli Szabó Csaba) [Soviet–Hungarian relations. Notes on Ferenc Nagy’s meeting with Stalin (published by Csaba Szabó). *História*, 8 (2000). 23.

work of the church remained fruitless because of “the horrendous crimes of the Jews”: “The Jew can, for example, smuggle goods by the wagonload, while the poor man is locked up for stealing a kilo of groceries”.¹²² He is aware of Jewish nudist camps up and down the country, men and women indiscriminately holiday together and indulge in unfettered sexual activity, Zionist movements are springing up everywhere under the guise of agricultural labour organisations.

Ravasz phrased his views differently but he too thought that “the whining, complaining Jews are desperately clinging to the offences committed against them, and exploit these as legal grounds for complaint. They almost enjoy the sweetness of their grievances, treating them as the sweetness of revenge”.¹²³ In this period, Ravasz’s chief adversary became Albert Bereczky, a minister from Pest’s Pozsonyi Road, who for a time also acted as undersecretary of state in the coalition government, and gradually turned against his bishop, accepting, despite his Smallholder Party links, the increasingly undisguised support of the leader of the Communist party, Mátyás Rákosi. Bereczky’s people held a Calvinist Congress in Budapest in the autumn of 1946, of which the chief topic was “Towards the Hungarian Future along the Path of Faith”. The president of the republic, Zoltán Tildy, and his wife, also put in an appearance at this congress. The plenary session on the last day of the three-day event was opened by Ravasz under the title “We Have Been Saved”, but this was on his part a damage limitation exercise, an attempt to prevent a schism in his church. The lead speaker at the congress was once again Bereczky, who spoke of the shameful autumn of 1944 and said two things. One was that there was no future until “we condemn” the past “root and branch”: this was an allusion to the church’s deficit in humanitarian rescue in 1944. The other was that there was no future other than the kind of life on offer at the present time “being humbly and obediently accepted by us”: this was an allusion to the fact that the church could no longer be an actor on the political stage. His ally, the careerist missionary priest Benő Békeffy, read out the congress’s declaration in which the Calvinist church expressed its faith in democracy. From the outset Ravasz saw in the activity of the National Calvinist Free Council only a weapon of the power struggle. His strategy was to mobilise the “silent majority” within

¹²² „Ég, de meg nem emésztetik...”, Szabó Imre a budapesti egyházmegye első esperese. *Naplók 1914–1954* [“It is ablaze but it is not consumed...”, Imre Szabó, first Dean of the Budapest diocese. *Diaries 1914–1954*]. Budapest, Budahegyvidéki Református Egyházközség, 2001. 423. Enyedi’s and Ravasz’s statements are cited by Tamás Majsai: *Szemponatok a Soá 1945 utáni (magyarországi) evangélikus és református egyházi recepciójához* [Aspects of the post-1945 reception of the Shoah in the (Hungarian) Lutheran and Reformed churches]. In *Magyar megfontolások a Soáról* [Hungarian Considerations of the Shoah]. Budapest–Pannonhalma, Balassi Kiadó – Magyar Pax Romana Fórum – Pannonhalmi Főapátság, 1999. 179–211.

¹²³ Majsai Tamás: *Szemponatok a Soá 1945 utáni (magyarországi) evangélikus és református egyházi recepciójához*. [Aspects of the ecclesiastical reception of Hungarian Reformed and Evangelical Churches of the Soa] In: *Magyar megfontolások a Soáról*. [Hungarian regards on the Soa] Budapest–Pannonhalma, Balassi Kiadó – Magyar Pax Romana Fórum-Pannonhalmi Főapátság, 1999. pp. 179-211.

the church. In his September 1946 speech at the general meeting of ORLE, the National Alliance of Calvinist Ministers, which resonated widely, he positioned himself on the side of the ministers of the Calvinist church. On the one hand, he defended the support of the revisionist policies of the interwar period as the “final great opportunity to reunite the Hungarians dispersed over four countries”, while on the other, he broke with the topos of repentance, which had declined into being a narrative of a weapon of power. To an avalanche of noisy clapping from hundreds of priests he declared that the church “does not beg for the Jews’ forgiveness, for the simple reason that it is just as wrong to ask for forgiveness of the sins of others as it is to confess to the sins of others instead of our own”.¹²⁴

