

THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF THE CATHOLICS OF MOLDAVIA

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ABSTRACT – Catholics represent almost 5% of the total population of Moldavia. Their spiritual identity was formed in opposition to that of the Orthodox majority and according to the universal church dogmata, preached by the missionary priests who reached the territory surrounded by the Carpathians, the Nister, the Black Sea, the Danube and the Milcov as early as the 14th century. In the Middle Ages, religion was the means of differentiating oneself from the others and not ethnicity. Therefore, the large Catholic communities around Roman and Bacău, of mixed ethnic origin (Hungarian and Romanian) and of different ages (due to the Transcarpathian movement of the population from Transylvania), considered themselves to be Catholics and nothing else until the modern period. Once the ideas of nation and nationality appeared, these biethnic groups were gradually involved in the process of formation of the modern states (Romania and Hungary). The Catholics of other origins, such as Polish, German, Armenian, Roma, French and Italian are very few and some even became completely Romanian, preserving only their religious identity. As many of the speakers of Hungarian and Romanian (called Csangos by the Hungarians and the Secklers) lived in Moldavia, it was inevitable for them to be subjected to a natural process of becoming Romanian, through school, army and church for the past 150 years. Yet, they managed to preserve unaltered their laws, customs and superstitions, supported by the active participation in the spiritual and social life of the community.

Keywords: religious identity, Catholics, Moldavia, Csango, acculturation

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic population is little known and yet, it is only natural in a majority Orthodox country, which came into contact with the Polish and Hungarian Catholicism, Greek Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and Transylvanian Unitarianism and which was marginalized, sometimes even persecuted, especially during the communist period.

A SHORT PRESENTATION ON THE HISTORY AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE MOLDAVIAN CATHOLICS

Situated in the East of Romania, in the region known as Moldavia, the diocese of Iași was founded in 1884. With a surface of 46,378 km² spread over 8 counties (Botoșani, Suceava, Iași, Neamț, Vaslui, Bacău, Galați, Vrancea), the diocese has a population of 4,681,605 people, among which 4,277,869 are Orthodox, representing 91.38% of the total, 243,345 are Catholics, which is 5.21% and 3,017 are Greek Catholics, namely 0.06%.

In Bacău county, out of 120,579 Roman-Catholics, 96% identified themselves as Romanians, 4,528 as Hungarians and 847 as Csango. The rest of the Catholic population can be found in Botoșani-929, Galați-217, Iași-38,165, Neamț-61,453, Suceava-8,488, Vaslui-6,602 and Vrancea-4,959.

The presence of a religious minority in Moldavia has raised many questions. According to the contemporary Hungarian researchers Csangos=Hungarians=all the Roman-Catholic population in Moldavia, the theory being supported by poetical and romantic arguments rather than scientific. As long as Romanians were Orthodox, then all Roman-Catholics must have belonged to a different ethnic group - the Hungarian one. Even the data of the censuses (at the 2002 census, only 1,370 identified

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themselves as Csangos, which is a very small number of the total Catholic population in the diocese of Iași) were considered false, always exaggerated by some abusive, assimilation policy of the Romanian state and the Catholic church.

In the scientific Hungarian literature, the word “*csango*” defines a community which has become estranged- linguistically, culturally and socially- from the Hungarian community, but did not fully become part of the Romanian one. When using the term “Csangos”, we do not consider all the Catholics of Moldavia, but especially those who speak or understand a Hungarian dialect and also those who identify themselves as such, according to their Hungarian origin, though they do not speak the language. In the last century, the number and proportion of this group have decreased once assimilation stepped in. The assimilation was sometimes natural, other times organized and thus, the proportion varied from period to period.

