

Réka Tímea Újlaki-Nagy

Christians or Jews?

Early Transylvanian Sabbatarianism
(1580–1621)



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1. Introduction

Although in the 16th and 17th centuries Transylvania was one of the most exciting scenes of the so-called Radical Reformation, it is still only rarely made the subject of discussion in the international secondary literature. Within this arguably scanty body of literature, Transylvanian Sabbatarianism is a topic on which even less scholarship can be found. There is almost nothing devoted to the history or theology of this fascinating community in the literature on the Radical Reformation, a literature which alas only rarely extends beyond the geographical areas in which the languages of the larger nations of Europe were spoken.¹

Among the many reasons for the virtual absence of Transylvanian Sabbatarianism from the scholarship, the most obvious is linguistic isolation. Beyond that, however, I would go so far as to venture the suggestion that the literary and cultural legacy of the Transylvanian Sabbatarians has had a fate all too similar to this community's decaying cemetery, much of which is little more than slowly crumbling gravestones half covered with moss: no one regards it as their own, or in other words, it has no heirs. The local Jewish organisations argue that it is hardly their responsibility to look after the graves, since the Sabbatarians were not really Jews, and the Christian churches have an even easier time shrugging off the responsibility, as they need merely observe that the Sabbatarians distanced themselves from them (and even judged them). Similarly, scholars of the Radical Reformation may justifiably shirk the task of studying this (I will argue) fascinating religious community by saying that the Sabbatarians ultimately departed from the Christian fold, much as scholars of Judaism do not regard Sabbatarianism as part of their research field.

Of course, it is not my intention, with this book, to fault the field for having largely overlooked the Transylvanian Sabbatarians, since there are, in addition to the reasons I have listed above, numerous other explanations for why this community may have escaped the attention of the international scholarly world. I seek rather simply to change this state of neglect and to present early Transylvanian Sabbatarianism to the international scholarship. This book is a unique undertaking, as no monographs have been written on the early period of Sabbatarianism, when this community was first emerging in the tumultuous decades of the Radical Reformation. There are, in the body of secondary literature, only larger-scale works which cover broad

1 In connection with this problem see Gizella Keserű and Mihály Balázs. "Der Siebenbürgische Unitarismus". In Ulrich A. Wien, András F. Balogh, Juliane Brandt (eds.). *Radikale Reformation. Theologie und Lebenswelt der Unitarier in Siebenbürgen*. (=Studia Transylvanica 44). Köln-Wien-Weimar: Böhlau, 2013, 11–36.

overviews (see the chapter on the history of the scholarship). Furthermore, for a reader who does not speak Hungarian, there is hardly any literature based on primary sources offering a thorough and adequately supported reliable overview of Sabbatarianism itself, regardless of the period.

The issue that arouses the most interest with regards to the Transylvanian Sabbatarians is usually the simple question of their identity. Who were they? Were they Christians or Jews? The admittedly scarce secondary literature on them does seek to answer this question, as it cannot be avoided, but most of the answers that have been offered are emotionally charged and ideologized, and the connections between a given author's religious, ideological, and national affiliation and their positions with regards to this question are usually clear. A tendency towards bias and even mystification infuses the entire literature on Sabbatarianism and makes it well-nigh impossible for one to find clear, reliable insights on the issue of Sabbatarian identity. Furthermore, the answers that have been given to this question tend to be superficial. Rather than drawing on the primary sources, they usually approach the issue from the biased perspective of an outsider, largely ignoring the Sabbatarians' self-image and trying instead to squeeze them into rigid categories. Given this problem, one of my primary aims with this book is to offer a detailed response based on thorough readings of the primary sources to the fundamental question of who the Sabbatarians were (and how they defined themselves) in a religious sense. I have striven to present early Sabbatarianism from the perspective of the Sabbatarians' collective understanding of themselves and their relationship to Christianity and Judaism.

Anyone attempting to answer these questions, however, admittedly faces obstacles and must grapple with limitations. The surviving primary sources are few and, by their very nature, they contain only very limited elements of self-reflection. It is likely, furthermore, that the attitudes of the authors of these texts did not always overlap entirely with the views and perspectives of all the members of the community. Consequently, conclusions and generalisations drawn on the basis of these texts may lean towards exaggeration and may at times be superficial, but they are still essential if we seek to make any claims concerning this unusual community. The texts that were in common use (e. g., congregational songs and prayers) are somewhat more suitable as foundations for general conclusions about the self-image of Sabbatarians, since these texts may well have influenced the development of this image. However, even in the case of conclusions based on these texts, there is still a risk of overstatement and oversimplification.

