

Theses of the Ph.D. dissertation

Against the Oblivion

A Comparative Analysis of the Guest Books of
Hungarian Pilgrimages

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1 The topic of the thesis

My thesis is the comparative analysis of the guest books and written prayer strips of five selected pilgrimage sites in Hungary. They are the following: *Máriakálnok* (County Győr-Sopron-Moson), *Egyházásbást-Vecseklő* (Nová Bašta-Vecelkov, Slovakia), *Máriagyűd*, *Mátraverebély-Szentkút* and *Máriapócs*.

At the places mentioned above, the books or written prayer strips started to be in use from the 70s and has been more and more popular ever since. There is one book which dates earlier (*Máriapócs*) but it was in restricted use until 1986 when it became available to the public. The name of these books varies from place to place: *Book of Memories*, *Visitors' Book*, *Guest Book*. Despite how they are called, they serve not only as the documentation of the visits but also give place to addressing Our Lady, Jesus or some saints.

The key role in the existence or attendance of the books is played by the Church and the persons in charge of the site of pilgrimage. It is assumed that the books at *Máriakálnok*, *Máriagyűd* and *Máriapócs* were first introduced and have been looked after by the caretakers of the shrines. Their attitude to this job is very positive. At *Egyházásbást-Vecseklő* (Slovakia) the caretaker of the Statue of the Virgin Mary introduced the book to avoid further graffiti on the wall of the chapel. The caretakers of the books are some locals. The Church ignores both the chapel and the book. At *Mátraverebély-Szentkút* the placement of the prayer strips began spontaneously, the local Franciscans have noticed the practice but do not support or hinder the habit. They consider it as something out of their scope of authority.

The guest books I examined are placed at different points in the sacral place. Only some (*Egyházásbást-Vecseklő*, *Máriagyűd*, *Máriapócs*) are in

the centre.

My thesis is based on more than 10,000 *records* I have collected from the books, 7184 of which were analysed.

2 The frames of interpretation of the topic

I have chosen two basic frames of interpretation to examine the religious practice which is presented in the guest books: the first is pilgrimage with all the traditions, abilities and symbols connected to it. When a believer visits a shrine, his /her primary goal is to experience transcendence. For him /her a shrine is a designated place of the presence of the transcendent and of a dialogue with it.

The oldest and universal form of such a dialogue is prayer. The second main frame of my dissertation is the *communication* which is realised in the prayers. In my thesis, verbal forms of prayer are examined, both codified and spontaneous types. The latter is much less known or studied because it is less public. These prayers are personal, so they get recorded only exceptionally, especially rarely at a public place. So a seldom observed communicative situation becomes available here: written representation of an informal, oral utterance. These texts become non-textual and objective by the act of recording, which transforms an act of prayer into a rite. So the guest books at pilgrimage sites offer an opportunity for a unique practice of religion at a public forum.

The sources I used, according to my observations, are freer in form, wider in content and more varied in expression than traditional written prayers. That can make guest books a forum where sacred and profane meet, form layers upon one another or create areas of transition. Reading the books we can experience the borderline between the two.

The fact that such guest books are placed at shrines shows duality. Vis-

itors' Books can be seen in museums or at exhibitions where their aim is to hold records of visits to the place, reflect on what the visitors have experienced. Reading the records at shrines, however, is like reading letters. Especially where, finding no book, visitors write on strips of paper and place them on the altar. What is more, there are shrines where messages are sent by post, in an envelope, with a stamp, to God or the Virgin Mary.

At some places, these guest books are called Memory Books and in them we can find drawings or poetry, which again is far from sacral.

The books also contain messages of gratitude, like the ones one can read on small marble tablets in shrines, as well as prayers or verses from hymn books at pilgrimage sites, stories of miraculous healing or expressions of gratitude. What they contain reflects the hardships of human life, struggles of everyday people.

