PROTESTANT ETHICS IN THE KINGDOM OF HUNGARY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE INTERPRETATION OF ECONOMICS IN THE REFORMED CHURCH[1]

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According to Max Weber's theory, Protestant ethics significantly contributed to the development of capitalism. Historians agree that a capitalist economy did not emerge in the Kingdom of Hungary in the early modern period. However, Calvinism and puritanism had a strong influence in the country, and a Protestant ethic similar to that of Western Europe developed in the Reformed Church. This study aims to contribute to existing research in the history of ideas and economic history by incorporating new sources. Researchers have not yet examined the works of Benjámin Szőnyi or manuscript chronicles. Nor have they examined church building applications, church accounts, or János Fábián's catechism. With the help of these sources, the study conducts a further examination of Weber's theory in the 18th-century Kingdom of Hungary. It concludes that Protestant ethics did indeed exist in the Kingdom of Hungary, but that it was unable to transform the feudal economy into a capitalist one.

Keywords: Max Weber; Protestant Ethics; Kingdom of Hungary; Church Chronicle; Church Building; Credit; Reformed Church;

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Podľa teórie Maxa Webera protestantská etika výrazne prispela k rozvoju kapitalizmu. Historici sa zhodujú, že kapitalistická ekonomika sa v Uhorskom kráľovstve v ranom novoveku neobjavila. Kalvinizmus a puritanizmus však mali v krajine silný vplyv, a preto sa v reformovanej cirkvi vyvinula protestantská etika podobná tej v západnej Európe. Cieľom tejto štúdie je prispieť k existujúcemu výskumu v oblasti dejín myšlienok a hospodárskych dejín s využitím nových zdrojov. Výskumníci doteraz nepreskúmali diela Benjámina Szőnyiho

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ani rukopisné kroniky. Nepreskúmali ani žiadosti o výstavbu kostolov, cirkevné účty ani katechizmus Jána Fábiána. S pomocou týchto zdrojov štúdia ďalej skúma Weberovu teóriu v 18. storočí v Uhorskom kráľovstve. Dospela k záveru, že protestantská etika v Uhorskom kráľovstve skutočne existovala, ale nebola schopná transformovať feudálne hospodárstvo na kapitalistické.

Kľúčové slová: Max Weber; protestantská etika; Uhorské kráľovstvo; cirkevná kronika; cirkevná stavba; úver; reformovaná cirkev;

Introduction

Max Weber's well-known theory on the relationship between Protestant ethics and capitalism highlights two points. First, Calvinism, due to its doctrine of predestination, created a form of religious anxiety in people, which encouraged Protestants to seek signs of divine election (success) everywhere, including in economic life. Asceticism and the capitalist spirit were closely intertwined, for an important feature of Protestant ethics was the symbiosis of moderation and hard work, through which people sought to achieve economic success for the glory of God. Calvinist ethics provided an excellent foundation for capitalism because it extended asceticism to society as a whole, expecting self-restraint from everyone. Economic growth was regarded as the multiplication of wealth granted by God. Calvinist ethics created a work ethic that considered self-sacrificing labour a divine duty, thus providing capitalist entrepreneurs with disciplined and hard-working employees. However, spending profit on luxury and extravagance was considered a sin; while reinvesting acquired wealth was considered theologically appropriate. This became a powerful regulating factor, educating people into capitalism. Protestant ethics created a motivation that became measurable on a social level. In the Low Countries and England, groups built upon Protestantism dismantled feudalism and laid the foundations for modern capitalism by setting economic success as a central goal. Second, according to Weber, the majority of early modern capitalist entrepreneurs were protestants.[2]

Previous research

When Weber's theory first appeared, Hungarian historians refuted the claim that Protestant ethics had influenced the development of the Hungarian economy. This was explained through the reception of Calvin's views on economic matters, since Calvin had broken with the medieval church's opposition to interest. He did not consider financial practices as sinful but considered them acceptable in the spirit of fair trade. According to Imre Révész, 16th-century Hungarian reformers were unaware of this position, therefore it could not have had any impact in Hungary.[3] Jenő Sebestyén argued similarly in 1911: citing Calvin's 1545 letter, Sebestyén explained that Calvin did not regard charging interest on loans as sinful, but called for moderation and condemned unrestrained profiteering. Sebestyén acknowledged that the theological liberalization of credit transactions contributed to the emergence of free trade, yet this way of thinking had no effect in Hungary. According to Sebestyén, the reason lay in the fact that Reformed Church discipline in the Carpathian

[2] WEBER, Max. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. London 1976, pp. 98-128. WEBER, Max. Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Berlin 1958, p. 312-316.

[3] RÉVÉSZ, Imre. Szempontok a magyar „kálvinizmus" eredetének vizsgálatához [Considerations for examining the origins of Hungarian Calvinism]. In Századok [Centuries], 1934, vol. 68, no. 7-8, p. 261, 273.