The period on which I focus runs from the emergence of Sabbatarian ideas in Transylvania in the early 1580s to 1621. This initial period is the most exciting in terms of the issues under examination. It is in the sources that were created in this roughly forty years that one can hope to find answers to the questions of why and how this community was formed and spread, how it came to acquire a clearly

recognizable, distinct identity, and what historical and cultural factors influenced this identity. The later period, after 1621, was so marked by the charismatic personality and work of Simon Péchi (who had at one time served as chancellor of Transylvania), that almost nothing has survived apart from his writings. Even the manuscript collections from later centuries contain for the most part copies of his writings. Péchi strove quite clearly to bring Sabbatarianism closer to Judaism, and as a consequence of his influence, the whole religious movement took on a different character from that of the formative period examined in this book.

Why is this community, which many rightly see as a kind of exotic, isolated oddity in the cavalcade of religious denominations and trends, worthy of study? Perhaps it would suffice to answer this question simply by pointing out the popularity of this religious phenomenon at the time and its longevity, despite the persecution the community suffered. At the beginning of the 17th century, there were thousands of Sabbatarians, including some very influential people in Transylvanian society. Sabbatarianism survived for three centuries, and in another form, incorporated into Judaism, for almost a quarter of a century until the community was finally wiped out by the Holocaust. Beyond the quantitative and temporal aspects, however, I think there are more fundamental human issues at stake in looking at the history of this community. Although in many ways their beliefs and lives were on the borderline of marginality and extremity, this borderline situation brought to the surface some general human issues. Hovering on the border between Christianity and Judaism, they were constantly confronted with questions of identity, including belonging, selection, inclusion and exclusion, freedom of conscience, persecution, common destiny, and hiding. Perhaps they wanted to offer proof that it is possible to be both a true Christian and a Jew. But this attempt, which from the ancient Judaizers to the twentieth century was the largest-scale attempt to reconcile Christianity and Judaism, was doomed to failure from the outset. In my view, this was true not simply because of external sources of persecution, but also because Sabbatarian thinking was ultimately destined, given its theological underpinnings, to a slow, gradual return to Judaism. In the effort to purge the Church of its accumulated human traditions, from the outset, the Sabbatarians took steps that almost inevitably resulted in a return to Judaism. Although this had not yet occurred in the period under study, it was clearly predictable on the basis of the surviving texts, and this is what I have endeavoured to show.

1.1 Overview of the scholarship

Sabbatarianism was discovered by scholars in the middle of the 19th century. The first lecture on a surviving Sabbatarian song collection was presented on 2 Septem-

ber 1850 at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.² In the following years, however, especially with the conversion of the Sabbatarian community to Judaism in 1868, collection work began. At the end of the century, more and more interested researchers, writers, journalists, rabbis and ethnographic collectors hurried to the proselyte community to get hold of any manuscripts that were still available.³ After Sabbatarians had converted and begun using Jewish prayerbooks, they parted more easily with the manuscripts they had previously jealously guarded, so in the first two decades of the 20th century, almost all surviving sources were discovered and all available documents were collected.⁴ In this period of collection, several studies were published which either offered discussions of the different source documents (mainly the liturgical ones) concerning Sabbatarianism or tried briefly to recount the history of Sabbatarianism.⁵

The first monograph on the movement was written by the chief rabbi of Pest, Sámuel Kohn. His book *Sabbatarians. Their history, dogmatics and literature. With special regard to the life and work of Simon Péchi* was published in 1889 and is still the clearest, most easily read and also reliable and incisive book on Sabbatarianism. Written with great erudition and empathy, its most important defect is that the rabbi-scholar did not notice the foreign influence of Matthias Vehe-Glirius, which had played a part in the birth of Transylvanian Sabbatarian ideas. This is understandable, however, considering the few sources at his disposal. The lack of sources also made it impossible for him to paint an unbiased, authentic picture of the personalities

2 József Lugossy thought to present the only surviving volume of the literary heritage of Sabbatarianism. József Lugossy. "Egy szombatos énekes könyvről". *Új Magyar Múzeum* 1 (1850–51/2), pp. CVL–CIX.

3 See the travelogues and the prologue in the volume *Zsidó székeleyek. A bözödújfalusi szombatosok emlékezete*. Ed. by Réka Újlaki-Nagy. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2020. The proselytes called themselves 'ger'-s (גר) and the community "kahal gerim" (קהל גרים).

4 After their conversion, Sabbatarians wanted to get rid of the past and were ashamed of it, so they replaced their handwritten songbooks and prayerbooks with printed Jewish prayerbooks. The outmoded manuscript collections were initially donated to the visiting scholars and later sold to various libraries and collectors. However, it can also be presumed, relying on an account written in 1855 by the Unitarian priest Sándor Ürmösi, that in spite of these efforts, not all the last sources that existed in the 19th century were handed over to researchers. There existed a holy "Book of Law" ("törvénykönyv") kept in secret "as the ark of the covenant" ("frigyláda") by the actual Sabbatarian leader of Bözödújfalú (Ro. Bezidu Nou, Ger. Neudorf) that outsiders were not permitted to see. This collection, presumably rich in data concerning the history of the movement, disappeared without any trace. This account will be discussed in more detail later. It is also known from contemporary travelogues that some manuscripts were buried with their owners when they passed away. See Sándor Ürmösi. *Székely magyar szombatosok Erdélyben. Jegyzékül a honi történethez*. HAS Department of Manuscript Coll., Ir 4-r. 396; György Bözödi. *Székely emberek, zsidó istenek. Jegyzetek a székely szombatosokról*. Cluj: Minerva, 1935, 22.

