Abstract: The life and works of Hungarian Calvinist preacher Mihály Szatmárnémeti (1638 – 1689) are closely linked with Transylvania. After he finished his studies in his homeland, the Kingdom of Hungary, he went to Germany, Holland and England to learn at the well-known Protestant universities of his times. Later on, he returned from Western Europe and taught in Gönc, but he had to leave because of the hostile circumstances created by the Counter-Reformation. From 1673 onwards, he lived and wrote in Cluj-Napoca.

He left behind about 30 volumes of writings: polemic theses, a Hebrew grammar book, sermon books, catechisms, psalms and a book of prayers. In his time, he was counted among the important learned men as a writer, teacher and preacher and his books were well-known until the 19th century, but the literature concept of the 19th century generally omitted most of the religious writings. Nevertheless, his works reveal interesting details about the construction of religious identity in the 17th century.

In this case study I will attempt a close reading of two sermon-books by Szatmárnémeti. Both contain Sunday sermons, as their title points it out (“Dominica”). The first one appeared in 1675 in Cluj-Napoca, the second one was published in 1686, also in Cluj. Both are surrounded by paratexts (a dedication, introductions) that give a lot of information about the writer’s self-perception and his opinion on his community, what he thought about being a Protestant (Calvinist) Christian, how the readers should use his writings and how they should act as “true Christians”. The main texts (the sermons themselves) are also related to the above mentioned subjects, but they are mainly well-structured (dogmatic) teachings.

In this study I will try to present and to analyze the literary procedures used by the author to represent himself and his confessional community. In doing so, I hope to provide some additions to the topic of „Calvinism on the frontier” (Graeme Murdock), to present a section of the cultural relations between Western and East-Central European Protestant movements, to better understand the modern and postmodern discourse on identity and to draw attention to a writer who vanished in the mist of varied concepts of literature.

Keywords: confessional identity, protestant church, XVII. century, sermonbook, Szatmárnémeti Mihály

Although little known today, Mihály Szatmárnémeti (1638 – 1689) was an interesting and important figure of the late 17th century Cluj-Napoca. The Hungarian Calvinist1 preacher was born in Satu-Mare. He studied in Satu-Mare, Debrecen and Sárospatak, then he was teacher in Tokaj and with the financial help of Protestant aristocrats he went to study at the famous Protestant universities of Europe. According to biographical sources, he studied at the universities of Franeker, Groeningen, Utrecht, Leiden and Cambridge. Afterwards, he returned to his homeland and became a teacher and preacher in the town of Gönc in the Kingdom of Hungary (nowadays Northern Hungary).

1 Calvinism is the theological system associated with the Reformer John Calvin, which emphasizes the rule of God over all things as reflected in its understanding of Scripture, God, humanity, salvation and the church. In popular vernacular, Calvinism often refers to the Five Points of Calvinistic doctrine regarding salvation, which make up the acronym TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints). In its broader sense, Calvinism is associated with Reformed theology.
In 1671, however, an aggressive phase of the Counter-Reformation began and he was banished from Gönc. (This period of persecution lasted for 10 years, from 1671 to 1681, and passed into the history of the Protestant Church under the name of “the Decade of Grief”\textsuperscript{2}.\textsuperscript{2}) Being persecuted became an important element of the identity of the Protestant Christian community in this part of Europe and this is true for the preacher Szatmárnémeti as well, who wrote about himself as a representative of this community. After he spent one year in Debrecen, he was invited to Cluj-Napoca to fill the position of a Calvinist pastor. He continued to live and write there from 1673 until his death in 1689.

He left behind about 30 volumes of writings: polemic theses, a Hebrew grammar book, sermon books, catechisms, psalms and a book of prayers, dogmatic teachings and bible commentaries. It is known that his works were used by erudite and less educated readers as well (the book of prayers, for instance).

