

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**DIOSIG`S REFORMED CHURCH LIFE AND HABITS FROMTHE
MIDDLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY TO PRESENT DAYS**

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The Objective of the Thesis. Delimitation of the Topic

My interest towards religion began as a university student during the sociology of religion classes. The systematic research closely related to the subject of my dissertation has been started only 5 years ago in the Calvinist (Reformed) village of Diosig, first aiming the religiosity, the analysis of the religious practice, later turning to the religious customs.

The investigated municipality is Diosig, a large village of Bihar county in Romania, in the southern part of the so called „Valea Ierului” (Hungarian: Érmellék), at a distance of 32 km from Oradea to the north. According to the last census in 2011 the village counted 6816 inhabitants (Diosig with 6529 and Ianca, a village that administratively belongs to Diosig, with 287 inhabitants). There are three nationalities in this village showing the following structure: 3338 ethnic Hungarians, 1758 Romanians, 1545 Romani, while about the remaining 175 inhabitants we have no data.¹ At this moment the denominational affiliation shows the following distribution: 3,596 Calvinist, 1,385 Orthodox, 750 Roman Catholic, 341 Pentecostal, 303 Adventist, 62 Greek Catholic and 266 belonging to other denomination. The dissertation presents only the Reformed community, and in the delimitation of the thesis' topic the fact that this is the largest denomination also was taken into consideration. The majority of the Calvinists are ethnic Hungarians and there is also a small number of Romani, but no Romanians.

The aim of the research is the better understanding, describing, interpretation of the religion of local Reformed community, as well as the formation and description of its institutions, as well as the collection of the customs related to the main turning points in the human life. The dissertation depicts the phenomena from the basis of the religion and the religious customs, and on which I had the occasion to gather the most coherent and interconnected material. I tried to make a detailed and interpretative description of the religious customs.

The questions I sought to answer were the religious changes over time in the life of the Diosig Reformed community and the factors/events leading to these changes. I was interested to get a glimpse of how the people in Diosig think about faith, what do they know about faith, religion, the associated customs, not only with today's perspective, but also recalling them from the middle of the last century, collecting and writing down those changes. Despite the fact that I grew up in this village and today I live just 32 km away, the majority of the customs were

¹ The 2011 census data: <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-2/>

unfamiliar to me. First of all I have focused on the faith, the practice of religion and learning about the customs, obtaining a clear picture of the present and the past of the Reformed community in Diosig, as a whole. According to Getz, the connection between the whole and the parts is very important. It is called hermeneutical circle after Dilthey, which refers to the understanding of the whole and the parts separately, namely the whole is established by reference to the individual parts, and on the other hand, the individual parts will be understood with the reference to the whole, and hence it is a circle. These are considered important both in ethnography and other sciences, as well as in everyday life. I myself was brought up in Diosig, and due to my status of “native”, I had the advantage of preliminary knowledge about my data providers, therefore during the conversations I was able to register the background stories in order to picture them as a whole.

My dissertation has the following structure: after the introductory thoughts chapter one presents the concepts used in the research, followed by the description of the methods used and the experiences gained during fieldwork. Also, this chapter makes a historical overview of the research, associated with the main works providing an insight in folk religiosity, reformed ecclesial life and the customs connected to the life turning points. After this the narrative continues by presenting the region with the studied settlement, followed by the demonstration of the researched community from a historic, economic, ethnic and denominational point of view. It is followed by the chapters with the dissertation’s subject. The structure of these chapters is as follows: brief definition of the religious phenomenon from theological and ethnographic, in some places, in religious socialization perspective, the relevant local information and the results of the research are presented. Regarding of the topics, my dissertation can be divided in three major parts. The first part treats the material and spiritual goods closely connected to the Church as an institution, and the organizations within the Reformed Church. I considered essential to write about the history of the local Church and priesthood, since the local religiosity has been largely influenced by these factors. The second part describes the religiosity and its changes over time. In the first place, I present religious socialization as an institution and its forms occurring in the family, followed by the practice of religion and its changes over time, the order of church worships and their attendance. The third part presents moments, traditions connected to religious celebrations, which gather customs in connection with human turning points, i.e. christening,

confirmation, marriage, and funeral. At the end of the dissertation after summarizing the results, I will list the references and the annexes.

