
This edited collection of 23 articles about the Reformed religious tradition in Hungary was inspired by a 2008 conference. The editors have succeeded in the difficult task of drawing together a volume which is very much more than the sum of its parts. They have produced a text (including wonderful illustrations and helpful maps) that analyses the emergence and development of Hungarian Reformed religion and considers the enduring significance of Calvinism to the social, political, and cultural history of Hungary. During the last two decades scholars have paid increasing attention both to the place of Hungary within the Reformation and to the role of religion within Hungarian society. This volume reflects on questions taken up by this recent research. Some articles consider the character of Hungarian Calvinism and its relationship with the rest of the Reformed world. Others focus on the political and social consequences of the attachment of Hungarian-speakers to Calvinism from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

A substantial number of Calvinists in contemporary Europe speak Hungarian. Of around 10 million citizens in contemporary Hungary, 1.6 million declared themselves to be Reformed in the most recent census. This represents around half the total of those who express some loyalty to the Reformed church across the region, with the remainder drawn from Hungarian-speaking communities in Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia, and the Ukraine. Reformed churches in all these countries endured life under hostile Communist regimes during the twentieth century, but state repression was hardly novel for Calvinists in this region. From the mid-seventeenth century until the late nineteenth century there were episodes of violent state persecution as well as legal restrictions on the religious freedoms of non-Catholics in Hungary. However, a substantial proportion of the population remained Protestant. In 1900 around a fifth of the population of Hungary (within its pre-Trianon borders) was either Calvinist or Lutheran, with the Reformed church about twice the size of the Evangelical church. As Juliane Brandt explains in her contribution to this volume, there were important differences between the adherents of the two churches. In 1900 Lutherans were relatively evenly divided between speakers of Hungarian, German, and Slavonic languages, while over 98% of Calvinists spoke Hungarian. Two excellent articles in this volume examine...
non-Hungarian speaking Calvinist congregations to cast light on the relationship between Reformed religion and ethno-linguistic community. Márta Fata discusses how Calvinists from Hesse and the Palatinate were among those who settled in lands gained from the Ottomans during the eighteenth century. Sándor Előd Ösz explores some valuable manuscript sources about Romanian-speaking Calvinist congregations in southern Transylvania. Calvinists, Lutherans, and Catholics all made efforts to reform the religious life of the Romanian-speaking Orthodox community. This article demonstrates some success for Calvinist mission efforts with a small number of Romanian-speaking congregations surviving until the middle decades of the eighteenth century. There is remarkable evidence from the early eighteenth century that these Calvinist communities celebrated Christmas on 4 January although the Gregorian calendar had been accepted by all Latin Christians in Transylvania in 1588. This Calvinist mission to Romanian-speakers has long been a controversial subject. Some Hungarian writers adopted a rather patronising tone which implied that the overall failure of this mission reflected rather badly on Romanians. Meanwhile, as Hans-Christian Maner outlines, nineteenth-century Romanian historians viewed attempts to impose a “Hungarian” religion on Romanians as a deliberate attempt to disrupt their national identity. Romanian rejection of Calvinism was seen in this context as a natural affirmation of popular commitment to the national cause.

How then should we understand the attraction of Calvinism to “magyar” communities? Reformed religion spread in Hungary and Transylvania during the 1550s and 1560s as a second wave of reform that was deeply hostile to the material culture of Catholic church buildings and challenged Lutheran sacramental theology. The spread of Calvinism among Hungarian-speakers cannot be seen as a rejection of the German character of the Evangelical reform movement. For one thing, as Jan-Andrea Bernhard explains, Calvin’s personal connections with Hungary were rather limited. Rather, German-speaking centres of reform in the Swiss lands proved influential. Tamás Juhász details the significance of Heinrich Bullinger’s Second Helvetic Confession, adopted by the Debrecen synod in 1567. András Szabó explains that Wittenberg University continued to remain an important destination for Reformed students during the latter decades of the sixteenth century. Some degree of fraternity was also sustained between Evangelicals and Calvinists, particularly when both communities faced periods of Catholic persecution (as is highlighted here by Eva Kowalská and Botond Kertész). Hungary’s religious diversity affected the character of Calvinism in other important regards, not least the split of the Reformed church in Transylvania into Trinitarian and anti-Trinitarian branches. Sharp