5 In 1937 János Varjú published a bibliography on the literature of the Sabbatarian liturgy. János Varjú. *A szombatosok költészete*. Budapest: [Varjú], 1937, 39–42.

close to Sabbatarianism, such as the Unitarian bishop Ferenc Dávid and the poet Miklós Bogáti Fazakas. It was important for him, as someone who worked hard on the emancipation and Hungarianization of the Jews, to show the pure Székely origin of Sabbatarianism. He tried to stress the admiration Sabbatarians felt for the Jews and to show that the members of the Sabbatarian community had chosen their faith voluntarily. Sabbatarians found an enthusiastic, receptive supporter in Sámuel Kohn, who also tried to help the community financially.

Nonetheless, his book exerted considerable influence. It helped the Proselyte community of Bözödújfalú (Ro. Bezidu Nou, Ger. Neudorf)⁶ survive and gain strength, and it saved the lives of the members of this community during the Second World War, as it served as a reference which could be used to deny Jewish ancestry to the authorities (the Gestapo).⁷ It is still the only monograph on Sabbatarianism based on original research that made its way to an international audience, as it was translated to German in 1894 with the title *Die Sabbatharier in Siebenbürgen*.⁸

In the following years, alongside several studies and treatises on Sabbatarian liturgy and Simon Péchi, research on Sabbatarianism was also given a strong push by Zsigmond Thúry's bibliography on Sabbatarian codices⁹ and the different editions of Simon Péchi's book of prayers and Psalm translations.¹⁰ This research at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was done mostly by Protestant (primarily Unitarian) theologians and representatives of the Neolog Jewish community,¹¹ and it yielded some studies.¹² Acceptance of the Sabbatarians by

6 I use Hungarian names of settlements (villages, towns, cities) in the main text. When these place names occur for the first time, I give the Romanian and, when relevant, German equivalents in brackets. The index contains all the place names.

7 See the memoir of Lieutenant Colonel Gendarmerie Lóránt Botskor in the Manuscript Collection of the National Széchényi Library (*Erdélyi Bözödújfalui székely szombatosok megmentése 1944. évben*, Anal. 11.134) and the "Sabbatarian affairs" folders of the National Archives of Hungary (Igazságügyminisztériumi iratok, Általános iratok, K 579, 87–90. cs.) concerning the case of the Sabbatarian-Jews during the Second World War and their rescue from deportation.

8 Samuel Kohn. *Die Sabbatharier in Siebenbürgen. Ihre Geschichte, Literatur und Dogmatik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Lebens und der Schriften des Reichkanzlers Simon Péchi*. Budapest: Singer & Wolfner, Leipzig: Franz Wagner, 1894.

9 With the use of the term, I would like to join the consensus originating from the 19th century according to which all Sabbatarian manuscript collections are referred to as codices. Zsigmond Thúry. *A szombatos kódexek bibliográfiája különös tekintettel azok énektartalmára*. Mezőtúr: Borbély Ny., 1912.

10 Mihály Guttmann and Sándor Harmos. *Péchi Simon szombatos imádságkönyve*. Budapest: IMIT, 1914; Áron Szilády. *Péchi Simon psalteriuma*. Budapest: MTA, 1913.

11 Neologs are one of the three main communal organisations of the Hungarian Jewry which broke from the conservative Orthodox Jews following the 1868–1869 Hungarian Jewish Congress.

12 The Unitarian journal *Keresztény Magvető* (Christian Sower, abbreviated as *KerM*) and the Jewish annals and publications of the IMIT and MIOK played a significant role in this.

the Neologs (despite the Sabbatarian desire to join the Orthodox community) was probably reinforced by the emancipation aims, which were becoming stronger and stronger among Neolog Jews, at the time.

Research on Sabbatarianism came to an almost complete halt in the 1920s.¹³ This may be due to the fact that scholars had little hope of finding new, relevant sources. Also, as the Second World War loomed on the horizon, more and more nationalist and antisemitic voices began to suspect that the conversion of Sabbatarians was part of some larger conspiracy, and they considered this conversion shameful, as it was a clear sign of sympathy for Jews to the point of giving up Christianity and “national” identity. Unitarian theologians considered it more and more important to distance themselves from anything resembling Jewish traditions or customs and to “clear” their past of anything that might be deemed suspicious and defend their first bishop, Ferenc Dávid, from the accusation of “Judaization”. Sabbatarianism was often an obstacle in the way of Unitarianism or a pretence used against the Unitarians by the powers struggling to limit their sway.¹⁴ In addition to distancing themselves from the Sabbatarians, Unitarian theologians also tried to reinforce the myth of the national character of Unitarian faith and to prove that Unitarianism was “the religion of Hungarian future”.¹⁵ This meant that the church politics of the 1930s and 1940s could not include any acknowledgment of common origins among Unitarians with Sabbatarianism or any positive evaluation of Sabbatarianism.