Basin was not as organized as in Western Europe, therefore Protestant ethics could not permeate society as deeply as in England or the Low Countries.[4]

The latest economic history research has likewise concluded that the conditions necessary for the emergence of capitalism did not develop in the early modern period, and therefore protestant ethics had little impact on the development of the Hungarian economy.[5] It is true that in the 17th and 18th centuries, several reformed Hungarian theologians, building on Calvin's ethics, supported mercantilism but was never realised. The new trends in economic thinking had no tangible influence on the country's economy.[6]

Attila Károly Molnár devoted an entire monograph to the reception of Max Weber in Hungary. In his view, Weber's Protestant ethic existed in a distorted form in 17-century Hungary, as Western capitalism did not take root in the country. It is evident that Hungarian Puritanism did not adopt diligence and asceticism to the same extent as was characteristic of Western Europe. A telling example of this is the Hungarian-language Reformed Bible translation, as the Book of Sirach, which in England served as a model for the Puritan understanding of vocation, emphasizing self-discipline, diligence and moderation, was omitted from the Váradi Bible. Moreover, no anxiety regarding predestination was present in Hungary. This can be explained by social differences and the moderate nature of religious practice. Hungarian Reformed society consisted of nobles and serfs, and this social structure was not conducive to the transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy.[7]

Julianne Brandt agreed with this view, emphasizing that Puritanism was not so strong in Hungary, and the doctrine of predestination was not so dominant in reformed thinking that it would have promoted the emergence of capitalism. On the contrary, one of the greatest figures of 18th-century reformed piety, György Szikszai, even spoke out against overwork, warning that it might jeopardize one's salvation. Szikszai considered excessive profit a sin, and therefore recommended that people should not strive for profit in their work, meaning that the acquisition of capital necessary for capitalism did not even occur to him. Brandt also reflects on Weber's second thesis: Hungarian Reformed Christians were essentially engaged in agriculture and were scarcely involved in industry and trade. On this basis, Weber's thesis is simply not applicable to Hungary; the development of capitalism in the Carpathian Basin cannot be derived from protestant ethics, and modernization was not linked to Reformed Christians.[8]

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4 SEBESTYÉN, Jenő. Kálvin és a kapitalizmus [Calvin and Capitalism]. Marosvásárhely 1911, pp. 5-6.

5 KOVÁCS, György. A történelmi kálvinizmus és a társadalmi kérdések [Historical Calvinism and social issues]. In Heller Farkas Füzetek [Farkas Heller Notebooks], 2003, vol. 1, pp. 52-53. KOVÁCS, György. Protestáns identitás és a „kapitalizmus szelleme" [Protestant identity and the „spirit of capitalism"]. In CZAGÁNY, László et al. A szociális identitás, az információ és a piac [Social identity, information and the market]. Szeged 2004, pp. 110-115. NÉMETH, Balázs: „... Gott schläft nicht, er blinzelt uns zu..." Evangelisch-reformierte Lebensgestaltung zwischen Kontinuitat und Wandeln: Ungarn im 16. Jahrhundert als Beispiel. Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 117-132, 147. KOVÁCS, György. Kalvins Zinstheorie und ihre Rezeption in Ungarn. In BENYIK, György. The Bible and Economics: International Biblical Conference XXV. Szeged 2014, pp. 199-212.

6 KOVÁCS, György. Protestantizmus és kapitalizmus: Magyar gazdaság- és eszmetörténeti tanulságok [Protestantism and capitalism: Lessons from Hungarian economic and intellectual history]. Szeged 2011, pp. 119-129.

7 MOLNÁR, Attila Károly. The Protestant Ethic in Hungary: The Puritan Ethic and its Influence. Göttingen 2024, pp. 212-220. doi.org/10.13109/9783666540899.

8 BRANDT, Julianne. Adalékok a munka fogalmának református koncepciójához a 19. századi Magyarországon [Additions to the Reformed concept of work in 19th-century Hungary]. In Korall [Coral], 2001,

However, literary history and ethnography do not fully share this view. János Győri L. points out that there is a contradiction between the research of Attila Károly Molnár and Bálint Csűry, since it is unclear how the Reformed Bible translation was incorporated into the vernacular. Molnár claims that in the 17th century, moral norms demanded by puritanism (self-discipline, moderation) could be observed among Reformed Hungarians, but the common people were characterized by low level of religiosity, upon which biblical ethics had little influence. By contrast, Csűry argues that psalms and biblical stories were still vividly present in the vernacular at the end of the 19th century. This suggests that Protestant ethics did in fact have a strong impact on the Reformed population.[9]