The Romanian radical nationalists strongly oppose the term “Csango”, recommending the use of “Romanian Catholic” for all the Catholics of Moldavia who have not been declared “of Hungarian nationality” at the census. Taking responsibility for all the Catholics of Moldavia, the radicalists support the idea that the term “Csango” is rejected by the Catholics themselves, who would consider it an insult. In reality, the truth is somewhere in between. The transformations of the word “Csango” are varied and dramatic. Its pejorative nuances – supported by the phonetic construction, the refusal to be used by the people named this way, hence its transitory fate, but mostly, the inconsistency of the interest shown by national and international organizations in the status of the Catholics of Moldavia have led to a constant confusion about the term.

Strictly speaking from a linguistic point of view, the situation is identical to that of the *bufeni* from Banat, which was documented beginning with the 19th century. The need to label an obvious reality, as well as the advantage of more than a century old history, has led to the current use of the term “Csango” in Romanian.

The fundamental characteristics of the Roman-Catholic minority in Moldavia suffered various modifications according to the religious, political and social evolution of humanity.

The main urban settlements of medieval Moldavia (Baia, Siret, Suceava, Târgu Trotuș, Huși, Ciubărciu, Roman, Bacău, Cotnari, Hârlău) had a significant number of colonists, refugees from other regions, hirelings and foreign traders since its very beginning, many of whom were of Roman – Catholic religion and of different origins: Hungarian, Polish, Armenian, Gypsy, Transylvanian Saxon. In time, they forgot their mother tongues due to the lack of churches or priests and were assimilated by the majority Orthodox population. The urban inhabitants had varied occupations and contributed to the welfare of the state. Many of them occupied administrative positions such as *pârgari* (council members), *șoltuzi* (mayors) or *hatmani* (police inspectors).

The oldest rural settlements populated by Catholics, some of which apparently preceding the birth of medieval Moldavia, are situated around Roman (Săbăoani/Szabófalva, Berindești, Gherăești, Iugani/Jugán, Adjudeni, Tămășeni, Răchiteni, Bârgăoani/Bargován), thus, forming the Northern group, with the largest number of inhabitants called Csangos – a bilingual population, Romanian and Hungarian who, in time, emigrated from the South-East of Transylvania and was united by the Catholic religion. The Southern group is situated around Bacău (Valea Seacă/Bogdánfalva, Valea Mare/Nagypatak, Nicolae Bălcescu/Újfalu). Farther south, in the valleys of the Trotuș and the Tazlău (Pustiana/Pusztina, Frumoasa/Frumósza) or along the either side of the river Siret (Ciucani/Csík, Arini/Magyarfalu, Cleja/Klézse, Luizi-Călugăra/Lujzikalagor, Lespezi/Lészped), there are communities where the Secklars are predominant. The farthest places away from Transylvania populated by Catholics were those from Huși and Ciubărciu, the latter being situated in the current Republic of Moldavia.

By the peasants’ leaving their birth places due to overpopulation or by the colonization measures taken by the boyars or the monasteries, new villages were formed or became bi-confessional, with a less numerous population. The villages resisted the passing of time or were transformed into precincts, depending on the political and military conditions of the moment. Some of them became the boyars’ or the monasteries’ properties, as donations from the king.