The genre of the dissertation can be primarily classified as ethnographic work, more specifically religious ethnological, moreover I have also used the results of the religion sociology.

Throughout my dissertation I gave the definition of the ethnographic, religious socialization and theological concepts.

Overview of Methods used

I grew up in the studied community from Diosig, a real “native” that is, a former member of the target community, with a certain benefit during my research. Considering I spent a significant part of my life in this community, most of the times I was familiar with the discussed topics, their history, the structures that occurred during the interviews, for example relatives, family relationships, events that have taken place within the community and data regarding my interview subjects. I’ve tried to involve my own experiences and memories in the study. Furthermore, knowing the Reformed community made it easier for me to select the appropriate methods and the subjects for my interviews.

Among the data collection techniques such as the participating observation and the interview, in my research I have relied on the supporting documents submitted by the Reformed church (presbytery, church choir, women’s association, christening, confirmation and civil registrations) and articles of the local paper greatly helped my work.

Also, not negligible the methods of data collection with the researcher observing from behind and without any influence on the events (participation on mass, celebration, different events, spontaneous conversation).

Participating observation

I used participating observation, which means a long term participation in the everyday life of the researched community, the researcher herself observes the phenomena, living the experience as her own. The method consist of a process in which the researcher is trying to get in the role of a group member and learning about the relations through the perspective of inner participant, by living among the group and understanding their philosophy, concepts about life.

Borsányi says that during the interview and observation the researcher places the subjects outside their ordinary everyday life, takes them out from their environment, creating an abnormal situation for them, because of which the data collected through indirect observation are indispensable, making the observation of norms possible on the field, in practice.

In my case, the participating observation was supplemented with the personal and long-term participation in the everyday life of the community, observing the religious phenomena.

During the research I wrote down the religious events, phenomena, customs, and tried not only to record one single case, but to provide a whole picture of events.

The Interview

During the research, I wanted to discover not only the events of present, but also the past, most of all, because it became clear to me that this way I can understand today's religiosity better. Therefore I considered important to make the interviews. I used the participating observation in order to understand the system as a whole, until my observations were confirmed or infirmed by the information provided by the interviews ("the parts"). Thus my references are based on the conversations held with my data providers.

In the course of the interviews, the interviewed persons were selected using probabilistic sampling, normally used in quality research. Firstly, I've applied the expert sampling² and the snowball method³ as my research was best supported by these sampling procedures. At the selection process I've used the principle of saturation, and chose the cases until redundancy occurred in the research, so I did not get any more information during the interviews.

The data gave an insight into the knowledge of a broad spectrum of the Reformed Community, and we could confirm through the selection of my information so that there were represented all social, economic and age groups, so that I could get a holistic insight into the issue of religiosity within this community from the middle of the century up to 2016. The earliest information came from the eldest generation, who has already turned eighty.

The interviews were made mainly with Reformed people from Diosig, also active members of their Church and could provide relevant information about the subject. A few data providers

² Expert Sampling: The researchers select the responders according to their own judgment and the purpose of the examination

³ Snowball sampling is a way to gain an ever-increasing number of observation patterns by asking the interviewees to contact other people who are competent on the subject

weren't active members of the Reformed Church, however their great knowledge about the past customs made them eligible for the interviews. Furthermore, I've visited all of the competent persons in the matter. I've made a total of 44 interviews with actual and retired priests, cantor, religion teacher, actual and former presidents of women's association, former president of Christian Youth Association, the administrator, the actual and former administrators, the head teacher who led the school during the Communist regime, undertaker, bell ringer, presbyters, and parishioners.

I made mainly semi structured in-depth interviews, that for a certain degree were actually guided conversations, but also regarding on the subject I let my data providers to express themselves freely, so I often discovered relevant information for my research.

