

LAJOS KOSSUTH AND THE AUTONOMY DEMAND OF THE CATHOLIC HIGHER CLERGY IN 1848*

CSABA MÁTÉ SARNYAI

Szeged University, Szeged
Hungary

The higher clergy interpreted autonomy as the independence of the church from the state, while for the lower clergy autonomy meant primarily autonomy from its ecclesiastic superiors. The autonomy movement embraced about seventy years and emerged in several waves. The concept according to which the Catholic Church – if it wanted absolute independence – should expect no financial support from the state meant secularization to the liberal reformists.

Keywords: Catholic Church, separation of church and state, autonomy of church, civil society, education

1. The possible interpretations of the concept of Catholic autonomy and its emergence

The concept of Catholic autonomy might seem a paradox at the first sight. It raises the question of how autonomy can be related to the Catholic Church. First, it can relate to an external autonomy, which refers to the autonomy of the Catholic Church against the state and other establishments that have similar functions. Second, this autonomy can be internal, that is an autonomy within the Church, which can relate to the different levels of independence between the hierarchical levels of the clergy, e.g., the relation between rectors and bishops, or the relation between rectors and chaplains. During the period under discussion the higher clergy interpreted autonomy as the independence of the Church from the state, while for the lower clergy autonomy meant primarily autonomy from its ecclesiastic superiors. The reformist elite saw in the idea of autonomy a greater possibility for the laity to participate in the affairs of the Catholic Church.

* The researches were supported by the National Scientific and Investigational Fund (Országos Tudományos és Kutatási Alap) (application number: F 030232), the MTA-Sasakawa Foundation (az MTA-Sasakawa alapítvány) and the Faludi Ferenc Academy (Faludi Ferenc Akadémia).

Nevertheless, if we are to remain sensitive to the dogmatic constitution of the Roman Catholic Church, autonomy cannot be so easily interpreted within the Church by using the above-mentioned method. This refers mainly to the connection between the different levels of the clerical hierarchy, the crucial influence of the secular people and to the efforts of nationality. From a historical point of view, this makes the next analysed approaches more notable.

In Hungary an important element of the liberal and civil transformation was the process of separating Church and state, whereby several legal and political problems arose.¹ (László Péter has made a survey of the one hundred and fifty years of this process in a study recently published in Hungarian.) Owing to the birth of modern Hungarian civil society, the relation of the Catholic Church to the state changed in its foundations. At the same time, the Church had to face new challenges in connection with its internal relations.

Analysing the particular historic situation we can observe an autonomy movement that embraced roughly seventy years and emerged in several waves.

The demand for autonomy strengthened particularly when basic changes respecting the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state arose. This was the situation in 1848–1849, at the time of the Compromise in 1867, and at the time of the Church–government battles of the 1890s.² Here I am going to touch upon only the first element of this process, which occurred in the spring of 1848.

2. The emergence³ of the Catholic bishops' conception of autonomy during the closing period of the last parliament based on orders

In short, we can say that by raising the autonomy concept most of the higher clergy wanted to strengthen their own weakened position in perpetuating their interests.

The prelates presented a petition to King Ferdinand V on 20 March 1848.⁴ In this document they asked him – in view of the bill on the establishment of a Ministry of Religion and Education – to prevent the expectable influence of this newly established ministry on the exercise of the right of patronage and the administration of the ecclesiastic possessions and foundations, which were earlier disposed of by the Ecclesiastical Commission of the Gubernial Council (*Comissio Ecclesiastica*). They wanted him to keep these rights to himself, or if this did not prove possible, to assign them to the Catholic Church. In other words, they wanted the king to make them independent of the civil government. The king's answer contained in the royal rescript of 27 March encouraged the efforts of the clergy but was rejected by the parliament in an uproar. Two days later in a new rescript the ruler agreed that the exercise of the right of patronage should be countersigned

by the ministry. This version was then accepted by the representatives. Later, the appointed Prime Minister Lajos Batthyány was able to carry the proposal for the ministry in its original form. Accordingly, the influence of the ministry could proceed on the appointments through its right of countersignature. Simultaneously, the absolute competence that had formerly been practised by the bureaus [kormányosztályok] of the Viennese court, which included the administration of the Catholic ecclesiastic and educational funds, was passed over to the hands of the Minister of Religion and Education.

To this came to be added another important change in law, the 20th Act of Religion in which clause 2 (the 2.§) declared the absolute equality⁵ of the different denominations and churches. With this regulation the Roman Catholic Church also lost its status as the state religion in Hungary. In the course of the debate the bishops contested only the third clause (3.§) of the act. That article promised that the ecclesiastic and educational expenses of all institutional denominations would be financed by the state.⁶ In this concept the higher clergy saw the danger of further secularization because the prelates thought that it might be financed by using the properties and foundations of the Catholic Church. To prevent this, Mihály Fogarassy, the Bishop of Skodár, made a proposal to insert two additional stipulations into the text:

the ecclesiastic and educational expenses of all denominations, – and here come the stipulations – in case they do not have enough money from their present properties and their foundations, should be financed by the state⁷, but besides practising their own ideas they have to preserve their religious principles.