In the 18th century, the Hungarian money market was underdeveloped. The Hungarian nobility clung firmly to feudal economic traditions.[10] Nevertheless, lending practices were widespread: by 1725, almost the entire population was indebted in some form.[11] The first bank in Hungary, the Pesti Magyar Kereskedelmi Bank (verbatim: Pest Hungarian Commercial Bank) was only established in 1840. Prior to this, lending was carried out by church foundations, various orphan funds, cathedral chapters, and wealthy landowners. Although usury was formally prohibited, loans were often given at interest rates of 20-25%. The development of the credit market was hindered by the lack of a proper legal framework, since at the beginning of the 18th century there was only one law dealing with credit (prohibiting usury), and the law of entailment (ősiség törvénye in Hungarian, or avicitas in Latin) obstructed the creation of mortgages, as it was extremely difficult to sell mortgaged property for cash. The very idea of founding a bank did not even arise in the 18th century.[12] However, certain members of the intelligentsia already considered the introduction of capitalist modes of economy a desirable goal, as Lutheran lawyer Gergely Berzeviczy sharply criticized the feudal system of economy.[13]

Research goal

In the following, we introduce sources that have thus far received little scholarly attention. By means of these, we seek to examine whether Protestant ethics truly exerted no

vol. 5-6, pp. 23-25. BRANDT, Julianne. A weberi tézis és a magyarországi protestantizmus a 19. században [Weber's thesis and Protestantism in Hungary in the 19th century]. In MOLNÁR, Attila Károly. Szellem és etika. A „100 éves a Protestáns etika" című konferencia előadásai [Spirit and ethics. Presentations from the conference entitled „100 Years of Protestant Ethics"]. Budapest 2005, pp. 127-130.

[9] GYŐRI, L. János. A Biblia hatása a kora újkori magyar irodalomra és közgondolkodásra – református példák tükrében [The influence of the Bible on early modern Hungarian literature and public thought – as reflected in Reformed examples]. In Studia Theologica Debrecinensis, 2009, vol 2. no. 1. pp. 45-68. CSŰRY, Bálint. Károlyi Gáspár bibliafordítása és a magyar népnyelv [Gáspár Károlyi's Bible translation and the Hungarian vernacular]. In VASADY, Béla. Károlyi emlékkönyv [Károlyi memorial book]. Budapest 1940, pp. 112-122.

[10] PACH, Zsigmond Pál. Magyar gazdaságtörténet 1848-ig, I/1. kötet [Hungarian Economic History until 1848, Volume I/1]. Budapest 1975, p. 127.

[11] EMBER, Győző. Külkereskedelem [Foreign trade]. In EMBER, Győző – HECKENAST, Gusztáv. Magyarország története tíz kötetben. 4. kötet Magyarország története 1686–1790 [The History of Hungary in Ten Volumes. Volume 4: The History of Hungary 1686–1790]. Budapest 1989, p. 667.

[12] TOMKA, Béla. A magyarországi pénzintézetek rövid története 1836–1947 [A brief history of financial institutions in Hungary, 1836–1947]. Budapest 2000, pp. 7-13.

[13] BERZEVICZY, Gergely: Magyarország kereskedelméről és iparáról [About Hungarian trade and industry]. In TESSEDIK, Sámuel – BERZEVICZY, Gergely. A parasztok állapotáról Magyarországon [The condition of peasants in Hungary]. Budapest 1979, p. 344.

influence on Hungarian economic thinking. It is a historical fact that Hungary did not become a capitalist country in the early modern period, but this does not necessarily mean that people conceived of the economy solely within feudal frameworks. In our analysis, we aim to provide new insights with regard to both of Weber's statements: concerning Protestant views of economy and the emergence of a new social class, the capitalists.

Presentation of new sources

In the 18th century, most reformed congregations produced chronicles or annal-like records in which they preserved the origins and history of their respective congregations. It is highly probable that these were produced in large numbers during the Age of Enlightenment because they functioned as a response to the oppression of Protestants: the local community used them to try to justify their right to exist.[14] This process is also supported by the documents produced in the course of the Mixta Religionaria Commissio. In the 17th century, serious conflicts arose between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in the Kingdom of Hungary, and thus at the beginning of the 18th century, the task of the Mixta Religionaria Commissio was to investigate the situation of Protestants. Between 1721 and 1722, the commission examined what rights Lutherans and Calvinits had after the Ottoman wars and the end of Rákóczi's War of Independence. In this process, they also examined the past of the congregations.[15] Among other places, investigations were conducted in Esztergom County, where the commissioners inquired whether the population of a given settlement had indeed been Reformed since time immemorial. They also asked exactly that since which year a Reformed pastor had been serving in the village.[16] This information was important because it determined whether the community under investigation could freely practice its religion. For this reason, the protestant members of the commission sought to gather as much historical data as possible. It was a matter of survival for the parishes to prove their continued operation, so they also tried to present their past in their own records. We find chronicles in parish registers and other congregational documents because they provided legitimacy for their existence. In terms of genre, these are narrative sources, which often contain information about the opinions of the congregation, including their conceptions of the economy.[17]

Similar sources include applications for church building permission, as these also contain documents summarizing the history of a particular congregation or church. Since Protestant churches could only be built with royal permission during the reigns of Charles III and Maria Theresa, parishes tried to justify their requests in as much detail as

[14] HEGYI, Ádám. The Idol Moloch in the Church: The Interconnection of Calvinist Identity and the Memory of Reformation in the South-Eastern Part of the Hungarian Kingdom in the 18th Century. In Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Reformata Transylvanica, 2022, vol. 67, no. 2, 145-146.