In my thesis, a detailed description and comparison of the above mentioned genres, both sacral and profane, can be found. Such a summary does not appear in the bibliography, although, having examined these sources, it became obvious that the guest books and the records they contain represent a discrete phenomenon which takes its origin in a rich tradition.

3 The Aim and Methods of Research

First of all, I want to present the phenomenon of guest books and the religious practice attached to them. I made careful comparison between similar genres, both sacred and profane, and tried to place the genre of guest book records within the realm of sacred communication. Previous studies do not agree on how the new practice appeared, which urged me to study its origins thoroughly. Can we see a continuation of an old tradition or is it some new phenomenon?

Secondly, I wanted to present Hungarian variations of this special devotional practice. When analysing the records in the guest books, I used the methods of both quantitative and content analysis. I examined how the guest books reveal different aspects of pilgrimage (the intensity of visits to the shrine, the range of attraction) and I tried to define the authors of the records (age, sex, social stand, nationality, anonymity etc.) I tried to uncover hidden information by analysing the texts: the relationship between the believer and the Transcendent, the reflection on hardships or critical situations in the believer's life and how much the believer gets in the centre of prayer.

In the third part of my thesis, I am trying to find the reason what makes people write down their personal message to the Virgin or the Almighty into a publicly accessible book; what the aim of these guest books is; what the opinion of the believers and of the Church itself is. Those who write in the books: do they pray or record? Can a forum like that fulfil, as some claim, therapeutic or communal roles? Finally, can we regard these books as a sign of the loss of religion as viewed by theories of secularization? I was trying to find answers with the help of personal interviews, analysis of the records in the books and reading international bibliography.

4 Summary of the Research, Results

Analysis of guest books placed in sacral space have appeared in the international bibliography only recently and mainly in German speaking regions. They are quantitative reports, the interpretation they offer is based exclusively on the texts. Religious ethnography, sociology of religion, theology and theory of communication are applied in these studies. So the interdisciplinary nature of research becomes evident.

I find it remarkable that ,except mentioning content, none of the previous studies reflect on the significance of how sacral and profane written traditions and patterns of behaviour intermingle here. I suppose that is one of the most characteristic features of guest books, which I find supported by observations in my thesis, especially by ones concerning practices preceding the appearance of guest books and the study of similar genres.

Records in guest books at sites of pilgrimage show remarkable similarity to a number of religious genres: marble tablets of gratitude, graffiti in sacral space, letters to saints, hand written or printed records of miracles or statements of gratitude. At the same time, there are similar traits with secular guest books like ones at museums, hotels or restaurants. At the same time, parallel with written occurrences, similar records have started to appear in a digital form in the cyberspace. Both tradition and innovation can be observed. The third factor in the initiation and formation of such books is the role of the Church. The three factors: (tradition, innovative elements and the Church as institution) do not have the same importance at all places. As the custom gets further from the tradition of pilgrimage, so traditional elements fade. This is what books and virtual books in Germany tell us.

The next step in research was analysis of the texts themselves.

In the study of present day pilgrimage, even data appearing in the records of the books, which fill up quickly, can tell a lot. They clearly show that not only the holy day of the shrine attracts visitors: they tend to come around the year, often as tourists. They show how greater pilgrimage sites attract people from further and further and small ones from a smaller range. They show the leading role of women in pilgrimage. Despite all these deductions, however, I have concluded that the sources are more important to learn about this popular religious practice. Pilgrimage, thus,

appears not as an aim but as an instrument, a context of this form of religious practice.

What conclusions could be drawn about the examined religious practice from analysing these data?

Typically, it is women and very often children who use this channel of communication. Social status of the authors cannot be determined. More decisive is the character of religiousness of the author.

Anonymity is not typical – which is contrary to experiences abroad. Authors do not claim privacy. Signing one's name leaves trace about the record maker and it can also indicate a confession of faith.

After a quantitative process of the records, I have observed their content and structure. The underlying scheme reveals four parts: salutation, text, farewell and authentication.

