

## Article

# Popular Hymnody and Lived Catholicism in Hungary in the 1970s–1980s

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**Abstract:** In this article, I look at how popular hymnody and the surrounding devotional and liturgical practices changed after the Second Vatican Council in Hungary. The songs amongst authoritarian, atheistic circumstances sounded astonishingly similar to the emerging “folk mass movement”. The discourse analysis of Hungarian popular hymnody contributes to a new perspective of Eastern European Catholicism and helps us understand how “lived Catholicism” reflects the post-Vatican spirit. Post-Vatican popular hymnody, a catalyst for a new style of devotional practices, is understood as “performed theology” behind the Iron Curtain expressing relationality, as it actualizes and manifests spiritual, eschatological, and ecclesial relationships.

**Keywords:** popular hymnody; post-conciliar liturgical music; “beat mass”; Christian popular music



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## 1. Introduction

Crowds are flowing in and out of the Matthias Church, which is undergoing renovation, and the aisle is crowded with young people; you only see the odd older person here and there. Hippy-looking bearded young, downtown demons are listening to a mass now. A foreign bus stops at the square, and the visitors are streaming into the church; cameras are clicking. Once the mass is over, the band is surrounded like celebrities by their fans. Many posed pictures are taken<sup>1</sup>.

On Easter, 14 April 1968, a groundbreaking event took place in the Gothic Matthias Church, one of Budapest’s iconic buildings. The festive liturgy provided space for Imre Szilas’ “beat mass”, in which lyrics of traditional church songs were put to rock music. The appearance of Hungarian Christian popular music is undeniably a paradigmatic shift in the history of Hungarian church music. Not only was the event reported by contemporary press outlets and radio news, but even the Hungarian state television made a short documentary<sup>2</sup> The unique historical circumstances added to the delicacy of the occasion. In socialist-era Hungary, as in all Soviet satellite states, the state party devoted extraordinary energy to repressing Christian churches, forcing them into a dependent position and pushing religiosity into the private sphere. The churches’ social presence and role were rendered insignificant and confined to the officially sanctioned work of the clergy. Religious events were rarely reported in the news, the clergy were intimidated, and the Communist Party had agents, informants, collaborating priests, and bishops in the churches up to the highest levels<sup>3</sup> Despite all this, the parish priest of one of the most prestigious Catholic churches in the country—who also reported to the secret police—allowed young people to perform traditional folk hymns musically recomposed and accompanied by an electric organ, drum, and guitars.

The short documentary recorded by Hungarian Television (see Figure 1), entitled “Beat mass”, showed young people with long hair in denim jeans coming to the crowded church because of the music, and who were sitting in the benches enjoying the mass and tapping their feet to the rhythm of the music. Although this report intended to portray the decline of religiosity, the effect was the opposite. Behind the Iron Curtain, the Hungarian Catholic Church, which was subordinated to the state and took over the “Western” religious

processes selectively and belatedly, nonetheless became one of the pioneers of the 1960s religious renewal: the Church allowed rock music inside its walls despite the knowledge and will of ecclesial or political leaders.



**Figure 1.** The photograph is a still image from MTVA (Hungarian Television Archives) and depicts the first beat mass from the Matthias Church.

The “beat mass” movement appeared parallel with the so-called folk mass movement of Catholic communities in the United States, even before the on-stage debut of Jesus Christ Superstar in 1971. Perhaps for the first time, a modern, fashionable rock music-based “beat mass” was presented behind the Iron Curtain, steering non-religious youth towards religion, and strengthening already the faithful youth in their religious affiliation. The media event around the “beat mass” of the Matthias Church created the basis for a grassroots religious renewal in Hungary. Although the infiltrator agents, peace priests<sup>4</sup>, and collaborating bishops tried to ban the use of new music, they could not stop the grassroots transformation of religious music.

This paper’s aim is twofold: First, this paper aims to present the dynamics of religious change in the realm of devotional and liturgical practices as experienced by the Catholic laity following the Second Vatican Council through the “beat mass” movement and the evolution of a modern, post-Vatican hymnody in Hungary. In addition to historical, archival, and oral history sources, I also employ a novel group of sources in the analysis, which has not been used thus far to analyze religious culture. I capture transformation processes through the music scene’s change, focusing on the community-building power of music and its expressive meaning-making characteristics. Therefore, this paper aims to argue that the study of popular hymnody as a source for social scientific research can bring new, significant insights and results. By analyzing the lyrics of popular hymnody as narratives, I attempt to present the changes and attitudes that take place in the deep layers of religiosity, which can help to identify and elucidate the process of religious transformation in communist Hungary in the period after Vatican II.

Not much has been written on everyday religious culture during communist/socialist times. Government control of scholarship helps explain this lacuna: There was no discipline of religious studies independent from political censorship in socialist countries; the regime’s ideological expectations permeated the scientific literature of that age. Therefore, no voice was given to religious transformations, personal religious experiences, religious renewal

movements, or minority religions. Recently, historians have tried to address this lacuna. With a few exceptions, most of their research has examined high-level religious politics, the official state–Church relationship, and the persecution of religious communities.

Consequently, we know little about what happened in the deep layers of religious culture and how everyday religious practices were transformed during these years. There is little knowledge of the practices that developed within the framework of everyday or vernacular religiosity. Ethnographically in-depth secret police files<sup>5</sup> or secret police photography on lived religion have only recently come to researchers' attention (Verdery 2014; Povedák 2019; Kapaló 2019; Hesz, forthcoming). While we have many descriptions, ethnographic analyses, parish sources, popular literature, and newspaper articles from the period before the 1948 communist takeover of Hungary, informing us of folk religious practices of that time, and the processes of contemporary religiosity after 1989 are also under research by sociologists of religion, there is a gray area in the 20th century history of religions concerning the everyday, vernacular, lived religiosity of post-Vatican II laity. These few decades have also marked the beginning of a shift in mentality within the Catholic Church that can be described as an encounter with modernity at the level of institutional, theological, and lived religiosity.

