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The Only Future Left to Us

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Abstract. This study examines the relationship between Protestantism and modern political ideologies, with particular attention to the Protestant theological roots of liberalism and conservatism. It argues that the emphasis on both freedom of conscience and social conformity can be traced back to the Protestant tradition and continues to shape ecclesiastical and social debates to this day. The author illustrates the tension between these two legacies through the Hungarian Reformed Church's recent social engagement, with particular reference to the 1989 events in Timișoara and the 2024 grace scandal. It concludes that the future of the Protestant Church also depends on its ability to maintain a dynamic balance between its conservative and liberal legacies through open dialogue.

Keywords: liberalism; conservatism; politics; political ideologies; the pardon case; the events in Timisoara

In 1979, starting from a symbolic laundry room, Tamás Cseh and Géza Beremény turned irony into a tool of silent resistance. They wrote a prophetic song[1] about how they no longer wanted to remain in the same environment 'Ten Years After', nor did they want to sing the same monotonous song. And behold, exactly ten years later, this lament was heard when the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, and the music of servitude was replaced by the music of freedom. Yet in 2016, Beremény added the following ominous lines to the prophetic song:[2]

[1] Cseh Tamás; Beremény Géza: *Ten years after,* 1979. https://csehtamasarchivum.hu/dal/classic/ten-years-after Letöltve: 2026.05.04.
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhETTUuTm7o Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

While people once again turn against each other along religious and cultural lines. It never even crossed my mind that this would be the future, / It never occurred to me that my own humankind, That ancient breed would reach for this again — This only future left to us.

The song that once expressed hope now laments the return of religious and cultural battle. Religion and culture, which ought to promote community and solidarity, are once again drawing dividing lines and have even become a source of conflict. We have witnessed a succession of campaigns characterised by mutual attacks and hatred. But does God really want us to attack one another on the basis of 'religious and cultural lines', when the other might be a stranger, a Christian brother or sister, or even a family member?

European history warns us of what happens when faith becomes a weapon. Our continent has endured the French Wars of Religion, the English Civil War, but above all, the devastation of the Thirty Years' War, which laid waste a significant part of Central Europe. From these tragedies came the realisation that questions of God cannot be settled by force or arms. Mark Lilla identified the contemporary global "shadow" of the religious wars when he wrote these lines at the beginning of the 21st century: "Today, we have progressed to the point where our problems again resemble those of the 16th century, as we find ourselves entangled in conflicts over competing revelations, dogmatic purity and divine duty. [...] We had assumed this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong."[3] We forget not only the power of religious ideas, but also that the conflicts along which we clash often spring from the same source. Indeed, in contemporary polarised differences of opinion, conservative-liberal and collective-individualist ideas can be traced back to the foundations of Protestantism. Building on this, Ferenc Horkay Hörcher,[4] drawing on the insights of, Clark and Pocock, arrives at the important conclusion that in the formation of modern political ideologies Protestantism was not merely a backdrop, but a formative milieu.

The Protestant roots of liberalism can be understood through its emphasis on the freedom of conscience. In the Reformation, faith was no longer merely obedience to the church, but a personal conviction in which a person stands before God – a historical example of this is Martin Luther's stand. From this grew the idea that faith cannot be enforced by political power, which led to the concepts of individual rights, freedom of conscience, and limited state power.

[3] Lilla, Mark: *The Politics of God.* In: New York Times, 2007.08.19. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/magazine/19Religion-t.html Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

[4] Horkay Hörcher Ferenc: *Politikai teológiák és ideológiák*, in: Borbély Gábor; Gábor György; Geréby György; Szántó Veronika (szerk.) (2018): „Királlyá lett a te Istened". Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/m456klati__6/#m456klati_3_p8 (2026. 05. 04.) https://doi.org/10.1556/9789630599443

The Protestant roots of conservatism lie rather in the preservation of ecclesiastical and social order, in which religion upholds the moral fabric of the community. In the Anglican tradition, the church became the guardian of historical continuity and duty, whilst in Hungarian Protestantism the profession of faith was often intertwined with the defence of the native language and culture against Catholic Habsburg rule.

Thus, "both liberalism and conservatism are part of Protestant political thought, and their ongoing debate is a consequence of internal conflicts among Protestant denominations".[5] This tension persists to this day. Theology helps us see that this debate is not merely political but concerns a deeper question: whether humans are first and foremost beings of free conscience or responsible beings living within a communal order. In this, Jesus is the greatest example, who was radically free (Mark 2:27), yet fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17). He was not simply liberal or conservative, but transcended the logic of both, for whilst both sides find justification in him, he does not allow either to become exclusive. Debates among us intensify when one side, drawing on the liberal tradition, insists on an individual ethical approach ('what am I allowed to do?'), whilst the other, drawing on the conservative tradition, insists on a collective ethical approach ('what does the community expect?'). These principles typically clash in complex ethical debates, where we have recently, often for political reasons, come to present one ideology as the Protestant position. Neither Hungarian nor foreign Protestant churches are immune to this temptation, as both conservative and liberal ideas can become hegemonic by invoking Christian values.