In almost every case I had previous knowledge regarding my subjects, thus most of the interviews are structured and thematic, focusing on only one topic. This type of interview was applied in cases when the subject was competent in one of the topics presented by me.

Processing the Church archives

I considered that for this research the study of the Church archives was indispensable. First of all I relied on the minutes of the Reformed Church of Diosig's meetings from 1956 to 2016, by the help of which an image of the Diosig presbyteries work can be contoured and indirectly the religious events and Church matters of the neighboring villages can be followed.

The following records and minutes also have been very useful for my study: The Reformed Parish of Diosig - Confirmation Register. (1908-1935, 1936-1972, 1973-2016), Yearbook of the Reformed Parish Choir from Diosig. (1922-1958), as well as the Minutes of the Zsuzsánna Lorántffy Women's Association from Diosig (between 1993-1999). The last two minutes have been kept only between these years, and then the events of these organizations have been included in the minutes of the presbyters', each year noting a summary of last year's events. Beside these documents I used the parochial records made in the last ten years.

All these documents can be found at the Reformed parish's building. Quotes from these documents can be found in the dissertation, marked uniformly with year, month and day, as most of them are without pagination or incorrectly numbered.

I have also used the current Protestant canon which includes the laws, rights and obligations about “The organization and administration of the Romanian Reformed Church”, rules that are valid both for religious personnel and members of the church.

Other resources

In addition to the Church documents listed above I’ve used works written about the everyday life (mostly ecclesial) in Diosig. Such a work is the monography written by János Molnár, a priest in Diosig who served between 1877-1893, entitled “A Bihar Diószegi Ev. Ref. Egyház múltja és jelene. Egyháztörténeti monográfia” (The Past and Future of the Calvinist Church of Diosig. Church History Monograph), summarizing the historical states of the Church from the beginning to the year 1885, such as the church life, the officials and officers, organizations, movable and immovable properties, issues of education and learning. I have also used the monography written by Dr. József Szabó entitled „Bihardiószeg fejlődéstörténete” “History of Diosig’s Development” together with the single published chapter of a 1972 study conducted by the Miron Pompiliu Association of the ethnographers from Oradea, chapter written by Endre Dánielisz under the title „Bihardiószegi táncalkalmak” (Dance Celebrations of Diosig). The latter could be used in the chapter describing the marriage rituals.

Besides, during my research I’ve also used the local press articles.

A part of the photos used in my paper belong to my own family album or have been provided by the data providers, as well as the photos from the József Szabó’s digital archives.

Summary of the Results

The Reformed community of Diosig has been presented through three major topics.

In the first part I present the Diosig’s Church history, in which I included the material manifestation of the religious environment, the history and functioning of the Church’s movables and immovable goods. The most important among these is the temple built more than 400 years ago, where the official masses were held, but also a place for other religious events, such as the customs connected to the turning points of human life.

I present the most important “accessories” of the church, such as the organ – which in spite of the fact that it was repeatedly repaired, it kept its original condition –, bells, monuments, plaques. I give a presentation of the Church officials and officers, like priests, cantors, presbyteries,

churchwardens, as well as their work and duties, and changes in position over time. This chapter also includes the religious organizations of Diosig closely related to the church, like the choirs, women's association, Christian Youth Organization, diaconal house, which represent an important part of the religious life, as the local Calvinist religiosity is a Church-centered community, a religiousness that interweaves the whole life of the parishioners

According to the experience of the research, the most determinative role is always played by the current priest, with the most significant influence over the parishioners, and can be called a local religious leader. He is the one who through his personality, actions, and life could/can influence the souls of the believers, creating a truly united community. The village's community looks at priesthood as a "holy" vocation that comes with an exemplary, irreproachable life, and thus the parishioners expect this from a priest and if he cannot comply with these expectations he is criticized, and this remains in the public awareness for a long time.

Altogether it can be said that the local Church, the institutions and priests influence local religiousness in a great deal, thus they have their places in the dissertation.