## 2. Research Methods: The Lived Religion Approach

To carry out objective analysis, a horizontal approach is essential, in which we need to explore and portray the mundane, everyday and offer a glimpse of the materiality of religious experience. Without denying the importance of institutional-level processes, it is equally important to analyze the faithful's lived religiosity. The lived religion approach abandons macro-level questions and attempts to theorize the future of religion in modernity by focusing on how religion is practiced (Knibbe and Kupari 2020, p. 159). This bottom-up perspective can reveal how certain political-economic-cultural processes have been transformed and have been experienced in everyday life and entails a shift of interest from religion as an abstract system to the multiple forms related to the processes and practices of religious beliefs: their verbal, behavioral, and material expressions. The lived religion approach enables us to investigate the impact that reforms, synodal decisions, or papal encyclicals had on the majority of believers' religious worldview and everyday practices. The processes of official, institutional, and informal lived religion are not necessarily consistent, and there may be several correlations between them. There may be significant differences between an official, theological, institutional position and the opinion of the majority of believers; for instance, popular religious demands may arise sooner from the grassroots and pave the way for institutional approval. Conversely, a synod decision can win favorable reception and get harmoniously integrated into everyday religious practices. While following a certain authority, believers interpret the teachings of the Church individually, resulting in diverse currents of lived religiosity.

However, when we want to examine the characteristics of lived religiosity from a historical perspective, we need to incorporate additional resources in addition to oral history interviews. The time perspective, in this case, still allows us to collect the memories of the informants through ethnographic methods and get to know the religious culture of socialist Hungary by turning towards oral history. However, as time passes, we find fewer memories, and stories become more and more obscure. The change in the political system that has taken place in the meantime and the multiple changes in attitude towards the dictatorship, including a certain degree of nostalgia for the Kádár regime<sup>6</sup> (1956–1989), mean that oral history interviews conducted today contribute to a fragmented and constructed knowledge. Consequently, we need further sources leading to a more complete picture<sup>7</sup> of the religious phenomenon under research.

One might consider the contemporary press as a source, but its accounts can be seen practically as the opposite of oral history. While oral histories reflect individuals' perspectives, suffering from anti-religious, atheist politics, the censored press reflects the central power's perspective. Similarly, the propagandistic, anti-religious, "enlightening"

documentaries, which formed an atheistic counter-propaganda of religious phenomena (such as a Marian apparition, visits to a holy well, or guitar masses for the youth), and which strove to present the state's position on religion, are somewhat problematic as a source. The communist worldview sought to show that harmful misconception and superstition, which can be refuted based on rational thinking, were the remnant of the "unenlightened past".

At this point, it is worth considering the possibilities of using alternative sources, such as secret police documents as a source for religious studies. I argue that it is possible to read the work of the dictatorship's oppressive apparatus through the eyes of scholars of religion in a way that leads to new insights, new interpretations, and new readings in coming to understand everyday religious life. As Ágnes Hesz pointed out regarding secret police archival sources:

When read with a critical approach they reveal several aspects of religiosity under communism: most notably the ways in which religious groups and individuals adapted to oppression and developed strategies to deflect the attention of the authorities, but also expressions of spirituality or the position and role religion, churches and their representatives had in a socialist society. (Hesz, forthcoming)

I suggest that we can gain new insights about religious culture during the years of dictatorship with the help of images and artefacts, referred to by Kapaló as "hidden galleries", enclosed within the secret police archives (Kapaló 2019, p. 88) along with the so-called police ethnographies (Verdery 2014) referring to secret police reports and comparing the work of secret police informers to that of anthropologists. However, in the application of police ethnography, a source critique must also be applied; the content of the agent's reports cannot be considered as an authentic description of society, just as the agent's activity was not intended for scientific knowledge. However, it follows that these contemporary structures and prefigurations must be peeled off the text (Gyáni 2010, pp. 34–35).

In some cases, agent texts are conspiracies based on the observation of real persons through which the agent themselves sought to achieve their personal goals. However, the "agent's gaze" exploring the traces of anti-systemic organization may have inadvertently transformed the original emphases, the actual proportions: it could have highlighted certain phenomena better, overestimated their role and significance, and given them a different meaning from the original. Nevertheless, using multiple sources may result in a better understanding of Vatican II's direct effects and contribute to a reception history from a bottom-up perspective.

In my approach, the archival sources are complemented by a fundamentally sensory and expressive group of sources that is post-Vatican hymnal lyrics, which are rarely used in religious studies. The lyrics express individual feelings, desires, and faith experiences in poetic form. However, they feed on the given cultural-religious medium, reflect its peculiarities, and, due to their mass availability, also shape the religiosity, attitudes, and religious and value preferences of these communities. The post-Vatican II religious transformations, the emerging attitudes, and the meaning-making aspect of the "new type of religious culture" can also be investigated more thoroughly through the analysis of hymn lyrics.

### 3. Vatican II and Grassroots Modernization on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain

As Hellemans (2001) put it, Vatican II and the spirit of *aggiornamento* created a partnership and dialogue with modernization as the Roman Catholic Church had to find answers to the radically accelerating socio-technical changes and the processes threatening her authority and status. Before Vatican II, comprehensive reforms did not really occur in the 20th century, while spontaneous reactions were born among the faithful as bottom-up processes.<sup>8</sup> These grassroots spiritual renewal movements were constantly born and became increasingly diverse owing to the lack of regulation and clear guidance. In this sense, Vatican II was both a product and a promoter of reforms. Its innovations were built on existing needs as the Church was less and less able to keep up with the accelerating

changes after World War II. Church structures had drifted farther and farther away from social consciousness, with the natural consequence of a widening gap between Catholic believers (who are also part of social consciousness) and the institutional Church. The Church and the faithful no longer lived in the same age.