The inserted paragraph that had been meant to prevent the secularization of the fortunes of the clergy and indirectly to uphold its monopoly of education did not get into the final version of the act. Despite the objections of the bishops, the magnates also agreed to the original version. This turn of the debate on the bill about the ministry and religion was a considerable political failure for the Catholic Church and especially for its bishops in their fight for preserving their rights.

In this situation the ecclesiastic government had to take steps. As a result, immediately after the closure of the debate on the just mentioned bill, on 6 April, the episcopal council that was meeting in Pozsony presented a petition to the parliament.⁸ The aim of this request was to allow the Catholic Church, in view of the Act of Religion, to be able to handle its internal and external affairs independently, that is, without the interference of the state. In the view of the prelates the independence of the ecclesiastic councils and the freedom to establish schools pertained to the external affairs of the church. A separate clause dealt with the right to manage ecclesiastic and educational foundations independently. This pe-

tion was introduced in the Lower House as a bill by János Rónay, a representative of Csanád, on the following day, 7 April. On Ferenc Deák's advice the questions raised by the bill were committed to a conference. However, in the course of the three-hour debate the emergence of intractable conflicts prevented any compromise over the bill. Since there was little time left before the arrival of the king, the further discussion of the proposal was postponed until the next diet. Therefore, the last attempt to achieve Catholic autonomy at the final parliament of orders failed.

To sum up, I think that raising the demand for autonomy during this period and the plans to modernize the institution of the Church, which were linked to it, were not considered to be strategic,⁹ but rather tactical steps in the new political situation by the majority of the higher clergy. The tactical nature of the phenomenon was also demonstrated by the fact that when the new system had to face increasing difficulties – from the autumn of 1848 – the voice demanding autonomy in the circle of the higher clergy faded gradually.

An important motivation for the higher clergy for raising the demand for autonomy was to prevent the secularization of church property.¹⁰ But we cannot disregard the fact that the majority of the higher clergy wanted to conform to the changing social and political system. So, according to their expectations, they could have stabilized their own situation and their power towards the government and the believers under these new bourgeois circumstances; and they could have maintained the preferred image of the Church among the clergy as well. Thereby they wanted to avoid any further loss of power. These aims and plans, including the demands for autonomy, ought not to be considered as vices or virtues of the prelates.¹¹ The actions of the clergy were based simply on their perception of the situation and their interests.

3. Lajos Kossuth's relation to the higher clergy's conception of autonomy

Kossuth's personal relation to the aims of the higher clergy, which strove to maintain its previous position, was well illustrated in the speech that he made in the Lower House on 4 April. His speech was dedicated to Miklós Sárkány, an abbot of Bakonybél, who had enumerated the demands of the Catholics. Kossuth announced with considerable irony that:

Thinking about the proposals that were going to be presented, I haven't found anything else that could be prejudicial to these gentlemen as opposed to people of other religions, save the fact that they are unmarried. Let me note that, just as in other affairs, I am willing to lend a helping hand to abolish celibacy, in as much as I am able.¹²

Kossuth's opinion on the Catholic demand for autonomy was appropriately summarized in the discussion that he held with József Lonovics, Bishop of Csanád, at the time of the last parliament of orders.¹³ According to this Lonovics argued as follows: if the liberal élite wants to abolish Catholicism as an established religion and if it codifies religious equality, from this follows the independence of the Catholic Church from the state to the same extent as the Protestants are independent from the state. The argumentation of Lonovics for the necessity of autonomy was based on the codified liberal ideas. Above all, it was based on the principle of the absolute separation of state and Church, ideologically and especially financially, and on the declaration of religious equality and mutuality. This was the basis of the argumentation, which claimed – referring to the Protestants' right of handling Church property independently from the state, of holding councils and electing bishops – the same rights for the Catholic Church and its leaders.

In theory Kossuth agreed to this argumentation, as the basis of it was an important liberal idea, equal rights on both the individual and the institutional level. But against the practical realisation of it he made several objections. Above all, he referred to the dependence of the Catholic Church on Rome and to the fact that it was not an independent national Church, as those of the Protestants. He wanted to support the local ecclesiastic governments of the Catholics only in the case that their delegates prefer the laws that the Hungarian parliament had made to those of the Holy See. Moreover, he observed that he could only accept the autonomy of a Church in which the Church is identical with the complex of the believers and priests of the same religion and in which the right for action belongs not only to the clergy but also to the community of the believers.

This meant that the laity must have a wide range of influence over all aspects of the institution except the basic doctrinal questions. Finally, independence from the state means that the Church would get neither property nor governmental assistance from the state.

Analysing this chain of ideas, Kossuth's liberal counter arguments connected with the conservative episcopal concepts of Catholic autonomy can be observed. The universal Roman Catholic Church could have only laid claim to independence in the eyes of the liberal élite of the time, if it had tried to become national by getting rid of a foreign influence, which was unfamiliar to the liberals.