His polemic theses were written in Latin or in Hungarian and they treat important questions that were disputed among the members of the different Christian communities (Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Socinians, Arians – under the latter two we understand Unitarians nowadays). One important polemic thesis that appeared under an abbreviated name was also translated in German and was a response to a treatise written by György Bársony in 1671. György Bársony pleads in his treatise for the suppression of Protestant denominations and asks the king to banish the adherents of these religions because they teach heresies. He was successful: the persecution of Protestants in the Kingdom of Hungary between 1671 and 1681 was based on his arguments.\textsuperscript{3}

The Protestants taught that everyone should be able to read the Bible, everyone should be familiar with the basic religious teachings of his or her own church. That is why Szatmárnémeti’s works include a Hebrew grammar, catechisms, dogmatic writings, bible commentaries and books of prayer: all of them are meant to explain and spread such knowledge on various levels. One of his books of prayer (\textit{Mennyei Tárház Kuleza} [The Key to the Heavenly Treasury], Cluj-Napoca, 1673) was republished ten times until 1710 – a clear sign that this volume became very popular among common readers.

In his time, Mihály Szatmárnémeti was counted among the important learned men as a writer, teacher and preacher. His books continued to be well-known and widely used after his death, but their popularity decreased slowly as the situation of the Calvinist Church changed and a new literature concept took shape – the literature concept of the 19th century generally omitted most of the religious writings. Nevertheless, his works reveal interesting details about the construction of religious identity in the 17th century. That is why I will attempt a close reading of two of his sermon-books.

Both volumes contain Sunday sermons, as their title points it out (“Dominica”)\textsuperscript{4}. The first one appeared in 1675 in Cluj-Napoca, the second one was published in 1686, also in Cluj.

\textsuperscript{2} About the persecution of Protestant pastors in this period see Katalin S. Varga, \textit{Vitetenk itélőszékre... az 1674-es gályarabper jegyzőkönyve}, Kalligram, Pozsony, 2002.

\textsuperscript{3} Regarding the treatise and its historical context see Tamás Esze, \textit{Bársony György „Veritas”-a}, in ItK, 1971, 667–693.

\textsuperscript{4} Volumes of model-sermons were already used in the Middle Ages to help the clergy in their preaching. These volumes contained sermons either for the Sundays and feast days of the liturgical year (\textit{De tempore} or \textit{Sermones dominicales}-volumes) or for the feasts of saints (\textit{De sanctis}-volumes). See Edit Madas, A koldulőrendi prédikációirodalom: kibontakozása Magyarországon,
The former (A Négy Evangelisták szerint való Dominica, Avagy Az Úr Jézus Krisztustól prédikáltatott, és ő Felségeről irattatott historiáiknak, régen Vasárnokra rendeltett Evangéliumi Letzkéknek Predikatziókban való magyarázata. [Sunday Sermons According to the Four Evangelists or Sermons Explaining the Lessons of the Gospels Preached by the Lord Jesus Christ and the Histories Written about his Grace, Lessons Ordained for Sundays in Old Times]) is a larger volume that contains sermons for every Sunday of the liturgical year, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent. The sermon book is a well-structured volume: after the long baroque-style title follows a list of Bible verses that point out the importance of “true Christian teaching”. This list is followed by another one with the name and status of those who supported Szatmárnémeti in publishing his sermons. The list of his benefactors (fautors) is followed by two introductory texts: a dedicatory letter and an introduction. The main texts are the sermons themselves. The sermon book is completed by a subject list, the list of quoted biblical texts and by the errata.

The second volume of sermons was published in 1686 under the title Dominicalis prédikációk toldalékja [An Addition to the Sunday Sermons]. This sermon book also contains a dedicatory letter, a list of the quoted biblical texts, a list containing the subjects of the sermons and the sermons themselves.

The writer himself establishes a connection between these two volumes: “Since many parables, matters and teachings were omitted from the Sunday Sermons and my patron and brother-in-law was willing (...) to publish them for the sake of my poor preacher brothers who have been deprived of books amidst the fights that have now spread all over the country, and since I favoured his plan, I called it An Addition to the Sunday Sermons.” (To the Kind Reader, b3 verso) Therefore, I consider that a simultaneous study of these two volumes would be appropriate.

These sermon books teach the reader about the ortodoxa religio (“true Christian religion”) and the praxis pietatis (“practice of piety”) not only by explaining the biblical texts, but through treating the subject of confessional identity as well. There seem to be two groups of reasons that made the subject of confessional identity actual at the time of writing. One of them might be called “the group of actual circumstances”, the other one could be identified as “the group of intrinsic factors”.