For many onlookers, it was high time that the Church finally tried to adapt to the spirit of the age, and to change, as all other living organisms change (Wilson-Dickson 1998, p. 263). The extraordinary impact of the Vatican II reforms<sup>9</sup> was amplified by the fact that it was the first ecumenical council that could be followed by all interested believers and non-believers thanks to the mass media, at least in the so-called democratic “Western” world.

In the socialist states, however, all religious information was filtered through censorship and could appear in the controlled Church press in a simplified and often transformed way, while state television and radio generally did not report on religious topics. As it sought to indoctrinate atheism and a break with Christian churches, the state had no interest in bringing about the Catholic Church’s renewal. Due to the potential for renewal and the expected popularity of the Vatican II reforms, the state tried to limit their widespread implementation, as the reforms formulated at Vatican II and what followed (e.g., a religious language better adapted to the needs of the era, the rise of bottom-up initiatives, and bottom-up renewal movements) would have jeopardized the stability of an already functioning system capable of controlling the Church. It was not primarily because of renewal within the Church that they posed a risk factor, but because the new forms, in line with the transformation of postmodern society’s needs, treated institutions—the previously supreme authority—differently, thus endangering the already tense state–Church relations. The secret police paid particular attention to observing grassroots renewal movements, small group gatherings whose spirituality was in line with several post-Vatican II innovations. The fact that the Hungarian Catholic Church had an ambivalent attitude towards the post-Vatican II reforms also contributed to this. Officially, the Vatican II decisions were naturally supported, but the practical implementation of the reforms was slow. Contributing to this was the Church’s subordinate, vulnerable relationship with the state, which ecclesiastical authorities always had to keep in mind in order for the Church to at least function and avoid even more violent action and restraint.

The attitude of the religious policy of the Kádár regime is clearly demonstrated by the files in the State Security Archives, which from the 1960s to the second half of the 1980s testify that youth communities, emerging spiritual movements, and gatherings were under constant surveillance. The focus was on organizing individuals, primarily youth pastors. The state perceived all grassroots communities as an increased source of danger, independent of both the party organization and the controlled Church elite. Renewal movements (e.g., Focolare, the Bokor movement, the charismatic renewal) and various youth groups and choirs were such independent groups with significant community-forming power operating outside the church walls. As one informer noted, “trouble can only occur if the individual encounters a community” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-38453, p. 11). The same suspicious attitude can be observed with bottom-up initiatives aimed at ecumenism<sup>10</sup>, which could have fundamentally strengthened the unity and power of Christians organized independently of the party, and the emergence of which is perhaps best facilitated by religious music. As Bányai pointed out already in 1969, “the interplay of church music reforms has triggered better understanding and ecumenical relations between churches sooner than in the relatively closed world of dogma and theology” (Bányai 1969, p. 223). In each case, these private community initiatives, organized outside the church walls, provided a greater opportunity for individual opinions, demands, and views different from the central, state-approved forms of religion to emerge, and for communities to spread.

It can be seen that just as we cannot speak of a single pattern of modernization and a unified process, we cannot speak of a unified Catholic reaction. Just as there are many kinds of modernity/multiple modernities, so too is there Catholicism that is modernizing in many

ways. There are fundamental differences between the former democratic “Western” world and communist, post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. As Máté-Tóth emphasizes, in the West, the privatization of individualism and Catholicism became the determining dimension, in connection with which a loss of faith in institutions was observed. In the countries of the Soviet bloc, where the church became the primary target of the atheist-materialist cultural war, on the other hand, the privatization of religion took place only to a limited extent, and the institutional dimension of the church retained more of its former symbolic significance. (Máté-Tóth 2006, p. 21)

These official ecclesiastical, political processes, such as the subordination of the Church to the state, resulted in a situation in which renewal and spiritual movements within the Church were doubly opposed. Not only were the state suspicious, but the Church hierarchy usually did not tolerate their presence either. Hitherto, it is no coincidence that one of the primary markers of a modern post-Vatican II hymnody in Hungarian reception history is dichotomy. Modern religious music was accompanied by tension and division, along with self-contradictions, within the institution and the community over the last half-century.

### *3.1. Understanding Christian Popular Hymnody and Transformations in Post-Vatican II Religious Culture*

We know how important music is as a part of religious practice, and how central it is both in transcendent communication (songs as incarnations of personal feelings) and in the transcendent experience (the imaginary description of a song as a transcendent sphere, transcendent experience, and a facilitator of achieving transcendence). Among the branches of art, music can respond to the changing cultural, social, and religious needs the fastest and reach the largest masses; hence, it is evident that religious music is often the first and most expressive medium to show the need for change/invariance. Therefore, music becomes the symbolic battlefield of religious opposition.

The socio-cultural and religious processes can be well illustrated by the appearance of Christian popular music, by focusing on the transformation and community aspect of religious music. It can be argued that through the analysis of religious music, the adaptation strategies through which religion tries to give relevant answers in a given age become easier to understand. Nonetheless, there is a so-called “disciplinary deafness” (Weiner 2009) within the study of religions. How people experience contemporary religious music, and how religious music expresses and represents attitudes, values, and motivations behind everyday, lived religiosity are not studied in any great detail. Although the analysis of Christian popular music can already show relatively significant results,<sup>11</sup> Catholic popular music<sup>12</sup> research is inexplicably pushed into the background, and the contextual lyric analysis in religious studies is largely terra incognita.

The transposition of all these methodologies to the conditions behind the Iron Curtain is absolutely necessary research if we want to present our knowledge of the era in a coherent way.

### *3.2. Trajectories of Contemporary Popular Music*

The unraveling of the musical antecedents of Christian popular music presents four seemingly strange facts: Surprisingly, (1) its roots do not stem from the 1950s, at the birth of rock and roll, but in the late 1700s, with the advent of spirituals. Therefore, (2) Christian popular music did not grow out of European Christian culture but African American culture. This way, (3) Christian popular music is not based on previous church music antecedents but an entirely new musical foundation, and (4) the beginnings of Christian popular music are not only to be discovered within the religious culture.