Thus, in the 1920s, a period of roughly half a century began of silence in the scholarship on Sabbatarianism. New impetus was given by the publication of a critical edition of Sabbatarian songs in 1970¹⁶ and the works of Róbert Dán, the best known scholar of Sabbatarianism in the 1970s and 1980s. Antal Pirnát and Bálint Keserű initiated the study of religious relations involving the Radical Reformation in Transylvania in the Early Modern period, as well as research on the different Antrinitarian trends from the perspective of the history of ideas.¹⁷ Róbert Dán joined

13 One Ph.D. thesis originates from 1937 with the title *A szombatosok költészete* (The poetry of the Sabbatarians) by János Varjú. It contains no original insights or information apart from the bibliographical description of the songs. The ideological spirit of the age and the devaluation of the Sabbatarian poetry is strongly present in it.

14 Only one example of it from Unitarian theologian and historiographer Kelemen Gál: “Az unitarizmus hanyatlásának mélyreható oka a szombatoság volt.” (“The root cause for the decline of Unitarianism was Sabbatarianism.”) “A dézsi egység és a szombatosok”. In idem. *A kolozsvári unitárius kollégium története 1568–1906 I.* Cluj: Minerva, 1935, 59.

15 See János Pál. “Zsidókérdés a magyarországi unitárius egyház nemzet- és egyházépítő stratégiájának tükrében (1940–1944)”. *KerM* 2009, 381–420, 531–560. See especially pp. 398–400, 531–533.

16 This is the volume for which I have used the abbreviation RMKT 17/V. It will be discussed later.

17 The latter organized a research workshop in Szeged which was continued and enlarged, in particular by Mihály Balázs. The most important literature of this period on Sabbatarianism: Pirnát, *Die Ideologie*; Idem, *Arisztotelianusok*; Idem, *Gerendi János és Eössi András*; the conference volume

these endeavours and significantly changed the interpretation of the movement. He had a remarkable talent for finding hidden works that were of key importance for Sabbatarianism. He wrote an English biography of the theoretical father of Sabbatarianism (which also touches on his works), Matthias Vehe-Glirius,¹⁸ as well as several studies in foreign languages. His posthumously published Hungarian monograph on Sabbatarianism and Simon Péchi (*Az erdélyi szombatosok és Péchi Simon - Transylvanian Sabbatarians and Simon Péchi*) is the most acknowledged, most nuanced, and most thoroughly documented work on Early Modern Sabbatarianism. He paid much more attention to the exploration of foreign influences on the development of Sabbatarianism than previous researchers. This enabled him to modify significantly the false picture according to which the movement had been an authentically Transylvanian phenomenon. However, some of his assumptions about the reasons for the spread of Sabbatarianism among the Székelys and their attitudes towards the Jews are questionable (see later). In addition to offering a nuanced description of Sabbatarian history and ideas, he was even more successful in writing the biography of those connected to Sabbatarianism in some way, such as Simon Péchi, Miklós Bogáti Fazakas, and Matthias Vehe-Glirius, and also touching on their theoretical work.¹⁹

Despite the merits of his work, it was not primarily Róbert Dán who made a wider audience familiar with Sabbatarianism, but András Kovács, a talented journalist and a man of Sabbatarian origin. First, Kovács published a book containing, among other things, personal confessions concerning his own hidden past, his predecessors, and the inhabitants of Bözödújfalú, so-called “Székely Jerusalem” (the village in which he had been born), of whom he had, until then, been ashamed.²⁰

coedited by Róbert Dán and Antal Pirnát: *Antitrinitarianism in the Second Half of the 16th Century*; Antal Pirnát. “Christian Francken egy ismeretlen munkája”. *ItK* 87 (1983/1–3), 107–119; Idem. “A hazai antitrinitárius irányzatok háttéréhez”. *ItK* 74 (1970/2), 197–202; Idem. “Christian Franckens Tätigkeiten im Ungarischen Sprachgebiet und sein unbekanntes Werk «Disputatio de incertitudine religionis Christianae»”. In Róbert Dán and Antal Pirnát, *Antitrinitarianism*, 73–84; Concerning the Antitrinitarianism of this period the most important monograph of Mihály Balázs: *Az erdélyi antitrinitarizmus az 1560-as évek végén*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1988. Later, he published many books and studies that directly or indirectly relate to Sabbatarianism. I refer many times to these works. Although she did not belong to the “Szeged school”, Anikó Zombori-Pánczél wrote her study on the melodies of the Sabbatarian songs at that time: Anikó Zombori-Pánczél. “Szombatos dallamok a népi emlékezetben”. In Imre Dankó, Imola Küllös (eds.), *Vallási Néprajz III., Módszerek és történeti adatok*. Budapest: ELTE Department of Folklore, 1987, 382–431.

