

**Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

The Life and Work  
of the Liberal Theologian and Politician Albert Kovács

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## **1. The aim of the dissertation, the delimitation of the topic**

We are confronted with a relatively large number of unresolved issues concerning the life of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the nineteenth century. These gaps can to some extent be explained by the historical process. In the times before the Great War, events were too close to be objectively researched, and the mournful events after the war tended to turn the interest of researchers in a different direction. In addition to the consequences of the peace treaty, another factor was the loss of liberalism as an ideology. After the Second World War, the violent spread of socialist-communist ideology led to a decline in research and publications on church history (Mihály Bucsay's book with the title *Geschichte des Protestantismus in Ungarn* was published in Stuttgart in 1959, but in Hungarian only in 1985). In view of all this, it is not surprising that the gaps in nineteenth century church historiography have still not been filled.

As a result, in recent years, various studies on the history of science have increasingly focused on this area. However, the lives of Hungarian Protestant theologians working in the second half of the century are still not among the most researched topics. Among the liberal theologians, research on the life and work of Mór Ballagi – who was considered the grand old man of Hungarian liberal theology – has been carried out by Farkas Szóts, Sándor Csekey and Ábrahám Kovács, while József Antal wrote a biography of the theology professor Ödön Kovács from Nagyenyed (Aiud), two works on the pastor Sámuel Szeremlei from Diószeg (Diosig) and Hódmezővásárhely were written by Ede Böszörményi, and several works on the life of the Evangelic-lutheran bishop József Székács have been published. László Ötvös wrote about the life story of Ferenc Balogh, the leading figure of the New Orthodoxy in Debrecen, while the biography of Imre Révész Sr. – who started as a mediator and later joined the New Orthodoxy – was written by his grandson, Imre Révész Jr. Other prominent theological figures of the time were little or not at all discussed in the academic world. That is why I chose as my doctoral research topic the life and work of Albert Kovács, a Reformed theological teacher and member of the Parliament, who was almost forgotten a few years after his death.

Very little research has been done on the life and work of Albert Kovács. The most extensive is the monograph written by Péter Szente, who in 1950 attempted to preserve the

memory of Kovács and to reassess his work, when he tried to summarize and present his life and work in his second pastoral examination on church history. However, despite its undoubted merits, this work reveals major shortcomings in the biography and political career of Kovács. The study volumes produced in 1955 for the centenary of the Theological Academy and in 2005 for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institute's foundation mention Kovács in connection with the Protestant Society and the practical theology department, and also devote a few pages to him in the presentation of the teaching staff. However, the studies carried out by Mihály Bucsay and József Bodonhelyi, due to thematic and volume limitations, only shed light on a short period of Kovács' life and work (mainly in connection with his activities in the Protestant Society). His name appears even less frequently in political history literature; Gusztáv Gratz, for example, mentions him only twice, and that in connection with Albert Apponyi. The recent monumental work on the history of ideas by István Schlett also focuses on Apponyi. Besides all this, his name appears in a few encyclopedias. In my dissertation, therefore, I attempt to carry forward the scant research that has been done so far, to fill in the gaps in the history of church and theology of the nineteenth century.

My choice of topic was partly motivated by the richness of the research field, but also by the fact that Albert Kovács' life and work have both ecclesiastical and political aspects. My pastoral background and my interest in historical sciences made it obvious that I should choose as the subject of my doctoral dissertation a research topic related to both ecclesiastical and political life.

One of the main objectives of my dissertation is to discover new data on the research topic, and another is to analyze these data. In doing so, I ultimately wish to promote and further research into the history of Reformed theology and the history of politics in the dualist era. The basic objectives can be concretized in the individual chapters of the dissertation, in accordance with their thematic focus. My thesis is structured in four chapters: in the first, I present the biography of Albert Kovács, in the second I attempt to explore his theological thinking, the third deals with his work in the Protestant Society, while the fourth deals with a slice of his political career, his main contributions to parliament.