For our purposes, we cannot elaborate on the history and trends of the spiritual gospel jazz/blues rock development here, or discuss in which well-known rock and roll performers’ song we can discover explicit religious content as early as the 1960s. In

this article, the renewal of music with a religious function is included in our analysis as Christian popular music.

It should be noted that the emergence, and the wave of transformation, of religious music was not merely a derivative of Vatican II.<sup>13</sup> The “20th Century Folk Mass” of the Twentieth Century Church Light Music Group, founded in England in the 1950s and led by Geoffrey Beaumont, or the chansons of Father Aimé Duval of France do not originate from the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, but rather show the pre-existing, up-and-coming demands to which the Church responded and set a rapid cultural transformation in motion. The Second Vatican Council actually addressed this phenomenon in *Musica Sacram*, the conciliar document on liturgical music, in the following way:

“No kind of sacred music is prohibited from liturgical actions by the Church as long as it corresponds to the spirit of the liturgical celebration itself and the nature of its individual parts, and does not hinder the active participation of the people”.<sup>14</sup>

Musical renewal within the Catholic Church can be traced back to a three-threaded antecedent. On the one hand, the Western European line is marked primarily by Father Duval, Soeur Sourire, or Beaumont; on the other hand, the “folk mass movement” had its beginning in 1960s America. Third, the initiatives based on traditional folk music, such as *Missa Luba*<sup>15</sup> or *Misa Criolla*,<sup>16</sup> showed the characteristics of the musical folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. It was only later, for the most part, from the 1980s onwards, that the effects of ecumenical initiatives such as Gen Rosso, Taizé music, or the Pentecostal charismatic worship music flourished.

It is evident that in the music of the religious-musical revolution of the 1960s, the trendy musical styles of the age, first marked by the name of Bob Dylan, inspired by American folk music, had a pol-beat trend and then from the 1970s built on the other currents of rock and roll. As a result of its intertwining with a secular style, “Christian rock” at this time was distinguished only by its Christian texts. Almost entirely separate from these, but very similar in its sound, the style appeared in the religious culture beyond the Iron Curtain as well.

### 3.3. Post-Vatican II Hymnody behind the Iron Curtain

Based on the secret police archival documents’ description, Christian popular music appeared in the Hungarian public sphere with surprising suddenness, provoking massive reactions practically simultaneously to parallel processes in the “West”. The revolution of religious music, which was strongly intertwined with the emerging forms of religious renewal at that time and the changing religious experiences and needs, is usually connected to the previously mentioned “beat mass” of 1968 (also called the Szilas Mass, or Mass teenager). At the end of 1966, at the age of 16, Imre Szilas<sup>17</sup> began writing the “beat mass”, which was first presented in Abony in 1967. The mass was recorded on tape for both the parish priest and the band to commit to memory. The choir of roughly 15 people then did not function for nearly a year. It was not until the spring of 1968 that they reunited to perform the play at the Matthias Church in Budapest at Easter<sup>18</sup> For the Easter Mass, the choir was led by László Tardy, conductor of the Matthias Church, on the condition that Szilas’ band (Zenith) and a choir consisting of 20 young people from the conservatory, the Matthias Church, and the Tabán Church devote time and energy to perform the beat mass to a high standard (ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-158886/5. p. 12).

From then on, the spread of Christian popular music in Hungary took place at an avalanche-like speed. This was because, on the one hand, the “Szilas Mass” was covered by the Catholic newspapers of the time, and, on the other hand, the fact that it was performed several times in the Matthias Church and the Tabán Church. The second “modern musical worship” held in the Matthias Church on 5 May 1968—showing the confusing relationship of the political authorities—was already held with the participation of the Hungarian radio, as the entire musical and other materials of the mass were also recorded on Austrian television. This was followed by a succession of church choirs and shorter-and-longer

bands of youth groups across the country. Although their operation had been interrupted, in most cases due to the political situation, scarce opportunities, and mixed reception<sup>19</sup>, the phenomenon became unstoppable. Parish priests, who saw in music a possible tool and channel for the evangelization of young people, also played a significant role in facilitating the spread.

The wave of spiritual awakening and religious renewal began as an urban phenomenon, with centers in the capital and rural towns, mainly oriented around priests active in youth ministry. The “beat masses” of the urban choirs then appeared in the villages in the next phase, from the second half of the 1970s.

The Szilas Mass, and the resulting beat masses, had two main effects. First, through the new music, they contributed to the creation of a new religious musical language, a new musical hymnody, and second, new communities centering around this type of new music (youth prayer groups, choirs, orchestras) were created. The new musical repertoire, although noticed by state authorities, provoked controversy not only in political circles but in the religious sphere, among the clergy, and among the faithful. The state saw danger, not so much in the new hymnody, but in the emerging communities, which were under little control. Of particular importance in this regard were the initiatives whose main aim was to create religious communities specifically for young people through music and provide young religious people with a religious community experience. The most significant and longest-running such event, bringing together several generations (the founders, their children, and their grandchildren), were the meetings in Kismaros and then Nagymaros<sup>20</sup>, which met twice a year, occasionally for 800–3000 people. The meetings began in 1971 with Jenő Sillye (b. 1947), who has been writing pol-beat-style religious songs and guitar masses since 1969. The new religious music attracted young people to the meetings in Nagymaros, and in addition to the music, the spiritual programs that were the main events of the meetings were built up at a rapid pace (Kamarás 1989). The meetings in Nagymaros also practically became the national meeting places of the religious renewal movements (Regnum Marianum, Bokor movement, charismatics). The Kismaros/Nagymaros youth festivals were organized by enthusiastic, primarily young priests who put religious renewal and pastoral attempts before their fear of the repressive socialist apparatus. The meetings were not viewed approvingly by either state power or the leading clergy. The network of informers was constantly present, reporting on the organizing priests and the event.