The actual circumstances that led to the importance of speaking about confessional identity are the following:

1. the already mentioned treatise of György Bársony that questions the Lutheran and the Calvinist Church’s reason for existence;
2. the “age of confessionalisation”5: in East-Central Europe the 17th century was the time of the dogmatic and institutional solidification of the religions which appeared after the Reformation (1517);
3. the persecution of the Calvinist preachers and teachers (“the Decade of Grief”): some of the preachers and teachers (exactly 300 of the 700) were not only banished, but sentenced

to galley slavery in 1674. They were saved by a Dutch naval officer named De Ruyter in 1676.

The intrinsic factors that brought on the importance of treating the subject of confessional identity are the following:

1. the need for self-definition
2. the need for self-defense
3. the need for self-reinforcement
4. the holy command of the true and right teaching
5. a necessity of life

As the above mentioned two groups of reasons show, the matter of confessional identity was an important subject. In the following, I will try to present and to analyze the procedures used by Mihály Szatmárnémeti to represent it in his two sermon books.

The subject of identity is mostly treated in the paratexts of these volumes. The learned writer mirrors the identity of the religious community he represents and in this context he builds up his own image as well. The teaching about the identity of the Christians who follow “the true religion” (*reformata ortodoxa ecclesia*) is reflected through:

1. a list of the names and acts of pious patrons (*fautors*);
2. a long list of names and information concerning the Church Fathers and the great figures of the Pre-Reformation and Reformation;
3. a detailed presentation of the composition of the community;
4. a detailed description of the teachings of the Calvinist Church.

1. The dedicatory letter begins with the names and titles of his benefactors. Later he describes all their worthy acts and presents them as a role model for all who hear about them. They support the spreading of the “Word of God”, they help the preachers and teachers, they live like “saints”. The writer uses biblical metaphors to describe them: they are Obadihas⁶ and Pathmoses.⁷ Szatmárnémeti shows how this benevolent support functioned in his life: as a student, he could peregrinate with the moral and financial help of the aristocrat members of the Calvinist Church; as a banished preacher, he was helped by the wealthy members of the Calvinist Church in Debrecen; as a writer, he could print his books with their financial help. His life story is a good example of how the Hungarian Calvinist Church functioned and survived in the 17th century and it also shows the aspects he considers important in constructing his identity: he is an educated young man, who is a “true Christian” not only because he uses his talents to spread the “Word of God”, but also because he has been persecuted, like Jesus and his followers were. It is interesting to note that one of the most important characteristics of “true Christians”, as presented by Mihály Szatmárnémeti, is being persecuted.

2. The tradition of apologetic church historiography began as the Counter-Reformation became stronger and there were lots of disputes concerning the “rightful” Christian teaching. Szatmárnémeti begins the introductory letter of his sermon book by defending his confessional community: he argues that, according to the Bible and historical facts, the “Reformed ecclesia” is the follower of the “true Christian Church” (the old Apostolic Church). He traces his brief apologetic church historiography from the time when Jesus was still alive to his own times. Between Jesus, St. John and Mihály Szatmárnémeti more than a hundred persons are

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⁶ Biblical theophoric name, it means “Servant of Yahweh”.
⁷ Patmos is a Greek island in the Aegean Sea. It is mentioned in the Bible in the *Book of Revelation*. Its author, Saint John was on this island when he was given a vision from Jesus.
mentioned, who believed in the same religious principles throughout the centuries (from the 1st to the 17th century) as the teachers of the Calvinist Church did. He actually follows the expansion of Christianity throughout the centuries from the places where Jesus taught, through West-Asian (the town of Izmir), North- (England), West- (Germany) and South-European (Italy) locations, to East-European settlements (in today’s Bulgaria and Czech Republic, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Principality of Transylvania), ending this introduction with his own hometown, Cluj-Napoca. These names and facts not only show that the confessional community represented by the author relies on real history and so it is worthy of existence as a religious community, but they also forge the image of the community. Among the names listed we can find renowned Church Fathers: Polycarp of Smyrna – an Apostolic Father, Irenaeus of Lyons – a Greek Father, Tertullian – a Latin Father, Augustine and Saint Gregory the Great – Great Fathers of the Western Church, John Chrysostom and Athanasius – Great Fathers of the Eastern Church. Their names are followed by brief descriptions of their lives: when and where they lived and taught, what they believed in. To present just a few examples:

“Polycarp taught in Smyrna. An. 160. And he was killed there for the name of Christ.”