[15] LADÁNYI Sándor. Ráday Pál vallásügyi tevékenysége a szatmári béke után [Pál Ráday's religious activities after the Peace of Szatmár]. Budapest 1997, pp. 54-55.

[16] LADÁNYI Sándor. Az 1721. évi vallásügyi vizsgálat Esztergom Vármegyében [The 1721 religious investigation in Esztergom County]. In Limes: Társadalom – Természet – Történelem – Művészet – Művelődés – Irodalom Tudományos Szemle [Limes: Society – Nature – History – Art – Culture – Literature Scientific Review], 2001, vol. 14, no. 3 supplement, p. 44.

[17] HEGYI, Ádám. Zunichte geworden, dennoch bestehengeblieben: verbotene Handschriften der reformierten Kirche aus dem 18. Jahrhundert. In Codices Manuscripti et Impressi Supplementum, 2023, vol. 20, pp. 109-110.

possible. In addition to presenting the past, these petitions regularly contain data on the financial strength of the congregations.[18]

Valuable information can also be gained from the devotional works of pastors, as these reflect the thinking of the Reformed clergy. These works were sometimes published in print, but very often they circulated only in manuscript form, as censorship made their publication difficult.[19]

All of the sources listed above can be considered narrative sources, which are worth comparing with economic records, because a comparison of public opinion and the contemporary reality can be established through them. Textual sources show how people thought about economic issues, while numerical data indicate whether the ideas they considered desirable were actually implemented. Among the economic documents, it is worth examining diocesan accounts, pastors' widow fund records, fee letters, and curator accounts, as a large number of these have survived from the 18th century. These sources provide accurate information about the financial situation of a diocese, a pastor, and other institutions, and they also reveal how profitable or unprofitable they were. Currently, not all chronicles, church-building applications, and financial records of Hungarian congregations have been discovered, so we can only illustrate the situation with a few selected examples.

In the 18th century, Benjámin Szőnyi's devotional book *Szentek hegedűje* (verbatim: The Violin of the Saints) was very popular.[20] As it reached many Reformed families, it had a significant influence on the thinking of Calvinist believers.[21] The prayers contained in it show the ethical values that the church sought to convey to its followers.

The chronicle of the Reformed Church in Szentes (1748–1825) provides insight into the mindset of a congregation, as it contains not only historical events but also records related to farming and trade.[22] The influence of the French revolution is evident in János Fábián's catechism, which also deals with 18th-century economic issues.[23] The Locotenential Council (Magyar Királyi Helytartótanács in Hungarian, or *consilium regium locumtenentiale Hungaricum* in Latin), as the central administrative body, collected all church building applications in the country. Among these are petitions that provide textual descriptions of individual congregations while also presenting its financial circumstances. Good

[18] BUCSAY, Mihály. Der Protestantismus in Ungarn, Teil II. vom Absolutimus bis zur Gegenwart. Wien-Köln-Graz 1979, pp. 13-19.

[19] FATA, Márta. Buchführung des Lebens: Deutsche Hausbücher und ungarische Bauernchroniken in Ungarn im 19. Jahrhundert. In KAPOSI, Zoltán et al. Abstract Structures and Concrete Lives: Contributions to the Economic and Social History of Hungary (18th–21st Century) Pécs, Working Group of Economic and Social History, Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Pécs, 2025, p. 17.

[20] We used the 1762 edition for our analysis. SZŐNYI Benjámin. Szentek hegedűje [The Violin of the Saints] Kolozsvár 1762.

[21] VÖRÖS, Imre. Természetszemlélet a felvilágosodás kori magyar irodalomban [The view of nature in Hungarian literature during the Enlightenment]. Budapest 1991, pp. 28-33.

[22] KIS, Bálint. A szentesi reformáta ekklésia históriája [The history of the Reformed parish of Szentes]. In GILICZE László et al. A Békési-bánáti református egyházmegye története [The history of the Reformed diocese Békés-Bánát]. Békéscsaba–Szeged 1992, pp. 293-387.

[23] FÁBIÁN, János. Erköltsi okoskodások [Moral advice]. In HEGYI Ádám. „… azt kőzőnséges helyen fel olvasni éppen nem tanátsos…" Az olvasás és a vallásellenesség kapcsolatai Békési Református Egyházmegyében 1782 és 1821 között [It is not advisable to read it aloud in public places. The relationship between reading and criticism of religion in the Reformed Diocese of Békés between 1782 and 1821]. Debrecen 2018, pp. 282-295.

examples include applications from the Reformed Congregatios of Makó (1771),[24] Gyoma and Szentes (1773),[25] and Békés (1774).[26] In order to gain a clear picture of financial conditions, we can use the accounts of the Békés Reformed Diocese (1744–1772)[27] as well as the 1790 cash book of the widow and orphan fund.[28] We can determine the financial growth of the pastors of the Békés Reformed Diocese from their fee letters, so these documents are also included in our analysis.[29] It is also possible to examine the finances of a single congregation: the accounts of the Szentes parish have been preserved since 1777.[30]