Cardinal László Lékai, Archbishop of Esztergom, who was collaborating with the Communist Party, stayed away from the movement for a long time and even issued a circular condemning the small communities and movements, trying to meet the role expected of him from the state to the maximum (Mezey 2015, p. 23; Bodnár 2002, p. 34). As a result, the meetings were on the verge of illegality in the 1970s and became officially accepted (but not supported) in church circles only in April 1980, when the Hungarian Catholic Church, and thus Cardinal László Lékai, met with Pope John Paul II’s strong criticism. The Pope expressed concern about the moral decline of Hungarian Catholicism and called on the cardinal to do his best to evangelize society, especially in the religious education of young people, and the integration of small communities and renewal movements (László 1990, p. 172). Lékai then celebrated mass in Nagymaros himself on Pentecost of 1980. Therefore, many consider Nagymaros to be the cradle of Hungarian Catholic renewal.

With the meetings in Nagymaros, a new kind of musical style also started, which has become a significant movement (see Figure 2). Due to its melodic world and musical sound, it was now able to leave the walls of the church and become singable in individual or small group settings. This kind of pol-beat-style music simultaneously condenses liturgical, worship, entertaining functions and usability. In addition to the melodic world, its movement was also due to the fact that from the Sillye, the music was no longer heard from above, from the gallery of churches, but from below, near the altar, as an integral part of the encounter and the liturgy (Kamarás 2008).



**Figure 2.** Youth festival in Bokod in 1980. (Source: the author's personal collection).

Due to the political environment, the spread of this spontaneous religious musical phenomenon, taking the form of a grassroots movement, was essentially hidden from state authorities as a samizdat-like process. This spread of samizdat<sup>21</sup> was also observed in connection with the distribution of Christian popular music songs secretly imported from abroad and the reproduction of church recordings by similar domestic bands and had a decisive effect on the phenomenon that created authorship and existence in variants: the songs recorded on tape recorders, and the sheet music copied by hand and mailed to each other as letters. The people who secretly recorded the masses and performances were regularly present in the churches, and the recordings were soon made available on the black market. The songs recorded in this way often went to the West, to the Hungarian radios operating there, through which the songs returned to the Hungarian audience (already if they were able to catch such radio broadcasts illegally). The process naturally resulted in different rhythms and instrumentations from the original version of the songs, which, in several cases, was to the detriment of the esthetic quality and facilitated the controversy surrounding this novel hymnody.

In summary, it can be clearly seen that Hungarian Catholic popular music, born after Vatican II, and carrying the spirit of the Council, was typically born as a grassroots movement, but from the very beginning, it was in close connection with the institutional Church.

#### **4. Text Analysis of Post-Vatican II Popular Hymnody**

If we include the post-Vatican II popular hymnody lyrics as a valid source group of narratives in the analysis, we immediately face several methodological challenges. First, which songs shall we analyze and how can we obtain information that we can generalize as a characteristic of the religious culture of the era? Second, the esthetics, the poetic forms of expressions, and the theological correctness must be disregarded in the analysis. Third, new religious features discovered in songs should, in principle, be contrasted with earlier folk hymns that do not contain them in order for the changes to surface.

First of all, we must state that the use of popular hymnody as a narrative cannot produce representative results that could be quantified by surveys. Although quantitative lyric analysis of the Hungarian Christian popular music corpus from the 1960s to the 1980s is underway, no matter how hard we try to immerse ourselves, there may always be songs used by a local community for a longer or shorter period of time which are not included in the analysis. In addition to software lyrics analysis, there is also a need to analyze the poetic

aspect of the songs, which is slower and more labor-intensive work, but such an analysis of each song, in addition to being an impractically large job, would also be meaningless. There are songs that have been used regularly for decades at guitar masses; that is, they symbolize the whole phenomenon. Such songs have appeared in various collections of song volumes (see on Figures 3 and 4), but due to their widespread prevalence (and the samizdat-like proliferation already described above), they do not exist in a single version. In many cases, differences can be observed in their melody, rhythm, or even lyrics, and in many cases, even songs may have become poems or the “wisdom” of chain letters distributed online (Povedák 2019, p. 169). Therefore, we rely heavily on the community aspect in the analysis. We analyze songs that were played regularly and preferred and embraced because of their melody and lyrics by the community. These songs, similar to former folk songs, passed the filter of preventive community censorship and became an integral part of religious culture as they express the community’s feelings in the language of the community.



Figure 3. The cover of a home-made song book. (Source: the author’s personal collection).

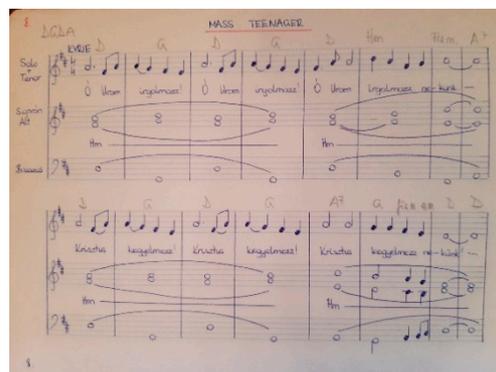


Figure 4. Handwritten sheet music from the 1970s. (Source: the author’s personal collection).

In the present study, I have chosen three songs as a basis for analysis, which have been generally known for a long time, and they occur regularly in all parts of the country, both in liturgical and non-liturgical settings. Jenő Sillye’s<sup>22</sup> 1972 song “I’m Little”, as its title suggests, basically addresses children. As a result, it was played primarily not as a liturgical song but as a song of worship and partly entertaining on small community occasions, especially in the presence of children. The simplicity and rhyme structure of its textual world are also adapted to the peculiarities of children, although the wording “I am little” can also express man’s descendancy and weakness compared to the transcendent.

Kicsi vagyok én, mégse félek én, / kicsi vagyok én, mégse félek én, / Semmi baj nem lehet, / mert engem Jézus szeret, / Kicsi vagyok én, mégse félek én! / Boldog is vagyok, az is maradok, / boldog is vagyok, az is maradok! / Rossz kedvem nem lehet, / mert engem Jézus szeret / Boldog is vagyok, az is maradok!