18 Abbr. Dán, *Matthias Vehe-Glirius*.

19 On the trial of Ferenc Dávid see the historical introduction.

20 *Vallomás a székely szombatosok perében*. Budapest: Magvető, 1983.

In later years, the only significant progress that was made involved the publication of Sabbatarian sources.²¹ In 1990, Györgyi Máté published an apologetic text from one of the Sabbatarian codices, *Complaint of the Holy Scripture* (abbreviated as *SzIP*), written against the philosophical ideas fashionable at the end of the 16th century.²² In 1999, Kornélia Koltai published the first Talmud translation by Simon Péchi (the tractate entitled *Sayings of the Fathers*)²³ and then, in 2009, published Péchi's fragmentary Bible translation.²⁴ Both publications contain the main texts and evaluate the translation and linguistic aspects and difficulties, though neither contains the commentaries translated by Péchi.

In 2010, all previously unpublished Sabbatarian texts from the Early Modern period were published together in a series by the University of Szeged (Abbr. *Korai szombatos írások* / Early Sabbatarian writings).

At the time of Róbert Dán's research, a German summary of Transylvanian Sabbatarianism was published which offered a thorough and reliable collection of the research findings before 1970.²⁵ Later, however, only short journalistic texts were written in English or German that could not claim a scholarly nature.

A new research opportunity opened up in 2002 with Sina Rauschenbach's discovery of Glirius' translation of Josef Albo's apologetic book, the *Ikkarim*. Rauschenbach discussed the Christian reception of the rabbi's work and even discussed Glirius in one of the chapters of her monographic book on Albo.²⁶

This brief discussion offers an overview of the existing scholarship on the Transylvanian Sabbatarians. All the known surviving Sabbatarian texts from the first period have been published. However, one of the reasons for which the scholarly

21 There are a few studies concerning the 19–20th-century history of the proselyte community: Attila Gidó. "Öt forrás az erdélyi szombatoság 19. és 20. századi történetéhez". *Aeropolisz. Történelmi és társadalomtudományi tanulmányok* IV, 166–180; Attila Gidó, János Pál. "Kiapadó búvópatak. Szombatosok az unitárius egyházban 1944 után". *KerM* 116 (2010/4), 386–395. See also the study by László Sándor Németh. "Degré Alajos miniszteri biztos tevékenysége a székely szombatosok ügyében 1941–1944". *Történelmi Szemle* 47 (2005/1–2), 69–87.

22 Máté, *A Szentírás panaszolkodása* (*SzIP*, see the Abbreviation in the bibliography). See the description of the treatise in Györgyi Máté. "La Complainte de la Sainte Ecriture". In Gizella Keserű, Mihály Balázs (eds.). *György Enyedi and Central European Unitarianism in the 16–17th Centuries*. Budapest: Balassi, 2000, 223–235.

23 Kornélia Koltai. *Az Atyák mondásai – Pirqé ávot fordítása, 1620/21*. (=Hungaria Judaica 11). Budapest: Osiris – MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1999.

24 Idem. *Péchi Simon kiadatlan Biblia-fordítása (1634)*. (=Hungarica Judaica 23). Budapest: MTA Judaisztikai Kutatóközpont, 2009.

25 Ladislaus Martin Pákozdy. *Der siebenbürgische Sabbatismus*. Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer, 1973.

26 *Jüdische Philosophie und christliche Kontroverstheologie in der frühen Neuzeit*. Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2002.

community remains largely unaware of the literature of this community (the Transylvanian Sabbatarians) undoubtedly lies in the fact that most of the texts from the second era, those of Simon Péchi, are still in manuscript form. The strongly archaic language of the texts, furthermore, is also a challenge for Hungarian readers, and the translation of these texts into other languages would present significant challenges.

Generally speaking, neither the Jewish nor the Christian secondary literature on the Sabbatarians has proven able to detach itself from its religious and national biases and from seeing and depicting Sabbatarianism and the individual representatives of Transylvanian Antitrinitarianism from a recognizably Jewish or Christian or Hungarian perspective. The positivist literature of the second half of the 20th century, although largely free of religious biases and, in the pursuit of objectivity, seeing the external circumstances and connections most clearly, is paradoxically perhaps the furthest in its assumptions and intentions from Sabbatarian matters of belief and faith.

1.2 Methodological considerations

I chose the methodology on which this book is based according to the characteristics of the sources and the objectives of my research. Perhaps the biggest problem in arriving at a suitable research method is that it is hard accurately to define the subject of the investigation, that is, Sabbatarianism. It is not possible to examine it as a pure historical phenomenon in the absence of historical data and without consideration of important shifts over time, but there is also little data that would allow one to characterize it as a sociological or cultural phenomenon either. On the basis of the source material, it really can only be regarded as part of theological and intellectual history, but the issue is further complicated by the fact that there is no method to describe a religious community as both Christian and Jewish or as an un-institutionalised religious minority which emerged out of the intellectual queries and quandaries of the Radical Reformation.