On this occasion Ravasz was victorious: whatever declaration the November Congress adopted, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of the ministers and the presbyteries stood behind the leaders of the church and the person of Ravasz. The Free Council had, in practice, collapsed by the end of 1947. The movement was rent by internal dissension between Bereczky and Békeffy, but this also proved that no putsch could be carried out against the general opinion within the church. Nonetheless, by his willingness to fight, by playing up to the anti-Semitic sentiment of the general public, Ravasz discredited not just his earlier calls for repentance: he compromised for decades to come the theological relationship of Hungarian Christianity to the Jews, which to this day is floundering hopelessly in the web of the politics of remembrance. The events that followed, the Communist takeover of power and the inglorious role played in this by Bereczky and his allies, continues successfully to disguise the fact in his relationship to the Jews Ravasz opted for the path of spurious self-acquittal.

Bibliography

The author's works

- Ravasz László: Keresztyén szociálizmus. *Erdélyi Protestáns Lap*, (1906), 4.
Ravasz László: Mít tegyünk? Munkaterv az Erdélyi Kálvin-szövetség számára. *Református Szemle*, 3. (1910), 50. 815.
Ravasz László: Mikor a zsidó antiszemita. *Protestáns Szemle*, 26. (1914), 6. 386–387.
Ravasz László: Erdély. *Protestáns Szemle*, 28. (1916), 7–8. 479–485.
Ravasz László: Antiszemitizmus? *Protestáns Szemle*, 28. (1916), 4. 270–271.
A zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Körkérdés. Akik szerint van zsidókérdés. Ravasz László válasza. *Husadik Század*, (1917), 2. 129.
Ravasz László: Kilátásaink. *Református Szemle*, 1919. január 10. 11–12.
Ravasz László püspöki jelentése. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1922.
Ravasz László V. püspöki jelentése. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1926.

¹²⁴ [Presidential opening address of László Ravasz in the Plenary Session of the Hungarian Reformed Pastors’ Association on the 25 of September 1946] Ravasz László elnöki megnyitóbeszéde az Országos Református Lelkészegegyesület közgyűlésén, 1946. évi szeptember hó 25-én, Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1946, p. 10.

- Ravasz László *XIII. püspöki jelentése*. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1934.
- Ravasz László felszólalása az első zsidótörvény felsőházi vitájában 1938. május 24-én. *Felsőházi napló*, 1935. III. kötet.
- Ravasz László felszólalása a második zsidótörvény felsőházi vitájában 1939. április 17-én. *Felsőházi napló*, 1935. IV. kötet.
- Ravasz László: Egység vagy barátság. Válasz Bangha Béla cikkére. *Protestáns Szemle*, 46. (1937), 4. 161–166.
- Ravasz László: *Legyen világosság*. I. Budapest, Franklin, 1938.
- Ravasz László: Erdély. *Magyar Szemle*, 39. (1940), 4. 229–230.
- Ravasz László: *Isten rostájában*. II. Budapest, Franklin, 1941.
- Ravasz László: Faj, nép, nemzet a magyarság szempontjából (Rádioprédikáció, 1942. február 28). In Ravasz László: *Korbán. Beszéddek, írások II*. Budapest, Franklin, 1943. 292–303.
- Ravasz László *XXII. püspöki jelentése*. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1943.
- Ravasz László *XXIII. és XXIV. püspöki jelentése*. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Irodalmi és Nyomdai RT., 1945.
- Dr. Ravasz László elnöki megnyitó beszéde az Országos Református Lelkészegyesület közgyűlésén, 1946. évi szeptember hó 25-én. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Nyomda, 1946.
- Ravasz László: *Válogatott írások 1945–1968*. New York, Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1988.
- Ravasz László: *Emlékezéseim*. Budapest, Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Irodája, 1992.
- Ravasz László: *Erdélyi utam*. Kézirat. Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerület Tudományos Gyűjtemény, kéziratár, Kt.d. 12.967.
- Ravasz László: *A kolozsvári Unió-páholy*. Kézirat. Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerület Tudományos Gyűjtemény, kéziratár, Kt.d. 13.489.