/ Erdőn, réteken száll az énekem, / erdőn, réteken száll az énekem, / Tudja meg a világ, / hogy Jézus a boldogság! / Erdőn, réteken száll az énekem. / Utcán, tereken nem hagy el sosem, / utcán, tereken nem hagy el sosem! / Mindenkit így szeret, / mert Jézus a szeretet, / utcán, tereken – nem hagy el sosem!

I am little, yet I am not afraid / I am little, yet I am not afraid! / There can be nothing wrong, / because Jesus loves me, / I am little, yet I am not afraid! / I'm happy, I'll stay that way too! / I can't be in a bad mood/because Jesus loves me, / I'm happy, I'll stay that way too! / My song is in the woods and meadows. / Let the world know / that Jesus is happiness, / my song is in the woods, in the meadows. / He never leaves me on the streets, squares, / he loves everyone this way / because Jesus is love, / he never leaves me on the streets, squares. (Sillye 1981, pp. 56–57)

The novelty of the song clearly lies in addressing the target audience, the children. The lyrics of the song do not address Jesus, nor do they describe the sufferings of Christ. The song practically lacks all theological references, attachment, or references to Catholicism, or the emphasis on personal sin that often characterizes earlier Catholic folk hymnody. In contrast to folk hymns that build on the story of suffering, the emphasis here is on the joy that can be personally experienced through living in faith. It can be seen as “good news” that, in addition to emphasizing personal happiness and joy, carries a single message: Jesus loves and never leaves us. The Church as an institution, biblical images, or teachings do not appear at all in the song.

Jenő Sillye's other song “Happy smile on my face” can also be understood as a creed of a believer's personal religiosity:

Eltékozolt sok évemet, hazug vágyamat, örömet / kőkeresztként vállamon viszem! / Földre roskadok, fölkelek, de Hozzád mégis elmegyek, / megállni az úton nem lehet! / Refr Boldog mosoly az arcomon, egy pillanatról álmodom, utam végén vársz rám, tudom! / Add a két kezéd kedvesem, / együtt megyünk egy életen, / egymás nélkül nem jutunk tovább! / Testvéreim, ne várjatok, ha fáradtak vagytok, szóljatok, / de egymás nélkül nem jutunk tovább!

I am carrying my wasted years, my false desire and joy / as a stone cross on my shoulder. / I fall to the ground, I get up, but I still go to you, / I can't stop on the road! / Chorus: Happy smile on my face, / I dream for a moment, / You are waiting for me at the end of my journey, I know! / Give me both hands, my dear, / we will go together through life, / we will not get any further without each other! / My brethren, do not wait, if you are tired, say so, / but we will not get any further without each other! (Sillye 1993)

The poem begins with a juxtaposition of the profane and the sacred, with a look back on years wasted on worldly pleasures, with which, as if reading a narrative of conversion, the joy of being a believer is in opposition. In addition to the bipolar approach, the song also features positive aspects of community existence. Unlike the style of previous folk hymns, addressing the spouse informally, “my dear” appears, emphasizing the importance of marriage for life, as well as addressing “brethren” which refers not only to relatives but also to the community of believers. Additionally, the “we will not get any further without each other” part of the concluding line clearly emphasizes the communal aspect of religion without any theological content, scriptural reference, or reference to the institutional dimension of Catholicism.

The significance of János Benyhe's 1972 composition “I Bind Myself” is in the fact that it was born as the anthem of the most significant Hungarian Catholic renewal movement, the Bokor movement<sup>23</sup>.

Megkötöm magamat Isten kötelével. / Megkötöm szívemet Ország Igéjével. / Szabadságom, Uram, Néked visszaadom. / Csak a szeretetre formáld át tudatom. / Magamat megkötni nehéz nekem, Uram. / Segítő kéz nélkül nehéz járnom utam. / Atyám, erősítsd meg gyermeked a hitben. / Életem példázta: szeretet

az Isten. / Megkötöm magamat baráti kötéllel. / Testvéri közösség tartóerejével.  
/ Testvér, ha eloldnám kettős kötelékem. / Szembesíts magammal, légy felelős értem.

I bind myself with the rope of God, / I fill my heart with the word of the Kingdom,  
/ my freedom, Lord, I give you back, / just transform my consciousness into love!  
/ I am weak to bind myself, / Lord, it is difficult for me to walk without a helping  
hand. / My father, strengthen thy brother in the faith, / my life exemplifies: Love  
is God. / I bind myself with a friendly rope, / with the sustaining power of  
brethren community. Brother, if I loose my double bond, / face me with myself,  
be responsible for me! <sup>24</sup>

Born under the leadership of György Bulányi, the small community renewal movement was doubly opposed: in addition to the state, the Church also tried to suppress it.<sup>25</sup> The first ideas that appear in the anthem of the movement are the forces that unite the persecuted community: allegiance to God and the need for love in the face of oppression. For the path of faith, the author asks God for help, for the individual is weak in himself/herself and needs the sustaining power of friends and community.

Plenty of similar lyrics could be listed as examples apart from the three songs analyzed here. Most of them have been sung for decades at both the liturgy and small community gatherings. Theological content and examples of a biblical narrative are relatively rare in them; most were written by a priest or a theologian who, with sufficient knowledge in their possession, formulated their texts in accordance with the teachings of the Church. However, the majority addressed the listeners of the songs—young people, families, married people—focusing on the problems and questions of their lives, to which they gave simple answers: believing in Jesus, and loving their fellow humans, family members, and community. On the other hand, the representation of the Church as an institution is completely pushed into the background; mention of or devotion to saints and miracles is rare, while the emphasis is on worldly living, religious patterns, the communal way of life of religion, and living the love of Christ. The songs, although written during communism, do not contain political messages. The songs had virtually no primary political content, or lyrics threatening the party state. Simultaneously, they could carry secondary political meaning in the sense that this popular hymnody belonged to religious culture, which was not politically supported or tolerated and basically operated outside the state's control.