Content elements also indicate a number of conclusions: salutations show that the cult of the Virgin Mary is becoming stronger while that of other saints are under-represented. Mary appears as a Mother, a Mediator, she offers help, consolation, protection and sympathy. Believers have informal relations to her.

Analysis of content also shows that this special form of prayer is mostly used to put forward requests. For expressing gratitude other forms are used, such as marble tablets, candles, flowers, jewellery or money. Often we can find very simple records like documentation of name and date only, which reveals a use of the book as a classical guest book.

Thematic grouping of texts shows that everyday problems of visitors are most often mentioned. The way the gravity of the problems is described depends on the age of the record maker and the prevailing social, economic, cultural and historic situation. This can be the reason why traditional intentions occur more and more rarely.

Diversity of topics also appears in formal marks of the texts. Besides friendly, informal words, we can read literary quotations, quotes from popular fiction and short formulas.

Diversity in style can also be observed. Both lofty and everyday phrases appear.

The interpretation of sources also lead to this result. I have introduced an additional element: some of the comment makers were interviewed. None of the great studies before have conducted such an experiment: they only used the written text as a source.

It became clear, after the interpretation of the comments and the interviews taken, that the guest books created with a sacral intention are, in fact, very heterogeneous.

1. They serve as documentation about the pilgrimage and so make the act and the name of the pilgrim immortal. To use the books for such purposes is especially typical of tourists visiting a site of pilgrimage. It is usually them who are not prepared to take part in cult practices, so use the guest book as expected at profane sites. It is also notable that this function of the books is kept to be primary by caretakers of shrines.
2. They serve as a forum for *personal, spontaneous prayer*. The fact that written records are made, strengthens the prayer's performative value. As these text are used as non-texts, the act can be viewed as a rite giving significance to the fact of recording. It is, in fact, communication with the transcendent. This is a way of communication where, instead of exchange of information, an act of invocation, salutation happens. The initiator of the contact goes through a fundamental change and the aim of the act is reached (*auto-communication*).

3. The mentioned auto-communicative role of the books reveal their *therapeutic function*. The books and the creation of records in them bring relief, give consolation and strengthen the believer.
4. The books give space for a forum to be created, *participants become part of a discourse*, where they reassure each other. This also gives legitimation to the shrine and proves the presence of the Transcendent.
5. From the list of possible interpretations *I have dropped the idea that the process of secularization made the practice of written devotion void of religious content*. It is without doubt that there is a change in the forms and practices of traditional devotion, but this can be viewed as a natural answer given to constant alteration of challenges in people's lives. One of the most important answers for challenges is religion itself. People today desire miracles, hope to find explanation to mysteries just as much as our ancestors did. They create new rites which are partially based on tradition but also they use modern techniques.

It is noticeable that the functions listed above correlate with the three basic functions of pilgrimage:

- *practical reason*: health of the mind and body – the communication of a wish for healing,
- *spiritual-ascetic reason*: to encounter the divine sphere, become a better person, to venerate the Virgin Mary – auto-communication, therapeutic reasons, the dimensions of forming a community,
- *secular or non-religious reason*: tourism, visit to a famous place – profane use of guest books.

Having drawn the consequences of my observations, I have arrived to the conclusion that there is a necessity to redefine what the written form of devotion appearing in guest books at pilgrimage sites is. These books can be considered to be a forum which realises a means of communication with the sacred. There are no normative rules to this communication neither for content, for style or for form, so a special mixture of the profane and sacral is created. This informality, at the same time, gives space to a much wider use (documentation of the pilgrim or pilgrimage, record of a prayer, rite, auto-communication, gain of spiritual support, arousal of a feeling of community). As the use of the books is so wide, the group of people using them is also broad. This can also be the explanation of their growing popularity.

While the aim of my thesis was to examine what characteristics personal prayer has and how it is changed when it gets recorded, new phenomena are emerging. Written spontaneous prayers can be met in a digital form, on electronic carriers, real sacral space is exchanged for a virtual one. All that will show a new direction to research the topic.

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