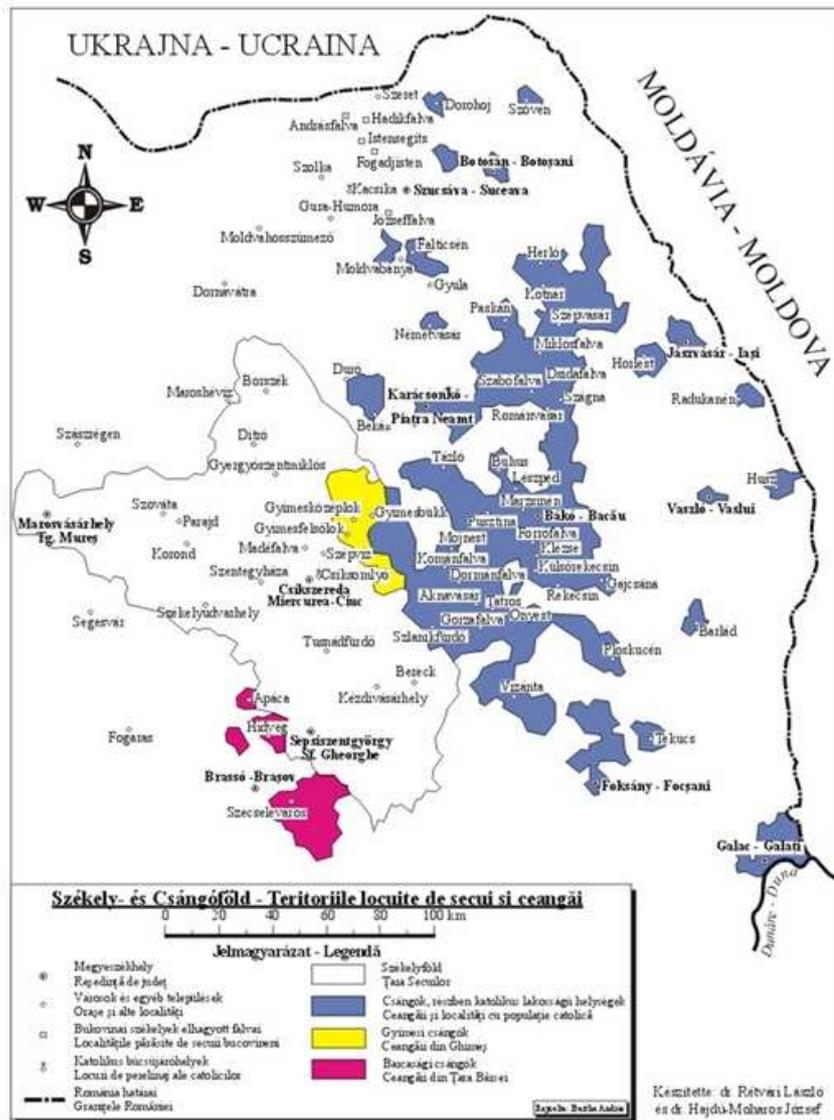


Figure 1. Map of the territories inhabited by the Secklers and the Csangos according to Rétvári László and Hajdú-Moharos József

The consequence of the 1764 massacre in Siculeni (Madefalva) was the migration of the Secklers to Moldavia, where they formed new settlements or they became part of the already existing Catholic communities.

In Bucovina, the Catholic presence is represented by the Polish population who came after 1791 to work in the salt mines or by the workers who came to build the railway lines that connect Roman, Suceava and Cernăuţi (1869). In March 2002, in Suceava, 2,696 people declared themselves Polish, thus forming the main group of this Slav population in the country.

The Germans living in Bucovina represented a population of German origin who lived in Bucovina between 1780 and 1940. The 1,806 Germans remaining in Suceava in 2002, many of whom are not of Catholic origin, are on the verge of extinction, being assimilated by the Romanian population.

Later on, during the 1806-1812 Russian occupation, the Hungarian migration to the Principality was as intense as in the former century, because many of them left their country to flee from the Austrian military service which was long and harsh.

In the 19th century, many French and Italian Catholics migrated to Moldavia in order to make their fortune as teachers, musicians, architects, as well as traders or workers, drawn by the privileges granted to them by the kings or the payments offered by the boyars, some of them being even free of taxes and protected by their consulates.

The Latin communities in Moldavia can be traced a long way back, but the name of “Catholics of Moldavia” refers to different realities along the eight centuries of Catholic presence in Moldavia.

THE PAST AND FUTURE IDENTITY

The term of identity plays an important part in the world culture, being a set of characteristics which ensures one's singularity and which, at the same time, refers to an alterity, thus forming the necessary background to define the singularity.

The first religious acculturation of the community took place after the Council of Trento in 1563 and the coming of the missionaries of De Propaganda Fide congregation to Moldavia, who were highly active in imposing their dogmata and eradicating the heretics and the protesters.