When Kossuth considered the possible independence of the Church in connection with greater influence for the laity, he followed the liberal concept of Church, which holds that the Church is a form of cultic community that is independent from the state.

The concept according to which the Catholic Church – if it wanted absolute independence – should expect no financial support from the state meant secularization according to the understanding of the liberal reformists. To understand this, according to László Csorba, we have to examine the liberal idea of

Church property that began to coagulate during the reform era.¹⁴ The clergy – in the period of feudal absolutism – was a part of the feudal governmental system and dealt with cultural and religious tasks. The clerks (here meaning the priests) in the state apparatus got paid for their work by the state. Their payment was not money but donations. The aim of the liberals was the separation of state and Church. Consequently, after the state had taken over their functions the officers of the Churches were not authorized to use the donations they had received as payments. According to Kossuth's argumentation church property had never been a possession of the Church. So the Church had not been its owner, but its holder. The owner was and remained the state. In this interpretation the liberal reformists re-interpreted feudal law according to civil principles of law.

This understanding might be made clearer by reference to an often cited reminiscence of Kossuth from 1871. In this writing in connection with religious equality he brought up the question of support for the Churches by the state. For the establishment of absolute religious equality there were two possibilities at the last parliament of orders. The state should either give nothing to each Church, or it could ensure the religious and educational needs of each denomination. Following the liberal principle, Kossuth wrote, "The first part of the alternative is right, but not the second."¹⁵ However, he added immediately:

We were convinced that if we had proposed this way of equality among the denominations, we would have brought forth such a rigorous fight and hostilities, and we would have sent such great aid into the arms of our Viennese enemies, who were against our freedom, that the whole work of transformation would have been endangered. We did not dare to do it.¹⁶

This meant that the leader of the liberal reformists interpreted every kind of financial support to the Church by the state as a compromise of principle.

Let us return to the conversation between Kossuth and Lonovics. Examining the argumentation of the two sides we can notice an interesting situation. The Bishop of Csanád, who was stressing the arguments of the higher clergy, was using a liberal-based argumentation to back up the conservative concept of the law protecting ecclesiastical autonomy. After an analysis of Kossuth's words it becomes obvious that the liberals chose the partial neglect of religious equality and mutuality rather than accept the Catholic autonomy plan proposed by higher clergy. Kossuth believed that if he supported the Catholic bishops' proposal on this issue realization, he would strengthen the power of the higher clergy, which he did not want to do.

Notes

1. László Péter, "The connection between state and church and the civil society in Hungary: a historical synopsis," *Századvég* (1998 Spring): 3–31. In regard to this period, see especially pages 3–15.
2. For more on this issue see: Csaba Máté Sarnyai, "The possibilities to approach catholic autonomy in the second half of the 19th century", *Századvég* (2001 Summer): 85–101.
3. For additional information see: Csaba Máté Sarnyai, "The autonomy – idea supported by the episcopacy in 1848", in *Állam és egyház a polgári átalakulás korában Magyarországon (1848–1918)* [State and Church in the period of bourgeois transformation in Hungary (from 1848 to 1918)], ed. Csaba Máté Sarnyai (Budapest: METEM books, 2001), 63–88.
4. Pécsi Püspöki Levéltár 1848/704 [The Episcopal Archives of Pécs].
5. See *Magyar Törvénytár* [Collection of laws in Hungary] (henceforth MT), 1836–1868. évi törvényczikkek [Acts between 1836 and 1868] (Budapest, 1896), 243.
6. See MT, 1836–1868. évi törvényczikkek [Acts between 1836 and 1868] (Budapest, 1896), 243.
7. *Főrendi Napló 1848* [Diary of the peers], 468. The underlined part is the proposed addition.
8. *Religio és Nevelés* [Religion and Education] 1848. Vol. I, 252.
9. László Csorba, "Katolikus önkormányzat és polgári forradalom", *Világosság* (1989): 219–227.
10. This reference is more particularly analysed by László Csorba, *A vallásalap "jogi természete"* [The 'juridic nature' of church properties] (Budapest, 1999), 47–68.
11. We can find examples for both cases. For the first we can find examples in conservative Catholic historiography, for the latter in marxist historiography. See: Antal Meszlényi, *A magyar katolikus egyház és az állam 1848/49-ben* [The Hungarian Catholic Church and the state in 1848/49] (Budapest, 1928), 88; and Erzsébet Andics, *Az egyházi reakció 1848–49-ben* [The reaction of the church in 1848/49] (Budapest, 1949), 22–23, 28.
12. *Karok és Rendek Naplója az 1847/8. országgyűlésen* [The Journals of Faculties and Orders at the parliament of 1847/48], 219.
13. *Kossuth Lajos iratai* [The papers of Lajos Kossuth] in *Kossuth Ferenc* (Budapest, 1900), VIII, 344–346.
14. In the course of the analysis we follow László Csorba's article "A szekularizáció kérdése a reformkori országgyűléseken" [The issue of secularization at the parliaments of the reform era], *Világosság* (1979), 603–610.
15. *Kossuth Lajos iratai*, 342.
16. *Ibid.*