In the Hungarian secondary literature, Sabbatarianism and Radical Reformation are traditionally studied from the perspective of the history of ideas. However, in Hungary, the history of ideas is considered part of literary history, and it does not have its own methodologies.²⁷ The discipline known in the international scholarly world as the “history of ideas” does not have a methodology that could be easily

27 On the use of intellectual history and political history in East Central Europe and its methodological problems see Balázs Trencsényi. “Conceptual History and Political Languages: On the Central-European Adaptation of the Contextualist-Conceptualist Methodologies of Intellectual History”. In Petr Roubal and Václav Veber (eds.). *Prague Perspectives I: The History of East Central Europe*

applied to relations in Central Eastern Europe. One cannot really adopt a method that builds on the outstanding representatives of the movement, since, apart from Matthias Vehe-Glirius, we know of no other leading figure from the period under study about whose life we have enough information to venture any conclusions or even conjectures. Furthermore, the German theologian cannot be considered a Transylvanian Sabbatarian. Moreover, the aim of my monograph is not to present the lives or ideas of individuals, but rather to consider the life of the community and the ideas which held it together. The Sabbatarians did not have a systematically developed theology which one could discuss and use to place the concepts they espoused in time within conceptual history, and political and philosophical languages were completely foreign to them.

The method that is perhaps the closest to the subject and seems to be the most suitable for an examination of Sabbatarian texts must be sought within church history and the history of theology. Here, however, the problem is that the subject of these disciplines is the Christian Church. Consequently, using the methods on which these disciplines rely, we assume that what we are examining is a Christian, church-like organization, although this initial position is questionable from the outset. Trying to discuss Sabbatarianism as an unknown branch of Judaism would be even more problematic.

The use of conventional methods and techniques to describe a non-conventional phenomenon that produced no traditional sources (such as printed catechisms, creeds, etc.) raises questions. In addition, a researcher who is attempting to examine and describe a religious minority faces different challenges than the challenges faced by a researcher who studies the major churches.

With these limitations in mind, one can still do an empirical examination of the given sources by means of church history, the history of theology, and the history of dogma. The division of these approaches into discrete disciplines is not entirely persuasive, even according to the secondary literature.²⁸ These approaches work with the same sources, and they tend to discuss essentially the same topics. Thus, the suitability of the technique to the task of the research is more important than the separation of these approaches from one another. The best solution is therefore an eclectic method, or in other words the use of more than one technique of analysis.²⁹

and Russia. Prague: The National Library of the Czech Republic, 2004, 142–163. Special thanks to Márton Zászkaliczky for his bibliographic advice.

28 See James Bradley and Richard Muller. *Church History. An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods*. Michigan/Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, 2016, 2.

29 See *Ibid.*

The subject matter of the history of theology is, according to Robert Calhoun, the history of Christian doctrine and the total religious life of a Christian community. Within the history of theology, there are three concentric areas:

the practices of worship, discipline and organization, the recording and study of what is revealed as scripture and written prophecy, and the more or less systematic reflective interpretation of what is revealed and of the responses it evokes.³⁰

These topics correspond to the chapters of this book. In other words, I begin with a discussion of the Sabbatarian views on the means and interpretation of revelation. I then turn to the teachings revealed, and I conclude with an examination of the ritual life of the community.

The analytical technique used in the monograph could perhaps be defined best as a kind of synchronic model, which is by definition “the matrix/interaction of ideas in a particular period”.³¹ I also try, in my analysis, to follow the general/special pattern of the history of dogma, outlining a system of theology in general and presenting the Sabbatarian doctrines through this system familiar to them, firstly the doctrine of Scripture and the sources of theology, followed by the doctrines of God, of salvation, of law, and the last things.³² The tools on which I have based my textual analysis are thus the tools used in the secondary literature on church history, but the question examined—religious self-view—also affects wider cultural and sociological aspects. However, due to the nature of the sources, it is not possible to examine the issue in more detail from these perspectives.

The purpose of the textual analyses I offer in this monograph is to describe Sabbatarianism in terms of the topic of a given chapter and also to allow reflections on how traditional and innovative Sabbatarianism is in this particular aspect, the extent to which it could be described as adhering to Christian tradition, and the extent to which it seems to have approached Judaism. Obviously, only very general criteria can be used to determine what Christian or Jewish means with regards to a given issue, such as interpretations, ideas, liturgic elements, and practices originating from the New Testament, Antitrinitarian literature, or rabbinic literature. For the nature of the examined issue and for contextualization, I have maintained a continuously comparative perspective in the textual analysis and synthesis.