The confrontation of the popular religion and the norms of dogmatic Christianity had no consequences. Traditionally conservative, the rural life did not welcome the missionaries' intensions to indoctrinate. Lacking the protection of the authorities, and mostly money to fulfil their mission, some of the missionaries abandoned their pursuit, going along with the already existing situation. However, most of them fulfilled their mission honourably, despite the hardships.

The results were not similar to those of the western process of acculturation, but they determined important transformations as a result to a slow evolution which made necessary to affect all structures and modify all hierarchies.

The identity of the Catholics of Moldavia should not be an object of historical and political dispute between the Romanians and the Hungarians. The confessional identity is beyond all other forms. *“I am a Christian first, a Burgund second, and only thirdly, French”* is a famous saying that expresses extremely well the priorities and hierarchy of the medieval, as well as modern man. The confessional identity is often stressed by an ethnic term, which can easily mislead us, especially if we do not take into account the famous dictum *“ex fide vivens”* of which psychological implications go beyond the chronological limits of the Middle Ages.

In Moldavia, the Catholics are called “Hungarians” most of the times, the two names becoming thus synonyms. As a result, we will find “Hungarian villages”, “Hungarian churches” or “Hungarian priests”, while the Catholics call the Orthodox “Moldavians” or “Vlachs”. The inhabitants of the Principalities were Christians first, inhabitants of Moldavia, Oltenia, Hațeg, or Făgăraș second, and only thirdly Romanians. Romanians considered themselves to be at home, as well as some Catholics, but this mattered little back then. The distinction between the two religions did not necessarily imply their being rivals, as some people considered.

This duality in terms was also used by the Italian missionaries as a result of a direct contact with the existing reality. That is why they used for some of our villages the term “Hungarian” villages. To prove that, we have the use of the other term: *“I wanted to separate the others as well, but they threatened to turn Orthodox (Vlach)”*, says Bartolomeo Bassetti in 1643, using this term instead of schismatic, favoured by the Church.

As for the term “Hungarians”, used by the Orthodox Moldavians to name the Romanians from Transylvania, this happened, according to the Bishop of Bacău, Stanislau Jezierski, in 1763, because many Catholics came from Transylvania, which they left because they had been deprived of their lands and rights and faced increased obligations, and mostly, because of the lack of national recognition.

The Romanians from Transylvania joined the already existing Catholic communities of the medieval Moldavia (13th century) as a result of Rome's missionary work. In turn, the Catholic missionaries did not make any difference between the Hungarians and the Transylvanians. Most Hungarian researchers have the tendency to consider that Csangos are exclusively Hungarian and those who speak Romanian have been the victims of recent assimilation, brutally and purposely done

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(mainly by the “Janisseries”, taught and manipulated in the Catholic schools founded in the 19th century). At the same time, we must mention that some of the Romanian historians (A.D. Xenopol, N. Iorga, P.P. Panaintescu, Radu Rosetti) accepted the fact that Csangos are of Hungarian origin.

The Hungarian missionaries informed that most Csangos that had come from Transylvania were bilingual or at least could speak little Hungarian. They promised that they would make sure to preserve the use of the Hungarian language and that those Christians were to be preached in Hungarian and only by Hungarian priests. It was an obvious attempt of turning Hungarian the Csango Secklers in Moldavia. But the most important obstacle in turning them Hungarian was not the Italian missionaries. The ecclesiastical Hungarian authorities realized that the difficulties came from the Csangos themselves, who were indifferent towards Hungarian, having abandoned it in favour of Romanian.

The Hungarian missionaries accomplished their mission in some villages from the Southern group, but in most Catholic villages people continued to speak Romanian. Disappointed by the failure, the Hungarian missionaries accused the Italians that instead of dedicating themselves to the religious activities they determined the Csangos to turn Romanian.