Economic sources

The accounts of the Békés Reformed Diocese were very incomplete. Generally, they only recorded the total amount of expenditure for the given year without indicating how the money had been spent. The sources of income are not mentioned either. Based on the analogy of the customary practice in the Reformed Church, we can only assume that the costs of the Diocese were financed from contributions from the parishes.[31] However, in one case, we find traces of a modern financial transaction: in 1772, the congregation of Makó took out an interest-free loan of 500 forints for the construction of a church, which it repaid in 1792, but even then, 100 forints of the debt was remitted.[32]

In accordance with the legal regulations of the time, church-building petitions had to demonstrate that the congregation possessed adequate financial resources for the construction.[33] The Reformed church in Makó initiated the procedure in 1765.[34] However,

[24] Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltár [National Archives of Hungary in Budapest] (MNL OL) fund C 40 Helytartótanácsi Levéltár [Archives of the Locotenential Council], Acta religionaria Lad. K Fasc. 94. Circa instantiam oppidorum Makoviensium Helveticae confessionis, 1771.

[25] MNL OL C 40 Lad. M Fasc. 41. Gyomai református egyház templomépítési kérelme, 1773–1774 [Application by the Reformed Church in Gyoma to build a church, 1773–1774]. MNL OL C 40 Lad. M Fasc. 43. Szentesi református egyház templomépítési kérelme, 1773–1774 [Application by the Reformed Church in Szentes to build a church, 1773–1774].

[26] MNL OL C 40 Lad. N Fasc. 66. Békési református egyház templomépítési kérelme, 1774–1775 [Application by the Reformed Church in Békés to build a church, 1774–1775].

[27] HEGYI, Ádám. A Békési Református Egyházmegye első jegyzőkönyve és annak mellékletei, 1696–1809 (1839) [The first minutes of the Reformed Diocese of Békés and its appendices, 1696–1809 (1839)]. Debrecen 2021, pp. 78-83.

[28] Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerületi Levéltár (Debrecen) [The Archives of the Trans-Tisza Region Reformed District] (TtREL), fund I.29.k, Békési Református Egyházmegye iratai. Nyugdíjintézet iratai [The Archives of the Reformed Diocese of Békés. Pension institution records], no. 1., Özvegy, árva és lelkészi nyugdíjintézet jegyzőkönyve (alapszabály) 1790–1908 [Minutes of the Widows, Orphans, and Clergy Pension Fund (Articles of Association) 1790–1908]

[29] HEGYI, A Békési Református…, pp. 62-78.

[30] Hódmezővásárhelyi Református Egyházi Gyűjtemény [Reformed Church Collection in Hódmezővásárhely] (HREGy), fund I.375.e, Szentesi egyházközség iratai. Számadási iratok [Documents of the parish of Szentes. Financial documents], no. 1-25, 1777–1808.

[31] KIS Bálint. A helvéciai vallástételt követő Békés-bánáti egyházi vidék vallási, polgári, tudomány és földleírási történeteinek emléke [Religious, social, scientific, and natural description of the Reformed Diocese of Békés-Bánát] In: GILICZE László et al. A Békési-bánáti…, p. 151.

[32] HEGYI, A Békési Református…, p. 95.

[33] FELHŐ, Ibolya – VÖRÖS, Antal. A helytartótanácsi levéltár [Archives of the Locotenential Council]. Budapest 1961, p. 128.

[34] MNL Csongrád-Csanád Vármegyei Levéltár Makói Levéltár [Csongrád-Csanád County Archives, Makó Town Archives] (CsCsML ML), fund IV.A.1.b., Csanád vármegye iratai [Documents of Csanád County],

they did not receive the building permit until 1772. The protracted procedure was not only due to financial reasons, but also to the religious laws of the time, which did not allow the construction of new Protestant churches.[35] According to the documents, the congregation did not have sufficient funds for the construction.[36] They were therefore forced to apply for a loan. This was difficult, because Protestants could not ask for money from Roman Catholic foundations, and there were no Protestant landowners within a radius of at least 200 km from Makó.[37] We know of several similar cases: in 1773, the people of Gyoma had to prove to the county that they had the necessary funds for construction.[38] We also have data showing that 4,488 forints were collected for the construction of the church in Békés in 1774,[39] which means that the loan taken out by the people of Makó would have been considered a significant contribution in the case of other parishes as well. As we know, the Diocese helped the parish in need. In fact, this was a very generous gesture on the part of the Diocese, because this amount (500 forints) most likely far exceeded their annual income. Although the revenues of the Békés Reformed Diocese are unknown, we may estimate how much money they had to manage. For example, in 1766 their total expenditure was 389 forints, and in 1760, it was 432 forints.[40] This suggests that their income was roughly the same amount. It follows that the disbursement of a 500-forintloan doubled the annual expenses of the Diocese. This is considered a serious financial risk. It can be assumed that the risky transaction was facilitated by the fact that the lender and the borrower were related as father and son: György Szikszai Sr. served as dean at the time, and his son, György Szikszai Jr. was the pastor of Makó.[41] This also explains why no interest was charged on the loan. In any case, the arrangement clearly shows that the traces of a capitalist economy were entirely absent within the diocese.