The next large chapter presents religious life through religious socialization and practice of religion.

First I have described the subject of the **religious socialization**, by which religious knowledge is transmitted through tradition from one generation to another, and for the individual it represents a life-long learning process. For this purpose I have reviewed the primary and secondary religious socialization sphere, like the family, the school and the Church. In this chapter I've discussed the prayers, behaviors that play an important role in learning religious behavior, and which define and lay the foundations the individual's religiousness. I found out that people from Diosig are not regarding the prayers like a religious obligation, but as individual needs. The family is the socialization medium in which the most important norms, values and attitudes are transmitted, thus determining whether the child is religious or not as future adult. All in all, it can be said that religious socialization has slowly disappeared from the family, and its role has been increasingly taken over by the school and the church. Even among the families who consider themselves religious, it is still natural to transmit the religious knowledge to their children, especially prayers, but there are fewer grandparents or parents to do so. Religious knowledge and prayers are taught for the majority of children in kindergarten or in religious classes. However,

the religious education itself provided by the school and the church alone is not enough for the individual to have a future religious life, unless it is associated with the value and norm carried with from home.

The church service can be viewed as the central cult of the local religion, with both strong religious and community roles, thus **religious practice** is discussed in the light of church service attendance. I've reviewed the order of the church services, its changes as well as church attending traditions from 1800 to our days. In regard of religious practice, as a conclusion we can say that during the last one and the half century, beginning with the 19th century the number of church-going people gradually decreased, and in comparison with earlier times fewer people attended church services. A real regression in church-going habits could be observed during the atheist policies of the Communist regime, when attendance of church services by intellectuals and party members was sanctioned. After the change of regime religious life flourished again, the number of church-going parishioners grew dramatically, although this increase did not prove to be long-lasting, as in a short period of time it began to decrease again.

The third chapter discusses in detail religious traditions connected to life events, **turning points** such as christening, confirmation, marriage and funeral. I present and provide background for these life turning events applying on Arnold van Gennep's rite theory and using Lajos Balázs and László Kósa's liminality. Not all elements of rite are discussed, just the ones that are needed to introduce religious rites. Thus in connection with several customs the rite of separation is not discussed.

Besides the description of these customs I considered important to present the changes they suffered in the 20th century, thus I did not only write about the present conditions but also weaved in the elements of past traditions that are still known today, thus trying to present a complete image about the past and present of the Reformed community of Diosig. Life turning point customs have gone through significant changes, with different scales. Some elements have completely disappeared (such as in case of marriage the pasta making board "csigacsínáló", in case of the funeral the services in the church etc.), some have gone through change of form (e.g. funeral reception) and others have suffered changes of content (e.g. gifting at weddings). Through times the locations of these customs have also changed, while just a few decades ago these celebrations have been kept at home, within the family, today there are few examples for this.

Within the topic of traditions connected to **birth** I give a detailed presentation for christening and dedication, due to their religious references. During the last few decades the strict rules and traditions connected to birth have become more relaxed, and it seems that superstitions are also discontinued. The tradition of baby dedication is still alive, but it has changed into a new form, now after the post-natal period the new mother goes to church and attends the service, but in most cases her first visit is not the church. The customs around christening have been kept until today, it is considered an important rite even by those Reformed families which are not active members of the Church.

Confirmation is another important rite in the community of Diosig, and as in the case of christening it is considered an obligation even by people who usually do not attend church services.

Today the **customs around marriage** have few religious references left. While today only the wedding itself can be linked to religion, during the '70s and the beginning of the '80s the young couple or the newly-weds attended church service before and after the marriage, at first the marriage was announced and after the bride was introduced as young married woman. The wedding is a larger communal ceremony where the extended community participated as well, as a consequence a greater emphasis is put on the keeping the traditions. I also present the changes that occurred within the traditions around weddings during the 20th century, starting with engagement and to the day of the wedding. The research is extended to traditions that since then have faded out, such as pasta board (csigacsináló), wearing a black dress, or playful event that involved some of the guests on the second or third day of the wedding (hérisz). This chapter is made colorful by presenting poems of the Master of ceremony (vőfély), that I've collected from one of the interviewees that for decades has played the role of official Master of ceremonies in Diosig.