Later, Hungarian publicists accused the Moldavian Catholics of having denationalized and assimilated the Csangos. Though untrue, such accusations had such an impact on the Hungarian public that the theory according to which Moldavia is a cemetery for the Hungarians came to be formulated in the middle of the 20th century.

The building of national spirit and of nations themselves, these “imaginary and imagined” communities as Benedict Anderson calls them, was to further complicate this game of identifying identities. In 1781, the Seckler priest Péter Zöld uses for the first time the term “csango magyarok” – “estranged Hungarians”. It was the first time when it was admitted that the Catholic Moldavians did not take part in forming the Hungarian national spirit, as they did not belong to it. This fact was to be further highlighted by some Hungarian researchers who observed that the Moldavian Catholics took part in forming the Romanian national spirit, which made them admit that they could not be considered Hungarians.

As during the formation of the Hungarian state the Csangos lived outside its borders, they did not participate in common events, essential to the formation of the Hungarian civic nation. They also did not take part in the formation of the Romanian nation for a long time. Their rural – agricultural communities were dominated by a medieval ethnic spirit which did not attribute any function or symbolic significance to either their mother tongue or the popular traditions in such language. To them, belonging to a national community did not represent the most important aspect, the dearest to their lives. They also did not even try to identify with the national group to which they belonged. Because of that, their most significant value is not the national identification but health, work ability and skills necessary to survive. The structure of their identity contains, apart from the attachment to the Roman-Catholic religion, a strong awareness of belonging to the native village represented by varied local costume items, decoration of houses, dialect, local customs. This can be explained by the periodical returning of those who had gone to distant cities (which implied significant financial sacrifices) in order to participate in the important events of the family or community. During the national movement actions, the Csangos of Moldavia did not have an elite to represent their interest and participate in the formation of the identity of rural population.

The Orthodox and the Catholic populations have always been on good terms, even if, as an ethnic and religious minority, the Catholics maintained a strong sense of solidarity and internal unity which, from a religious point of view, excluded the Orthodox. People, no matter the religion, shared the same life and the same hardships.

Péter Zöld could not know that, while using this term, he laid the bases for a false ethnic phenomenon, of which substance will be ensured by the way in which the two national spirits evolved.

The Hungarian nationalism will try to assimilate this community, attempt which the Moldavian Catholics oppose, while the Romanian nationalism will continually reject them, despite the Csango efforts to be recognized as members of the nation with full rights.

Until the use of the term “csango” was borrowed from the Hungarian researchers, the Moldavian Catholics were named after their religious identity which acquired even more meaning. As

a cultural nation, the Romanian national spirit is formed of two main elements: language and religion. The first element, the Romanian language, was shared by the Moldavian Catholics as well, but they lacked the other one, the Orthodox religion, which sometimes plays even a more important role as it is a form of solidarity with a foundation far superior to the language.

Taking into account the ancestral and essential character of the agricultural activities, the Romanian terminology referring to them, represents further evidence of the primordially of the Romanian language and implicitly, of its Latin origin.

It was obvious that many understood or spoke Hungarian, but what is sometimes omitted is the fact that, apart from using sibilants, they also used and still use today, a mix of Romanian and Hungarian words. This comes from the poorness of the basic word stock, as well as from the semantic incompatibility of the two languages.

CONCLUSIONS

- The Catholics of Moldavia have a varied ethnic origin, the main elements being Hungarian, Romanian (many turned Seckler or Hungarian), and then, Saxon, Polish, Armenian, Gypsy, Italian, French.
- They are part of the Moldavian population, amounting to almost 5% of the total.
- In time, the Csango communities were assimilated by the Romanians or used as a spoken language only Romanian, due to the influence of school, church, military service, radio, television, everyday life, yet preserving, beyond all doubt, the old Catholic religion.
- The Csangos are a reason for scientific and political dispute between the Hungarians and the Romanians.
- Today, almost all Catholics consider themselves to be Romanian.

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