However, we can already find the seeds of capitalism in the management of the congregation of Szentes. The parish's income came from church taxes, charitable donations, church services (e. g. bell ringing), and agricultural activities, which were used to cover daily operating costs and pastoral salaries. Profits and losses were always recorded in the annual accounts. The first record dates from 1797/1798, when the congregation made a profit of 500 forints, which was lent at interest, i.e., a financial transaction that formed

no. 169, Nemesi közgyűlés iratai, 1765. április 10. és 23. [Documents of the noble assembly, April 10 and 23, 1765.]

35 BARÁTH, Béla Levente. Az I. Carolina Resolutiotól a Türelmi Rendeletig: a királyi Magyarország protestáns egyházi életét meghatározó 18. századi uralkodói rendeletek áttekintése [From the Carolina Resolution to the Toleration Edict: an overview of the 18th-century royal decrees that shaped Protestant church life in royal Hungary]. In GÁBORJÁNI SZABÓ, Botond. Egyházak és egyházpolitika Magyarországon és Erdélyben a 18–19. században [Churches and church policy in Hungary and Transylvania in the 18th and 19th centuries]. Debrecen 2016, pp. 11-16.

36 MNL OL C 40 Lad. K Fasc. 94. fol. 25-26.

37 OLTVÁNYI, Pál. A csanádi püspöki megye birtok viszonyainak rövid története [A brief history of the property relations of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Csanád]. Szeged 1867, pp. 17-38. ROOS, Martin. Erbe und Auftrag. Momente aus der Vergangenheit der Diözese Csanád und ihrer Nachfolgebistümer, Bd. 1. Die alte Diözese Csanád. Zwischen Grundlegung und Aufteilung 1030 bis 1923. Teil 2: Vom Barock bis zur Revolution 1718–1850. Teilband a/1718–1800. Szeged – Nagybecskerek – Temesvár 2010, p. 324.

38 MNL OL C 40 Lad. M Fasc. 41. fol. 11-12.

39 MNL OL C 40 Lad. N Fasc. 66. fol. 16-17.

40 HEGYI, A Békési Református…, p. 79.

41 KIS, A helvéciai vallástételt…, p. 97, 223.

the basis of capitalist management.[42] Although several pastors were involved in lending transactions in the 19th century,[43] there is no evidence of this in Szentes in the 18th century; we only have data showing that the parish invested its capital in loans. However, the pastors' fee letters still bore the marks of feudal management, because between 1719 and 1743, the income of ministers in the congregations of the Békés Reformed Diocese was dominated by payments in kind rather than cash.[44]

In 1790, the Békés Reformed Diocese established a fund for supporting pastors' widows and orphaned children.[45] This institution can be considered a precursor to the modern pension system, and similar initiatives appeared elsewhere in the Calvinist church during this period: in Dés (1792), Pápa (1795), Bars (1799), Debrecen and Tata (1800), Szabolcs (1809), and Bereg (1813).[46] In the Békés Reformed Diocese, the initial capital was provided by the pastors and teachers of the diocese, which grew to 270 forints by 1809, but lost much of its value due to devaluation. In 1815, the fund's assets totalled 54 forints. According to the founding charter, the fund's capital were to be invested, which meant that they wanted to lend money at interest, but this did not happen because the sums collected were so modest that they barely covered even basic operating costs.[47]

Narrative sources

If the economic practices of the Reformed Church were so strongly rooted in feudal traditions, is it possible to find any traces of Weber's protestant ethic? This question is significant since according to Immanuel Wallerstein, Catholicism also adapted to the economic and social changes that characterize capitalism.[48] What's more, according to Benjamin Walter,

[42] HREGy I.375.e.15. 1797/1798.

[43] TÓTH, Levente. László Gergely (1798–1882): vázlat egy 19. századi székelyföldi lelkész hétköznapjairól [László Gergely (1798–1882): sketch of the everyday life of a 19th-century pastor in the Székely Land]. In KOLUMBÁN Vilmos József. A „recepta religiók" évszázadai Erdélyben [Accepted religions in Transylvania]. Kolozsvár 2019, pp. 229-246.

[44] HEGYI, A Békési Református…, pp. 62-78.