The funeral is the symbolic leading out of the deceased from the world of the living. This chapter presents the Calvinist cemeteries of Diosig – Hegyaljai (Under-hill) cemetery, Ócska (Old) cemetery and Új (New) cemetery – their characteristics and burial traditions, starting with the moment of death and up to the mourning period after the burial. The **traditions around funerals** have suffered significant changes starting with the 70s-80s, during which the tradition of keeping the services connected to funeral in the church has died out. Most of the changes were brought by the fact that today funeral homes are used. This new element of the funeral has been accepted

very slowly into the traditions, many have objected to this new obligation. The community of Diosig had a hard time in accepting the fact that the form of funeral has changed significantly, even if this new system hasn't implied such a burden on the family compared to earlier funeral obligations. As a consequence, the period following the moment of death has also changed, because the deceased's body wasn't kept at home but at the funeral home. Even after funeral homes were introduced the community was resisting against having funerals that were not officiated at the house of the deceased. A decisive moment in letting this tradition go was the moment when funeral services officiated at the house became more expensive than those kept at the funeral homes.

The attitude towards the deceased has also changed. A few decades ago the family participated in a significant manner in preparing the deceased for the funeral. Today the funeral services are provided mostly by the undertakers, from the moment of death to the day of the burial.

The funeral takes on an institutionalized form as well, while decades ago all the preparations were made by the family, today almost everything is taken out of the family's hands, e.g. the period after the death, the preparation of the deceased, digging the grave, organizing the reception. The reception after the burial has taken much simpler forms and a custom that was taken over from cities has become prominent, i.e. most of the families do not organize a reception, they only provide milk-loaf and drinks to those leaving the cemetery.

A death still activates the community, proving that in case of need the community sticks together like a family, this attitude is somewhat an obligation towards the mourning family, thus the family can also pay its respects to the deceased. As Durkheim has said the traditions around the funeral turn death into a social fact. The passed away become members of a community of deceased and this passage is made possible with the community of the living. There by they still remain members of the living community through the memories cherished by the living.

In every case I tried to present the conflicts and issues that occurred in the last decades between the community members bearing the public dues and those who are not. In this community this is mainly an ethnic issue, especially between ethnic Hungarians and Romani. The problems are most prominent in connection with christening and burials, because in these cases the Calvinist community feels that the requests of the Romani for christening and for a place of burial is a burden, because the latter do not fulfill their obligations towards the Church, i.e. they do not pay taxes, they are not confirmed and are not church-going people.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (1)

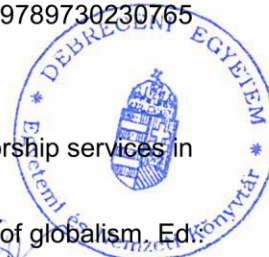
1. Szilágyi, G., **Tolnai, T. K.**: Vallásszociológia. Partium Christian University, Oradea, 132 p., 2009.
ISBN: 9786069218686

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2. **Tolnai, T. K.**, Szűcs, E.: A református vallásoktatás szerepe a vallásos nevelésben
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In: Kutatás és innováció a Kárpát-medencei oktatási térben : III. Kárpát-medencei Oktatási
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5. **Tolnai, T. K.**, Györbíró, A.: Change of Religiosity in the light of attendance of worship services in
Diosig, Bihar.
In: The challenges of communication. Contexts and strategies in the world of globalism. Ed.
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J. Rom. Lit. Stud. 16, 1522-1525, 2019. EISSN: 2248-3004.

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9. Szűcs, E., **Tolnai, T. K.**: Helyzetkép a Partiumi Keresztény Egyetem szociológiát és szociális munkát végzett hallgatóinak munkaerő-piaci elhelyezkedéséről.
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