The significance of post-Vatican popular hymnody as primary sources lies in the recognition of religious creativity and the agency of the faithful in creating a new repertoire with new visions, new ideas, and needs. Popular hymnody often becomes an expression of what people believe and is sometimes a more reliable indicator of popular belief than credal confessions (Yong 2015, p. 281). By centering the scholarly focus on post-conciliar popular hymnody, and through its analysis, we may understand the “vernacular theologies” of congregants. This performative way of religious expression, worship, and its music is what McGann calls “performed theology”:

Worship and its music are performed theology as they express embodied relationality and they actualize and manifest the spiritual, ecclesial, eschatological and ecological relationships that express and create a community's identity. (McGann 2002)

Following McGann's point, it is contended here that religious songs perform “vernacular theologies” and that post-Vatican popular hymn texts provide a hidden, unexplored source that is worthy of our attention and analysis.

## 5. Conclusions

We can conclude that Christian popular music and the so-called “beat masses” of the 1970s and 1980s became a popular form of semi-underground religious practice. Interestingly, all Catholic renewal movements in the 1970s were connected to this musical language and the songs of the newly created hymnody. However, these tendencies did not

always stop at the borders of religious culture but also carried an implicit political meaning. In the vast majority of cases, this was not a critique of the existing system, a confrontation with it, or even an image of an alternative, anti-communist model based on the Christian social system, but a much more depoliticized one, emphasizing national self-awareness. Needless to say, it provoked the disapproval and suspicion of the party state. As Jenő Sillye articulates:

“We didn’t really want to politicize because we were aware of it. I also saw the priest taken away at Béke square because he was dealing with young people [ . . . ] They also reminded us to be careful and not to get involved. We always avoided October 23rd<sup>26</sup> so that meetings were never held then [ . . . ] Priests also told us not to politicize, but if they get involved in someone, they tell me right away. The Regnum priests knew this, they spoke from their own experiences.”<sup>27</sup>

Political dissent did not appear explicitly in the views of the believers, but the existing system projected their own fears on them. The regime of the Kádár era had made it difficult for spontaneous relationships to develop certain “bottom-up” rules of behavior that the vast majority of society voluntarily adhered to, and on the other hand, the way such systems operate fosters a climate of mistrust and hostility (Andorka 2004, p. 43). The phenomenon had basically two characteristics: lived religiosity and the fashionable musical style (pol-beat, rock), both of which in themselves already entailed reservations of the socialist party state.

The emergence of the “beat mass” movement or Christian popular music phenomenon becomes relatively well traceable through the analysis of secret police archival sources that attempted to document and control all religious base community initiatives, and the person who created them (both clerics and laity). Thus, although the observations did not focus on new religious music, data can still be discovered, as religious music became almost entirely popular as a bottom-up initiative, independent of central state ideology, and was originally a community-centric phenomenon.

The secret police reports of the infiltrated agents shed light on the distrust of state and Church leaders towards new religious music and the new kind of youth religious culture that emerged around it, as well as the religious needs behind the musical phenomenon: the desire for renewal and new communities; the need for a new religious language and the identity- and political-based processes behind it. The suspicions of the socialist state resulted in apolitical Christian popular music becoming a threefold alternative movement until the 1980s. First, from a political point of view, this new genre of church music was outside officially accepted socialist culture; it belonged to the counterculture created by “Western rock and roll music”. At the same time, being religious during the communist regime was to, in a sense, oppose the political system. Additionally, third, the Church regarded renewal movements as an alternative religiosity and result of an external ideology—i.e., secular rock and roll. The new hymnody and the communities around it were viewed with suspicion by the party state, but it also represented a kind of alternative culture within the Hungarian Catholic Church as well. Many of the clergy, especially the peace priests, had strong feelings against popular hymnody, as they saw the community-forming power as a threat to the state–Church relationship, while others simply rejected the musical genre itself. Christian popular music, which functioned as a fundamentally new religious language, therefore symbolized a kind of bottom-up renewal movement during the years of socialism, symbolizing an alternative religiosity to traditionality. The main indicators of this are also found in popular hymnody: the small community as the most important medium for the preservation of religion, the simple, unambiguous, transdenominational Christian message, and the uninstitutionalized image of religiosity centered around loving interpersonal relationships.

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**Archival Sources:** Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára [Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security]:

1. ÁBTL H-63879
2. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-33094
3. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-33124/3
4. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-38453
5. ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-16455.
6. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-158886/5