Secondary literature

- A Dunamelléki Refomátus Egyházkerület 1944–45. évi tanácsülési jegyzőkönyvei. In *A Ráday gyűjtemény évkönyve XI*. Budapest, magánkiadás, 2005. 306.
- Barcza József – Dienes Dénes (eds.): *A magyarországi református egyház története 1918–1990. Tanulmányok*. Sárospatak, a Sárospataki Református Kollégium Teológiai Akadémiája, 1999.
- Beke Margit (ed.): *A magyar katolikus püspökkari tanácskozások története és jegyzőkönyvei 1945–1948 között*. Budapest–Köln, Argumentum, 1996.
- Bereczky Albert: *A magyar protestantizmus a zsidóüldözés ellen*. Budapest, Traktátus, 1945.
- Bibó István: Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után. In Péter Hanák (ed.): *Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus*. Budapest, Gondolat, 1984.
- Fenyő Miksa: Levél Ravasz László védőbeszédéről. *Haladás*, 2. (1946), 1. 3–4.
- Gombos Gyula: *Szűk esztendőök. A magyar kálvinizmus válsága*. Washington D. C., Occidental Press, 1960.
- Kádár Imre: *Egyház az idők viharában. A Magyarországi Református Egyház a két világháború, a forradalmak és ellenforradalmak idején*. Budapest, Bibliotheca, 1957.
- Karády Viktor: Gyengéd érzelmek és sorsközösség-választás a magyar zsidó-keresztény házasságokban (1895–1947). In Mózes Endre (ed.): *Ki szereti a zsidókat? A magyar filoszemitizmus*. Budapest, Noran Libro, 2014. 256–270.

- Majsai Tamás: Szempontok a Soá 1945 utáni (magyarországi) evangélikus és református egyházi recepciójához. In Hamp Gábor – Horányi Özséb – Rábai László (eds.): *Magyar megfontolások a Soáról*. Budapest–Pannonhalma, Balassi Kiadó – Magyar Pax Romana Fórum – Pannonhalmi Főapátság, 1999.
- Máthé Elek: Zsidómisszió vagy zsidóüldözés? *Teológiai Szemle*, (1960), 45.
- Romsics Ignác: *Bethlen István*. Budapest, Osiris, 2005.
- Szabó Imréné Szabó Éva: „Ég, de meg nem emésztetik.” *Szabó Imre a budapesti egyházmegye első esperese. Naplók 1914–1954*. Budapest, Budahegyvidéki Református Egyházközség, 2001.
- Szabó Imre budapesti református esperes levele Takaró Géza református lelkésznek 1946 elején. In Szabó Imréné Szabó Éva: „Ég de meg nem emésztetik.” *Szabó Imre a budapesti egyházmegye első esperese. Naplók 1914–1954*. Budapest, Budahegyvidéki Református Egyházközség, 2001.
- Szász Lajos: „...Aki bűnt követett el bűn nélkül.” A református lelkész és az izraelita felekezetűek megkeresztelése Gégényben 1943/1944-ben. *Kommentár*, (2015), 6. 21–42.
- Szekfű Gyula: Az erdélyi probléma. *Napkelet*, 3. (1925), 5. 453–466.
- Szekfű Gyula: *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik*. Budapest, ÁKV–Maecenas, 1989 [1920].
- Szenes Sándor: *Befejezetlen múlt. Keresztények és zsidók, sorsok*. Budapest, magánkiadás, 1986.
- Szovjet–magyar viszony. Feljegyzés Nagy Ferenc és Sztálin találkozójáról. *História*, 22. (2000), 8. 23.
- Varga, Attila: *Elite masonice maghiare Loja Unio din Cluj (1886–1926)*. Cluj, Argonaut, 2010.
- Vezér Erzsébet: Beszélgetés Ravasz Lászlóval. In Benda Kálmán et al. (eds.): *A Ráday gyűjtemény évkönyve VI*. Budapest, MTA, 1989. 305–326.