[45] Well before the establishment of Reformed funds, the Lutheran Church had already established the first widow and orphan fund in 1732. HEGYI, Ádám. Widows' and Orphans' Funds at the End of the 18th Century: An Attempt of the Békés Reformed Diocese to Establish a Widows' and Orphan' Fund, Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Reformata Transylvanica, 2023, vol. 68, no. 2, p. 169, 171. doi.org/10.24193/subbtref.68.2.11

[46] UGRAI, János. „Harminc esztendeig szolgáltam, semmim sincs" Gondoskodás az idős papokról a 19. század első felében a Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerületben [„I served for thirty years, and I have nothing." Care for elderly pastors in the first half of the 19th century in the Reformed Church District of Tiszáninnen]. In Korall [Coral], 2025, vol. 99, pp. 31-46. doi.org/10.52656/KORALL.2025.01.02. PÁLYI, Zsófia Kata. Protestáns lelkészi önsegélyező társaságok és özvegy-árva kasszák [Protestant pastoral self-help societies and widows' and orphans' funds]. In ifj. BERTÉNYI, Iván et al. „Taníts minket úgy számlálni napjainkat…" Tanulmányok a 70 éves Kósa László tiszteletére [„Teach us to count our days..." Studies in honor of László Kósa, aged 70]. Budapest 2012, pp. 355-357. BARCSA, János. A Tiszántúli Ev. Ref. Egyházkerület történelme, 2. kötet 1711–1822 [The history of the Trans-Tisza Region Reformed District, volume 2. 1711–1822]. Debrecen 1908, pp. 142-143.

[47] TtREL I.29.k.1.

[48] WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. The Modern World-System I. vol. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century. [online] Oakland 2011, pp. 232-233. (ProQuest Ebook Central), avaiable online: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/szeged-ebooks/detail.action?docID=714452, 30.08.2025.

all denominations of western Christianity identified with capitalism.[49] We also know that in 17th-century Hungary, Catholic treatises often contained statements about indebtedness or accumulation. Hell was synonymous with indebtedness, and Péter Pázmány, Archbishop of Esztergom, said that, similar to Protestant ethics, the reward for good deeds could be measured in material gain.[50] However, the phenomenon described by Weber can indeed be found in Reformed narrative sources.

In his work *Szentek hegedűje*, Benjámin Szőnyi repeatedly took a stand on issues of economic ethics. For example, he considered moderation to be an important virtue, which can be compared to Weber's concept of asceticism.[51]

As mentioned above, according to Weber, Protestants sought economic success for the glory of God. This idea also appears in Szőnyi's work, as he encouraged his readers to work for the glory of God, since the fruits of labor serve only the Lord.[52]

Szőnyi deals specifically with the ethical dilemmas of merchants, writing that the profession of merchant is a sign of divine election. He also emphasizes that material gain is necessary, but should not be taken to extremes, because then one risks one's salvation. Without losing sight of salvation, he nevertheless concludes that making a profit is important and useful.[53]

According to this, 18th-century Reformed devotional literature did indeed encourage capitalist trade. Yet another narrative source that this remained only a wish.

Pastor Bálint Kis served in Szentes between 1799 and 1853. In addition to his church duties, he also pursued scientific work and became a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He achieved notable results in the modernization of agricultural technologies by replacing the wooden plough with an iron one. Farmers of Szentes began to use iron plough based on Kis's instructions. He also attached great importance to fruit cultivation and thanks to his efforts, the grafting of fruit trees spread rapidly in Szentes.[54]

From 1747 onwards, the Reformed pastors of Szentes kept a yearbook in which they recorded important events in the life of the congregation, similar to the Catholic historia domus.[55] From this chronicle, we learn that in 1771, Anna Domján was granted a loan with interest in Szentes.[56] This information is interesting because the first loan transaction

[49] BENJAMIN, Walter. „Kapitalismus als Religion". In TIEDEMANN, Rolf et al. Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6. Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 100-103.

[50] SZÉKELY, Örs. Deus creditor: Gazdasági logika a magyar ellenreformáció épületes irodalmában [Deus creditor: Economic logic in the literature of the Hungarian Counter-Reformation]. In CSABA, András et al. Kaptilaizmus és irodalomtörténet [Captilaism and literary history]. Budapest 2022, p. 117, 119, 122.

[51] SZŐNYI, Szentek hegedűje…, p. 240.

[52] SZŐNYI, Szentek hegedűje…, p. 240.

[53] SZŐNYI, Szentek hegedűje…, p. 102.

[54] FILEP, Antal. Népismereti, néprajzi érdeklődés a Délkelet-Alföldön a reformkorban és tovább elő öröksége: Kutatási vázlat [Interest in ethnography and folklore in the South-Eastern Great Plain during the Reform Era: Research outline]. In Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság Évkönyve [Yearbook of the János Kriza Ethnographic Society], 2020, vol. 28, p. 370.

[55] BAGI, Zoltán. Szentes város református közössége a 18. században a Béládi István, Gál István és a Kis Bálint által írt eklézsiatörténet alapján [The Reformed community of Szentes in the 18th century, based on the ecclesiastical history written by István Béládi, István Gál, and Bálint Kis.]. In: SZABÓ, András. Mezőváros, reformáció és irodalom [Market town, Reformation, and literature]. Budapest 2005, pp. 185-205.