## Notes

- 1 This quote is taken from an informer report from a secret police file (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-33094, p. 83).
- 2 [Beat mise](#) (1968). Directed by Sándor Szalkai MTVA [Hungarian Television Archives].
- 3 Thanks to the infiltrating agents and informer reports of the secret police, we have a relatively detailed knowledge of the event and its organizers, which marked the beginning of Christian popular music or the so-called “beat mass” movement in Hungary.
- 4 The so-called “peace priests” during Hungarian communism and state socialism were organized based on the Soviet model from the 1950s contributing to the efforts undermining the social influences of churches in Hungary. The priests in opposition to the party were continuously kept under pressure so that they could be replaced by peace priests. Peace priests who joined the movement had various reasons for doing so. Some did not cause much harm due to their personalities; others gave a helping hand to the state in the persecution of religious practice, causing great harm. Again, others were forced to join the movement through torture.
- 5 Katherine Verdery refers to secret police reports as “police ethnographies” ([Verdery 2014](#)) comparing the work of anthropologists to that of secret police informers.
- 6 János Kádár (1912–89) was the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, presiding over Hungary from 1956 to 1988. As of 1957, Kádár implemented the so-called 3 Ts cultural policy after the Hungarian words: támogat (support), tűr (tolerate), and tilt (prohibit). Religion was situated on the borders of toleration and prohibition. In order to gain international acceptance after the oppression of the 1956 revolution, Hungary enhanced the image of religious freedom both at home and in international affairs. In 1964, Hungary signed a “partial agreement” with the Vatican. Consequently, Hungary became a positive model for state–Church relationships in the socialist bloc.
- 7 We can only gain a more complete, but never an entirely complete, image of religious culture during the years of dictatorship. The socialist state formation was often characterized by completely different interests, judgments, and attitudes toward various religious phenomena. The Roman Catholic Church, to which approximately two thirds of the population in Hungary belonged in the 1940s, was the subject of a different assessment, with which the state (1950) concluded an agreement after a series of show trials, extensive agent disruptive activities, media campaigns, and intimidation.
- 8 This is not to say that there were no significant innovations taking place in theology, ecclesiology, charitable practice, and devotional culture in Hungarian communities. The 1930s had brought the birth of such Catholic organizations as KALOT (Katolikus Agrárfjúsági Legényegyesületek Országos Testülete [National Organization of Catholic Agrarian Young Men]), KALÁSZ (Katolikus Asszonyok és Lányok Szövetsége [Alliance of Catholic Women and Girls]) that involved the vast majority of young Catholics. In addition to Christian morality, these organizations concerned themselves with wider issues such as education, preservation of folk traditions, and also preparation for social life. During the interwar years, these movements together with the flourishing scouting communities received significant state support; however, after WWII, they were all dissolved by the communist authorities in 1946.
- 9 The Vatican II reforms are not discussed in the present study. Even a mere listing of the literature on Vatican II would require constituting an enormous bibliography. My study does not deal with the theological innovations of Vatican II but focuses on what changes have taken place in religious music behind the Iron Curtain, a subject that is outside the mainstream literature on the history of the reception of Vatican II, and the additional information it provides us regarding the incompletely understood regional religious culture of the era.
- 10 “To me, this [the agent means the Bulányi Bokor movement] does not seem to be the most dangerous movement, but the charismatics who are often found in youth movements within the Protestant churches, especially among Baptists. They have propaganda material in Hungarian through foreign support, mainly from the Netherlands. These propaganda booklets will slowly be found everywhere from the central seminary to the smallest parishes” (ÁBTL H-63879: 17).
- 11 See, among others, the works of Monique Ingalls, Anna Nekola, Thomas Wagner, or Christopher Partridge.
- 12 For a notable exception, see Arpad von Klimo, “Katholizismus und Popkultur. Beatmessen in Italien und Ungarn in den 1960er Jahren”. *Religion und Gesellschaft im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf und Klaus Große Kracht, Böhlau: Köln 2007, pp. 353–74.

- <sup>13</sup> *Musicam Sacram*, the conciliar document of Vatican II concerning liturgical music should be interpreted in the context of the liturgical movement beginning in the early twentieth century within the Catholic Church and seen as a somehow continuation of Pope Pius X's *motu proprio* "Tra le sollecitudini" (1903).
- <sup>14</sup> Naturally, these chapters of *Musicam Sacram* had been interpreted differently by church musicians and liturgical scholars. The opponents of guitar accompanied masses built their arguments on sections underlining how Gregorian chant should be given pride of place in the liturgical services. Modern popular music is critiqued heavily based on chapter VI *Musicam Sacram*: "However, those instruments which are, by common opinion and use, suitable for secular music only, are to be altogether prohibited from every liturgical celebration and from popular devotions." For more on the Catholic "music war", see (Povedák 2016).
- <sup>15</sup> *Missa Luba* is an African setting of mass in Latin. The mass was developed from collective improvisations by Belgian Franciscan Father Guido Haazen and a choir consisting of school boys from the Baluba tribe years before the liturgical changes of Vatican II. *Missa Luba* included indigenous Congolese musical elements. In 1958, the *Missa Luba* was performed on several occasions at a European concert tour and became widely known.
- <sup>16</sup> *Misa Criolla* was one of the first masses not in Latin shortly after the Second Vatican Council permitted the use of the vernacular in Catholic churches created by Ariel Ramírez in 1964. *Misa Criolla* includes folk genres and indigenous instruments.
- <sup>17</sup> Imre Szilas (born 1950) was a student at the music art grammar school. On 17 October 1970, he left Hungary with a private passport to Sudan and then emigrated to the United States. See: ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-16455. 1.
- <sup>18</sup> One week after the presentation of the mass, on 23 April 1968, a typed and evaluated report was produced. See: ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-33124/3.
- <sup>19</sup> The style was not received with the same enthusiasm by the faithful, which was not helped by the fact that the songs, which did not work well in all cases, were often performed by untrained, amateur bands.
- <sup>20</sup> Nagymaros and Kismaros are small settlements situated 50 km from Budapest in the Danube curve.
- <sup>21</sup> Songs spread orally without the author's name indicated and were often transcribed the way they were heard. Songs generally spread by word of mouth, from one person to another. Due to the lack of published sheet music until the mid 1980s, there are several handwritten or typed home-made song books from the 1970s and 1980s.
- <sup>22</sup> Jenő Sillye (b. 1947) is often referred to as the "Father" of Christian popular music in Hungary. Sillye has been composing more than 400 songs to this day.
- <sup>23</sup> Bokor [Bush] was a Catholic renewal movement organized around György Bulányi (1919–2010) based on biblical teachings and laying great emphasis on the role of base communities. For more, see: Máté-Tóth (1996) *Bulányi und die Bokor-Bewegung. Eine pastoraltheologische Würdigung*. Wien: UKI.
- <sup>24</sup> This is the first song in a typewritten, samizdat songbook entitled "Énekek" [Songs] used by members of the Bokor movement.
- <sup>25</sup> See, for more: Máté-Tóth (1996) *Bulányi und die Bokor-Bewegung. Eine pastoraltheologische Würdigung*. Wien: UKI.
- <sup>26</sup> The significance of the date lies in the Hungarian revolution of 23 October 1956.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Jenő Sillye, Budapest, 2 June 2015.

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