In the biographical chapter, new information is sought and presented, particularly in relation to Kovács' family life. Contemporary evaluations and biographical writings leave Kovács' private life almost completely in the dark, so I consider it extremely important to shed some light on the details that remain obscure in this area as well.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research on the ideology of liberal theology and its struggle with neo-orthodoxy was mainly carried out by Ábrahám Kovács, but several books by Olga Lukács also touch on similar themes. However, fewer works have been written on the individual ideology of liberal theologians: Ábrahám Kovács also deals with the world and church views of Mór Ballagi and Ödön Kovács. In the theological chapter, therefore, my basic objective is to try to explore the individual theological approach of Albert Kovács, looking for similarities and, as the case may be, differences with the thinking of other liberal theologians. At the same time, my aim is to place Kovács' thought on the very broad palette of liberal theology, and within it, of the Hungarian representatives of this movement, and to define its nuances on the color scale of theological liberalism. However, the research of Albert Kovács' liberal theological thought can only move within certain limits. Since he was not a systematic theologian, he did not create a well-defined theological system and, unlike his brother, he did not write dogmatics. Instead, in his articles and studies, he discussed certain issues, often with a polemical edge, but he did not do so systematically, but rather in a piecemeal way, on issues that were important to liberal theology. Prominent among these were the definition of man as a religious being, the denial of man's sinfulness (meliorism), the question of the inspiration of Scripture (inspiration), the denial of miracles, and the need to develop theology on the basis of the natural sciences. He places somewhat less emphasis on the question of the redemptive nature of Jesus Christ (Christology), but he repeatedly states and describes the need to look to Jesus for the human hope to be followed, since in the absence of original sin, man does not need the form of redemption that traditional theology of faith claims. In view of the thematic limitations of Kovács' theological system, I can mention as a further aim, in addition to the objectives outlined so far, the analysis of the dogmatic propositions outlined above, both in the context of liberal theological ideas and through the lens of contemporary confessional theologians – the so-called New Orthodox – and in comparison with what they professed. Last but not least, my aim is also to explore the reception of Albert Kovács' theological thought. I intend to achieve this goal by means of a reception-historical analysis of the posthumously published *Homiletika*.

In the chapter on the role of Albert Kovács in the Protestant Society, the objective of collecting new data on the work he carried out in the Society. Beyond this, however, my basic aim is to use a variety of analyses to delimit the activities of the association and to show the results of its work (see below for details of the methods used). To this end, I will examine firstly the ideological background that gave rise to the Society and secondly the impact of the Society on contemporary Protestant church society.

As within the previous chapters, the political chapter has several objectives within the framework of the dissertation, which complement each other, providing a comprehensive picture of Albert Kovács' political career. In order to make Kovács' work as a member of parliament understandable and placeable in the political life of the country, my aim is to present the social, political and ecclesiastical context of the period, taking into account the main focus of the research topic, based on the literature, i.e. to define the social, public and religious environment that provided the basis and framework for both the elections of the period and the debates in the Parliament and the laws that were passed. In the context of the elections, given that no research has been done in this direction, I will again focus on uncovering new information on the elections in the constituencies associated with Kovács in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century. Although Albert Kovács spoke and commented on many bills during his parliamentary career, it is not possible to examine all of his contributions in the context of this research. Since the main focus of his work is on education-related laws, I will focus on his comments of this kind, complemented by his comments on church policy laws. In order to do this, I will first analyze his general comments on public education system, and then turn to his role in the creation of the 1883 Secondary Education Act. Although the literature does not deal with the issue, the importance of the topic made it impossible to leave out of the research Kovács' speech on the revision of the law on public education and the nationalization of schools in the context of Gyula Wlassics' ministerial program speech (1895). Of particular importance, and therefore indispensable to the research, are his proposals (1884-1895) for the drafting of laws to improve the financial situation of teachers, which are characterized by a desire for a fair and equitable distribution of burdens and benefits, and thus for balance. Also significant are his contributions during the debate on the Early Childhood Care Bill (1891), in which he takes a different approach and defends the interests of young children, in accordance with the changing context of the law. The last of the public education topics to be discussed is the debate on the teaching of Greek language (1887-1890), which is interesting in that Kovács, although had a pedagogical approach to the subject, took an almost unique view in keeping Greek language on the curriculum. Among the laws of ecclesiastical policy, his most influential contributions were on the bills concerning civil marriage and religious freedom (on marriage law, 1894; on the Israelite religion, 1895; on the free exercise of religion, 1895), and these are analyzed in the dissertation.