There are limitations on any critical examination that one might hope to undertake of the sources, as there is no basis for comparison or control except from later ages, and the objectivity of these sources could also be thrown into question. On

30 Robert L. Calhoun. “The Role of Historical Theology”. *The Journal of Religion* 21/4 (1941), 444.

31 James Bradley and Richard Muller, *Church History*, 29

32 See *Ibid.*, 24–26.

the other hand, one could nonetheless consider these sources reliable and broadly representative of the views of the larger community since they are almost devoid of anything that might imply a personal or individual perspective or experience and most of them, especially the liturgical sources, have a communal nature.

Although I work with theological concepts in this book, it is important to emphasize that I examine the texts from a purely descriptive point of view, omitting any theological or moral evaluation of the sources and the beliefs and ideas revealed in them. I am thus making a deliberate effort to avoid presentism and prevent modern theological ideas from interfering in my findings. I seek to understand the past on its own terms. Although the cultural, temporal, economic, etc. gaps that separate the world of today from the world of the Sabbatarians makes it impossible fully to realize this endeavour, I strive nonetheless to reconstruct, albeit fragmentarily, the “original” intentions and meanings of the ideas behind the documents.

In each chapter, I approach the given subject with different techniques of analysis.

The first chapter contains historical and sociological data, information about ecclesiastical and doctrinal antecedents, and descriptions of individuals and networks. My aim in this chapter is to offer a brief introduction to the historical, social, and theological context in which Sabbatarianism was born.

The second chapter contains a detailed description of the sources, including discussion of their physical characteristics.

In the third chapter, I discuss the attitudes of the Sabbatarians and Matthias Vehe-Glirius towards the Holy Scripture and interpretation of Scripture based on the key hermeneutic concepts and principles found throughout the entire corpus of texts. This chapter brings us closer to the hermeneutical backdrop to the birth of Sabbatarianism.

In the fourth chapter, I present Sabbatarian doctrines on the basis of a pattern familiar to the Sabbatarians. I thus avoid the general problem which one faces in the study of the history of doctrines, namely the risk of imposing a theological system on the doctrines of a community that was not familiar with this system and thus artificially separating teachings that were not separate in their understanding.³³ The rabbinic system adopted for this purpose, divided in only three main, fundamental teachings, seems suitable for a discussion of the three main areas that occur most frequently in their texts, and it also helps ensure that neglected topics do not come to the fore.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, I offer quantitative analyses of texts. I use these analyses to draw conclusions about the contexts, formal characteristics, and the prominence (based on the frequency of mention) of certain topics, keywords, songs, etc. in Sabbatarian ritual practice and self-view. The fifth chapter first surveys the

33 See *Ibid.*, 25–26.

division and experience of ritual time, concentrating on the clues hidden in liturgical texts. It focuses on the synthesis Sabbatarians created out of Christian and Jewish feasts and the ways in which they reinterpreted these feasts by borrowing elements (and excluding elements) from both traditions. Though I offer an examination of ritual life, this discussion cannot be considered an actual history of ritual due to the lack of information in the sources.

The second half of the sixth chapter is a kind of history of concepts. In it, I discuss two moral terms: purity and sanctity. Through the filter of these two concepts, the chapter examines the Sabbatarian teachings and norms connected to notions concerning the purity and sanctity of people, places, and objects and the practice of purification.

In the last short chapter, I examine the religious self-view of the Sabbatarians by focusing on keywords that can be linked to identity. This method, as a conclusion, reinforces the internal aspect and emphasizes the direction resulting from the previous chapters as far as the question of Christianity or Judaism is concerned.

The time interval studied is closely related to the principal issue. The period of the birth of Sabbatarianism is the most mysterious and most interesting phase of this movement from the perspective of religious affiliation. We know of no other religious trend that started from the aim of reforming Christianity and, as a result of this aim, returned to Judaism without direct Jewish influence, as evidenced by the primary literature. Not only were there no Jewish contacts, there were no historical or intellectual connections with other so-called “Judaizer” individuals or groups, except, of course, Matthias Vehe-Glirius.

Sámuel Kohn divided the history of Sabbatarianism into three periods.³⁴ According to him, the first period of Sabbatarianism lasted from the formation of the movement (he put the date at 1588) to the beginning of Simon Péchi’s literary activity (1621). The second phase began with Simon Péchi’s religious activities and ended with the great 1638 trial against Sabbatarians in Dés (Ro. Dej, Ger. Deesch/Burglos). The third period was between the Dés trial and the official creation of the proselyte community in Bözödújfalú in 1868. Sabbatarianism as a separate theological phenomenon ceased to exist at this point, with conversion to Judaism.