[56] TAKÁCS, Edit. A szentesi református ekklézsia története 1700–1825 [The History of the Reformed Church in Szentes, 1700–1825]. [online] Szentes 2001, p. 237 avaiable online https://www.szentesinfo.hu/cd/ekklezsia/image2/nagy/237.JPG 30.08.2025.

appears in the above-mentioned curator's accounts only in 1798, while the congregation had already been practicing it earlier, but the loan was not recorded in the curator's records. It should be noted here that it was also common practice for other Reformed congregations to grant loans with interest. In the case of the congregation in Kolozsvár (Klausenburg/Cluj), we know that it regularly granted loans at 10% interest as early as the 17th century.[57] A few years later, Bálint Kis also touched on commence in a short paragraph in the Szentes chronicle. According to this, at the beginning of the 19th century, Jews controlled trade in Szentes, while Hungarians were hardly involved in this area and were unwilling to change this. Even though Kis urged them to try their hand at shipping, as Szentes had a port on the Tisza River, the Reformed peasants were unwilling to give up their traditional farming lifestyle and try their hand at free trade, which was the basis of capitalism.[58]

Based on the above, we can conclude that in the 18th century in Hungary, the Reformed Church had an ethical mindset that encouraged economic growth, but in practice this did not materialize. We agree with Julianna Brandt's assertion that the Reformed Church in the Carpathian Basin lived primarily from agriculture and did not engage in industrialization or trade, which were the hallmarks of modernism. This is clearly illustrated by the reluctance of the Reformed Christians in Szentes to engage in shipping. Nevertheless, there are examples of ideas that went beyond cautious attempts to stimulate the economy, with some Reformed writers advocating the complete dismantling of the feudal economy.

In the 1790s, influenced by the radicalization of the French Revolution, political catechism were written in the Kingdom of Hungary calling for the abolition of feudalism and the dissolution of the monarchy. The state strictly prohibited their distribution, but many handwritten copies were made.[59]

In 1796, disciplinary proceedings were initiated against János Fábián, a teacher in Békés on account of his deist views. A year after the trial, Fábián left Gyula and set off for Debrecen. On his way, he stopped at several settlements, where he continued to spread his doctrines. He gave the teacher in Körösladány a handwritten catechism in which he proclaimed views closely related to those of the French Revolution. For this act he was imprisoned, and later went insane while in captivity.[60]

His handwritten catechism (Erköltsi okoskodások) does indeed contain deist views, but from the perspective of our topic, his views on the economy are of far greater interest. He proclaimed the abolition of feudal privileges, rejected the use of titles and ranks and wanted to achieve complete social equality, but he did not stop there, as he also advocated for the principle of universal taxation. Well before the era of bourgeois transformation,

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[57] SZÁSZ, Anikó. A Kolozsvári Református Egyházközség vagyona és gazdálkodása a 17. században [The assets and management of the Reformed Church Parish of Cluj in the 17th century]. In BOGDÁNDI, Zsolt et al. Album amicorum. Tanulmányok Sipos Gábor születésének hetvenedik évfordulójára [Album amicorum: Studies on the seventieth anniversary of Gábor Sipos' birth]. Kolozsvár 2021, pp. 586-587.

[58] KIS, A szentesi reformáta…, p. 317.

[59] SASHEGYI Oszkár. Censur und Geistesfreiheit unter Joseph II. Budapest 1958, pp. 176-206.

[60] ELEK, László. A jakobinus mozgalom és a felvilágosodás két üldözött Békés megyei képviselője: Réz József és Fábián János [Two persecuted representatives of the Jacobin movement and the Enlightenment in Békés County: József Réz and János Fábián]. In ELEK, László. Művelődés és irodalom Békés megyében I. kötet A XVI. századtól a XIX. század derekáig [Culture and Literature in Békés County Volume 1. From the 16th century to the mid-19th century]. Békéscsaba 1985, pp. 64-77.

this way of thinking could clearly be considered radical. Moreover, he considered communal ownership of property to be the ideal economic system, which would have signified an unequivocal break with the existing order.[61]

In our opinion, Fábián's catechism is an original work, not a copy. The influence of the French Jacobins is evident in it, but by this influence we mean the spirit of the age. In the 1790s, several people in the Kingdom of Hungary expressed ideas similar to those of Fábián. It is obvious that Fábián's theses do not fit into the framework of Weber's Protestant ethics. It is also clear that neither universal taxation nor a communist economic system came to fruition at the end of the 18th century. However, the very existence of the catechism shows that a wide variety of ideas circulated among the Reformed community.

Conclusion

In summary, we can conclude that Weber's economic ethics were only moderately evident among Calvinists in the 18th century. Only a small number of Calvinists set themselves the goal of establishing a capitalist economy. In Benjámin Szőnyi's ethics, we find references to asceticism that echo Weber's theory, and there was a practice in the church of conducting credit transactions to increase capital. Nevertheless, the economy remained fundamentally feudal, and the radicalism represented by Fábián was an isolated phenomenon. In the 18th century, the Reformed Church did not create a social class of capitalist entrepreneurs in Hungary, but pastors strove to do so. Bálint Kis's experiment with ship trading proves this.

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[61] FÁBIÁN, Erköltsi okoskodások…, p. 285, 289-290.

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