## 2. Outline of the methods used

The structural division of the dissertation is also visible in the methods used. I have used different methods to research the themes of each chapter. In the biographical chapter, I use a positivist narrative to discuss separately the ancestry of the paternal branch (we have no data on the maternal branch at this stage of the research) and his childhood (again, very little is known about this). After his native village, he continued his studies at the Reformed College in Târgu Mures, and then became a student at the Bethlen College in Enyed (Aiud), which at the time was located in Cluj-Napoca because of the damage suffered in the Independence War of 1848-1849. In the period of 1863-1865, he studied abroad for two years, mostly in Utrecht and for one semester in Göttingen, thanks to the Stipendium Bernardinum. At the end of his scholarship, he was invited to the Theological Academy in Pest, which he accepted, and worked as a teacher of canon law and practical theology for the rest of his life. In the first decade of his teaching career, he published numerous articles and studies on what he considered to be the correct liberal theological thought, but he withdrew from public debate because of attacks on his ideology and his person. The Protestant Society was founded in the same period, and he played a major part in its creation and work. However, as interest in the work of the Society waned after a few years, he turned to politics. Between 1881 and 1892 he represented his native land in the Hungarian parliament, and between 1892 and 1896 he represented the district of Covasna in the Hungarian parliament. His private life brought him as little pleasure as his academic work. His first wife and their young child died prematurely, followed by an extramarital affair that produced two children (one of whom died during his university years), and then a second marriage comes, which was soon dissolved due to mutual hatred. From this marriage a child also resulted, who also died prematurely. Finally, beyond the golden ages of his life, he found the happiness he had longed for in his third marriage, but he was not to enjoy it for long: his illness soon put an end to his life.

In the chapter on his scientific theological thought, I will first attempt to gather the sources from which his liberal theological ideas may have drawn. I seek to answer only the question 'from where' and not 'what'. I will then try to sketch the main lines of Albert Kovács' theological thought on the basis of his articles, analyzing their content from a dogmatic point of view. First among these is the image of man (anthropology), followed by a discussion of his view of the inspiration of Scripture (the doctrine of inspiration), then the question of miracles and the relation of religion to the sciences (phenomenology of religion). Finally, I

will deal with his attitude to dogma, followed by his Christology. In the third and final subsection of the chapter, I will examine the reception of Albert Kovács' theological work, focusing on the reception of his posthumously published book *Homiletika*.

In the context of the Protestant Society, I will first elaborate the history of the Society in a positivist narrative, and then, in the course of an ideological-historical analysis, I will try to outline the concepts of "religion" and "Protestantism" in relation to the pamphlet of Albert Kovács calling for the founding of the Society, as they define the ideological system not only of Albert Kovács, but also of other members of the Society. Finally, I will outline the impact of the association on Protestant church society.

The last chapter, in which I deal with Kovács' political career (Albert Kovács was a member of the Moderate Opposition, the later National Party, and was active in the party throughout his career), is divided into three subsections: after presenting the social and political context, I discuss the history of the parliamentary elections, and finally I examine his contributions and comments on various bills, using a textual method to a greater extent and a contextual one to a lesser extent. In view of the richness of the subject, I will not deal with all of Kovács' contributions, but only with a few of the key issues. First among these are his speech acts in various fields of public education. Kovács' broad ideas on public education are followed by the Secondary School Act (1883), the possible revision of the National Education Act (1895), the laws dealing with the financial situation of teachers (1884-1895), kindergartens (1891) and finally the debate on the teaching of Greek language (1887-1890). In addition to issues relating to public education, he was also actively involved in the struggle for ecclesiastical policy, and I would highlight his contributions to the debates on civil marriage and religious freedom.