“4th century. Our apostolic faith was present there as well: for it was taught by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in 316. His creed shows that he belonged to our faith and died belonging to it in 346.”

“5th century. Our true apostolic faith was transmitted to this century as well: for Augustine lived in this century in 420. All his works (which were tampered with by the Romans) show that he was a doctor of our faith.”

The reader learns that the community of the Calvinist Church has an immanent structure: the members of the community are the persons who live in the heavens and the ones who live on the earth. Together they build a large community represented by the writer through such phrases: “Our apostolic faith was transmitted to this century as well”; “Their writings show that they believed in the basic apostolic teachings as we do”; “His creed shows that he belonged to our faith and died belonging to it”.

The cleric writer not only represents his community, but he also constructs his own identity in relation to it: he has been persecuted like most of his predecessors and the Christian Church itself, he is the true heir of the “unseen church” that existed since Jesus had come to the earth (he ends the list of the notable figures of the Pre-Reformation and Reformation with himself), he states that although he is young, he wants to teach through his writings as the biblical commandment says. In his view, he is only representing himself as a “true Christian” should be: everyone should use their talents without fear, but using one’s abilities must only be done to serve God. Szatmárnémeti uses in fact two methods to shape his own identity: the method of genealogy (he shows where he comes from) and the method of minutio auctoris (he emphasizes that he does everything for the sake of God).

3. Szatmárnémeti presents his community as an old and strong religious community, which teaches clear and true dogmas. The immanent structure of the community can be described through its hierarchy: leading theologians (Church Fathers, figures of the Pre-Reformation, church leaders), converted secular leaders, preachers and teachers of the community – the „slaves of the church” – and members of the ecclesia. Despite the great differences in time, space and social status, together they build one coherent confessional community. The presented ancestors are meant to be role models for all who hear about them –
this way of reinforcing a Christian identity follows the model of medieval legends about the life of saints that were read in convents with the purpose of teaching.

4. In any confessional community it is important to know the answer to the question: what do we believe in? Which dogma do we reject? The introductory texts present the principal dogmas of the Calvinist Church through the example of the predecessors (Church Fathers, figures of the Pre-Reformation and Reformation): Hilarius taught that not Peter is the head of the church, that clergymen should have wives and he “refuted the human additions to the faith”; the bishop of Rome, Gregorius Magnus professed that only the Lord Jesus can be the head of the church.8

The main texts – the sermons – treat the subject of confession in detail. These sermons present the Protestant way of Bible interpretation. Szatmárnémeti composes well-structured and detailed sermons: each of them begins with a quoted Bible verse that is the basis (thema) of the sermon, followed by a short summary of the Bible passage and by the division determined by the passage. He then details the parts of this division, explains them, shows what the audience may learn from them and what beneficial effects the discussed biblical text may have. As in a catechetical work, he chooses to instruct in the form of dialogue: he formulates a question and he gives more than one right way of answering it. „Q. What kind of happiness did Jesus preach? A. Not bodily and not worldly, as the happiness of the unbelievers; because the believers are crying in this world, John 16. v. 20, but spiritual joy, joy over the liberation from the bondage of devil and sin, Luke. 1. v. 68–74, 75”9 „Q. How long did Josef have to be in Egypt with the child Jesus? A. Until Herod’s death, as shown by the 19th and 20th verses. This shows that as the Lord Jesus’ exile in Egypt and his persecution had a determined time, so does the persecution and oppression of the Lord Jesus Christ’s church and of the faithful belonging to it have a certain time. When this time has passed, they will be delivered from persecution and oppression. Jerem. 29. 10. “10

The representation of the community’s and the author’s identity is not narcissistic, because we can understand it as act of Christian piety. The praxis pietatis does not only mean to be pious, to sing, to pray or to read the Bible, but to help and defend with all of one’s given talents the spreading of the “true Christian dogma”.

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