Although the statements of the Hungarian Reformed Church on these issues contain both liberal-individual and conservative-collective values, in public life we tend to represent only one side — usually the conservative one[6] — in isolation. It has not entered the public consciousness that a balanced position was, for example, the 2015 statement on migration,[7] in which the Church, on the one hand, defends Europe's cultural integrity on a collective-conservative basis, and on the other hand, calls for the assistance of those in need on an individual-liberal basis, – regardless of the refugee's religion, education, persecution or financial situation – thereby transcending those generalising categories (e.g. 'economic migrant') that suit the community saying no to the refugee.[8] Yet from the fruitful dialogue between these two principles, we could have arrived, both as a community and as individuals, at a form of self-reflection in

[5] Horkay Hörcher Ferenc: *Politikai teológiák és ideológiák*, in: Borbély Gábor; Gábor György; Geréby György; Szántó Veronika (szerk.) (2018): „Királlyá lett a te Istened". Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/m456klati__6/#m456klati_3_p62 Letöltve: 2026. 05. 04. https://doi.org/10.1556/9789630599443

[6] Sinkovics Ferenc: *Cián a kockacukorban,* in: Demokrata, 20/39. 2016.09.28. 24–25.

[7] A Generális Konvent Elnökségének nyilatkozata az európai migrációs válságról. 2025.11.11. https://reformatus.hu/magyar-reformatus-egyhaz/gk-nyilatkozatok-lista/generalis-konvent-elnoksegenek-nyilatkozata-az-europai-migracios-valsagrol/ Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

[8] Magyar Távirati Iroda: A baloldal be akarja hozni a migránsokat, https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/magyarorszagon-keresztenydemokrata-allamot-epitettek-fel Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

which responsibility towards the vulnerable and the memory of our own vulnerability could have mutually shaped one another. After all, Israel too had to remember time and again that it had once been a foreigner in Egypt (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 10:19).

At the same time, over the past two years, the Reformed Church in Hungary has ignored the dynamic polarity of these two legacies, and we have instead witnessed a form of isolation reminiscent of the socialist era. By sidestepping the necessary theological work and guided by communicative or political imperatives, we have on several occasions shied away from discussing more sensitive social issues and from expressing our own views in international Protestant forums. This was the case when we stayed away from the 2024 General Assembly of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE),[9] or when we floated the idea of withdrawing from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).[10]

The problem is not that Hungarian Reformed Christianity takes a more conservative stance on ethical issues than the European mainstream, but that by avoiding debate, it neither shapes nor is it shaped. Participation in and engagement with debate would also be important, as the Protestant open-minded approach to social issues appears to have great community-building power.

When Protestant churches openly play a key role in social change, their responsibility is also multiplied accordingly. In recent decades, we have witnessed this twice in the life of the Hungarian Reformed community, in almost diametrically opposite ways. Whether intentionally or not, two of our Reformed bishops who lived through the transition to democracy played a decisive role in significant political changes. On the one hand, in connection with László Tőkés, we witnessed a courageous stand, as the biblical motif of freedom and liberation became a social reality during the Timişoara revolution in December 1989. However, we also saw the opposite of this in Budapest, when, following Zoltán Balog's actions and explanations, the Protestant concept of grace became so distorted that it provoked social outrage extending even beyond the church in 2024.

The first case demonstrated the courage of Protestant thought that takes freedom seriously, in the form of a distinctive Central and Eastern European theology of liberation. Individual freedom of conscience and outspokenness in the face of the oppressive regime became a prophetic force, setting in motion the fall of the Romanian dictatorship.

[9] Hungarian Reformed Church will not take part in the CPCE General Assembly. 2024.07.31. https://reformatus.hu/english/news/hungarian-reformed-church-will-not-take-part-in-the-cpce-general-assembly/ Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

[10] Felülvizsgálja tagságát a REV-ben a Magyar Református Egyház. 2026.02.02. https://reformatus.hu/magyar-reformatus-egyhaz/hirek/felulvizsgalja-tagsagat-a-rev-ben-a-magyar-reformatus-egyhaz/ Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

The second case was the opposite. In the so-called grace scandal,[11] the episcopal explanation was accepted by our church's governing bodies in such a way that one of the most important conservative principles—respect for the rule of law and the administration of justice—was overridden in defence of the status quo. Thus, the majority voice of the Reformed Church has become not prophetic and liberating, but self-justifying. This has simultaneously caused an identity crisis within our church (due to the concept of grace) and a crisis of credibility in the representation of conservative values. The latter contributed significantly to the political changes of 2026.

For want of a better alternative, even in the future that now lies before us, we cannot avoid the question of whether the church's social mission truly serves God's work of liberation, or whether it becomes a justification for our own self-preservation. Can we return to a social dialogue in which we can authentically and dynamically present the conservative and liberal heritage of Protestantism? Will we be able to proclaim the Gospel to as many members of society as possible, or will we continue to function merely as an ideological enclave?

[11] Parókia Portál: *Összefoglaló a Református Megújulás Konferenciáról*, https://www.parokia.hu/v/osszefoglalo-a-reformatus-megujulas-konferenciarol/ Letöltve: 2026.05.04.