### **3. List of results in thesis form**

The results of the research can be summarized in the following thesis-like ideas:

1. Albert Kovács' family connections. I will not only describe his ascending line of kinship based on the sources, but also try to trace his family foundations (he married three times and had one extramarital relationship) and the subsequent lives of his descendants using as yet unpublished data.

2. His turn towards liberal theology. The research has shown that the location of his studies from high school onwards, and more specifically the theological orientation of the teachers in those institutions, prepared and determined his turn towards liberal theological thought. This influence of his teachers was greatly complemented by that of his mentor, Mór Ballagi, who tried to push him in an even more radical direction.
3. The starting point of his theological liberalism is his image of man (his theological anthropology). As a main argument against materialism, Kovács states that man is a religious being and expresses his religious ideas according to his spiritual development. The doctrine of liberal meliorism is expressed in the theological denial of original sin. As a result of the Schleiermacher's philosophy of identity, Kovács believes that the eternal truths found in the Bible are essentially derived from the human soul. In parallel, God is reduced to a mere transcendent end, whom is almost 'forbidden' to interfere with the natural laws of the world he has created, and thus there are no miracles. However, knowledge of the laws of the natural world is only possible through the natural sciences, and therefore theology needs to be revised and developed as the sciences develop. And if theological development depends on the natural sciences, then dogmas are only instruments of domination over conscience. In order to avoid this, Albert Kovács wishes to place greater emphasis on practical Christianity. As a consequence, the person of Jesus will not become Christ, the savior, but will remain the exemplar and model of religious-moral life.
4. The Protestant Society found followers in every part of the country. Through the columns of the Protestant Church and School Gazette, the idea of the association, which was associated with the name of Albert Kovács, reached out practically everywhere and gained supporters. Despite the fact that the association was unable to reach the lower, less educated social strata and to interest them to the extent necessary, the books published in the Protestant Theological Library series led to a boom in scientific theological literature.
5. Elections of Albert Kovács as member of the parliament. Kovács was elected for four terms in his home town (1881, 1884, 1887) and in Covasna (1892). In 1896 he failed to win a seat, but his name was mentioned in some districts in subsequent elections.

6. Throughout his career as a member of the parliament, his contributions to Parliament have focused on issues of education and church policy. As a member of the Committee on Public Education, he was primarily concerned with finding solutions to problems in the education sector, and his efforts to improve the financial situation of teachers were also prominent among these. He also played an active role in the drafting of the law on secondary education and the law on early childhood education, and contributed to the debate on the teaching of Greek language. In the field of church policy, he expressed his views on civil marriage, the reception of Judaism and religious freedom.

On the basis of the thesis-like results of this research, I would like to provide a new basis and direction for future research on this topic, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the long nineteenth century in the fields of church history, theological history and political history.



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

1. **Bodnár, L.:** Kovács Albert politikai pályafutása.  
*Egyháztört. Szle.* 22 (1), 91-131, 2021. ISSN: 1585-7476.
2. **Bodnár, L.:** Egy mezőszegi székely, Kovács Albert liberális teológus és politikus életútja.  
*Studia Debreceni Teológiai Tanulmányok.* 12 (1-2), 86-101, 2020. ISSN: 2415-9735.

#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (2)

3. **Bodnár, L.:** Kovács Albert (1838-1904) teológiai szabadelvűségének forrásai.  
*Reform. Szle.* 114 (1), 89-107, 2021. ISSN: 0254-4458.
4. **Bodnár, L.:** Teológiai antropológia a liberális Kovács Albert szemléletében.  
*Teológiai Fórum.* 13 (2), 104-126, 2019. ISSN: 1337-6519.

### List of other publications

#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (1)

5. **Bodnár, L.:** Egy Jókai-regény vallási szövegei: A kőszívű ember fiai szentírási idézeteinek és imádságainak elemzése.  
*Reform. Szle.* 111 (4), 410-435, 2018. ISSN: 0254-4458.



The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.