Although this division of the history of Sabbatarianism into periods is partially historical and partially a mark of theological changes, it has become generally accepted in the secondary literature. I accept Kohn’s periodization, since from the perspective of the focus of my research, the precise division is almost irrelevant. The aim of my work is solely to discuss the texts preceding Simon Péchi’s activity, that is, of the early period. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, no

³⁴ See Kohn, *A szombatosok*, 40–41.

other prose writings by any other author after this time have survived, only a few songs. Thus, from the period after 1621, one could write almost exclusively about Péchi. However, this would be a broader topic, focusing on a person and not a community. Péchi's translations from the rabbinic literature emphatically sought to serve the desire to bring the community closer to Judaism in both knowledge and practice. Consequently, this is theologically a different era, the imprint and result of which we see only in later ages, since there are no contemporary texts written by members of the community (apart from the translations of Péchi) that would testify to this. This is no longer the establishment period, and any sources from this period would reveal nothing about how Sabbatarianism was born or what lay beneath its emergence.

The fact that the exact milestones are incidental also stems from the approach to temporality. I do not attempt to set up a linear historical narrative about the history of Sabbatarianism or the development of Sabbatarian doctrines and practices. The primary reason for this is that the insufficient number of historical documents and the insecure dating of the texts make any such attempt problematic. The surviving texts do not really allow us to differentiate time periods and personalities within Sabbatarianism in the early period. Therefore, one can only approach the texts and try to treat them as representative manifestations of the first period of formation, without creating a historical narrative. Clearly, venturing generalizations concerning the entire movement and the entire period which are little more than conclusions based on individual texts carries at least as great a danger as the drawing of the historical lines of development, but this cannot be completely avoided.

Wherever possible, I avoid the terms “church”, “denomination”, etc. with regard to Sabbatarians and use neutral terms with more general and wider meanings, such as “group”, “religious movement” (without political overtones), “community”, and “trend”. I deliberately avoid the term “sect”, often used for Sabbatarians in the secondary literature, not only because it has a condescending overtone and a negative value judgment but also because its meaning is imprecise and arbitrary. In the case of the Sabbatarians, the secondary literature most often refers to “extremism” as one of the criteria of being a sect, but this notion is highly relative. It judges a minority mostly from the perspective of power and majority and assesses religious belief and behaviour from the perspective of outsiders. Sabbatarians are also referred to in the secondary literature with the term “sect-like seclusion”. Though it seems difficult to explore the real meaning of this expression, seclusion may refer to their forced illegality, the separation from other Christian denominations, in exchange for an increasing openness towards Judaism. My position regarding this issue, however, is that they may be called an extremist and secluded sect to the degree that this name can be applied to a messianic trend within Judaism. The reason for this is that, in a theological sense, they wanted to be different from Jews in one single aspect, the

acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. It is probably not this thesis that made them “sect-like” in the eyes of outsiders.

Judaization is also a term that often appears in the literature and is used in reference to the Sabbatarians by outsiders in a pejorative tone. Sabbatarians did not reflect on this particular expression until later, when Péchi rejected it in a letter to prince George I Rákóczi.³⁵ The complex meaning of the term was discussed by Róbert Dán in his comprehensive study, *“Judaizare” – The career of a term*. Dán lists different examples of Judaizing and of cases considered Judaizing, and after a brief evaluation, he arrives at the definition of the notion of Judaizing.³⁶ He concludes that the term may be rightly applied to both Glirius and the Sabbatarians who followed in his footsteps. However, when Dán analysed this subject, he did not take into consideration the attitude of Sabbatarians to this term and the way in which they saw themselves. Thus, since it is a pejorative term that was used by outsiders, I omit and use instead the only term accepted by the Sabbatarians themselves, specifically the term “Sabbatarian/szombatos” (see the last chapter).³⁷ Although even this word has a pejorative edge in its everyday and original use, I use it without any negative overtone.

The novelty of my work stems not so much from a new perspective or research method, as my intention was first and foremost to introduce the topic to the international secondary literature. As can be seen in the literature overview, there is no monographic work that presents early Sabbatarianism to the international readership based on original research. The only book written about Sabbatarianism (not just about the early stages) available in German was written in the late 19th century. Although the aforementioned monograph by Sámuel Kohn fully met the scientific needs of the time, recent research results and sources have since significantly modified the picture of Sabbatarianism.

The novelty of my work lies rather in the way in which it turns to the texts, the depth and detail with which it handles them, the inclusion of the recently discovered texts in the corpus under study, and the rejection of any attempt to place

35 Simon Péchi asked for mercy in his letter to the prince by explaining that “holott mi nem judaizáltunk” (“we have not Judaized at all”). József Koncz. “Péchy Simon levelei”. *KerM* 15 (1880/6), 390–391, op. cit. 390.

36 In his definition: “The word «judaizans» signifies a person or theory that can be distinctly separated from the Jewish religious conception by the minimal basic postulate of the Christian creed, that is the acceptance of the Jesus = Messiah identity in a general sense. On the other hand, the person or theory thus characterized is distinguished from other Christian theories by a belief in the priority of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinical writings and of their unchanged validity for all peoples of the world.” Róbert Dán. “»Judaizare« – *The career of a term*”. In Róbert Dán and Antal Pirnát, *Antitrinitarianism*, 25–34; and the preface of his book: *Az erdélyi*, 11–26.

37 RMKT 17/V, 61, 485.