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**Mészáros Márton: Protestantism and Media**

**Abstract**

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The posting of *Ninety-Five Theses* is, without exaggeration, one of the most important identity-forming events of the Reformation; and many historians regard it as “the first modern media event”. However, from the 1960’s onwards, numerous historians and theologians (both Catholic and Protestant) have disputed if the theses were posted at all. Since the pro and contra arguments of this dispute are not detailed in Hungarian specialised literature on theology or history, the first chapter of the present dissertation provides a detailed examination of “Luthers Thesenanschlag Tatsache oder Legende” by Erwin Iserloh, which is then followed by delineation of the main reactions to the writing. The proof provided by Erwin Iserloh convincingly suggests that the posting of *Ninety-Five Thesis* did not take place in the manner as it is widely known today. The classical accounts of the event are contradictory in many respects, including the date, the correctness of which is almost certainly excluded. Nevertheless, the most important argument of Iserloh is that there is no sign in any of the available sources of Luther himself having as much as mentioned the event of posting the theses (while Luther gives detailed descriptions in his writings of numerous other events that are regarded as minor episodes in the tra-

ditional story of Reformation). Furthermore, his letter to Scheurl explicitly reveals his concerns about the fast spreading of the theses, and that he unambiguously blamed printing for it happening. It can thus be concluded that Luther did not initially intend to reach a wide audience, however – by having witnessed the theses spread against his will – he recognised the new functions of printed media, and eventually was able to employ it with exceptional success. Consequently, the story of the publication of the theses as a visually effective, heroic deed can be interpreted as an element of the image campaign created by later generations in order to conceal this initial uncertainty, the mistake in communication strategy. It is thus not as much the posting of the theses but rather the story of it that can be defined as a media event.

Luther reveals in several letters that his intention is to correct the communication mistake by publishing a book i.e. that he attempts to take charge of leading the communication campaign. It is common knowledge that as a result of this campaign Luther became one of the first best-selling authors in the Western world, and that to an extent which influenced the development of print house networks in not

towards the visual, and moreover, make a generalisation by accusing Reformation of loathing images as such. However, the conspicuous amount of preserved materials containing both verbal and visual elements (pamphlets, placards, illustrated books) pose a demand to fine tune the understanding of the relationship between Reformation and visuality, moreover, at points also to rethink it. Calvin and Luther, although judging the usefulness of pictures in a different manner, did not criticise visual imagery in general but merely its employment for sacral purposes. Since the popular culture of the age was clearly a visual-centred one, the Reformation campaign was also unable to abandon the visual; moreover, it was indeed for the complementary use of hybrid media in network communication that enabled the Reformationist views to reach the widest possible audience. It is most obviously exemplified by the hybrid flyers worded by Luther, which demonstrate a combined use of different media techniques. The sheets of paper connect three notation systems, an archaic human one, a pre-modern one, and a modern one: the rhythmical, rhyming text is combined with xylography and modern print technology. Considering that the system is hybrid from the medial aspect as well as language-wise – it con-

tains both images and text, and is written both in Latin and in German – it would be difficult to overvalue the significance of the manifold hybrid media from the point of view of communication. The publicity campaign of the Reformation might have become successful because it not only expanded its range of impact by taking advantage of print technology – it not only increased the amount of its possible addressees –, but it also organised the formerly popular (oral and visual) cultural systems into a complementary, mutually beneficial organic whole.

Gerhard Ebeling presents the main accomplishment of Luther – and more generally that of Reformation – as an essentially verbal one i.e. a word-event. The word of divine origin, the word of Christ is more effective than any physical creation defined by the needs of society, human beings; this effectiveness – according to Luther – is due to the special status of the verbal from the point of view of accessibility: only that can be transmitted without loss of information, self-identically beyond its vehicle, “those who preach the word of Christ”. However, for Luther as a theologian who believed that there is no need for an agent between God and man, it posed a recurring problem that

there was a need to insert his own words between the word of God and people; thus, as a solution, Luther defined himself as a medium of the word of God. Luther also considered the creation of written records as a mere necessity: the true vehicle of God's mercy is not the Holy Scripture as a book but the read and preached word, the personalised evangelion.

Between the two World Wars the Hungarian Reformed Church – apparently in possession of the (media) experience of Reformation – was especially quick to recognise the possibilities provided by the new technical media of the time. The second part of the dissertation examines the media approach of three “subsystems of communication” that were used by the Hungarian Reformed Church: preaching through the example of sermons by Ravasz; press through the example of three newspapers: “Protestáns Szemle”, “Református Élet” and “Reformáció”; and finally, the didactic media approach through the example of “Irodalmi olvasókönyv” (literature study book) by Ferenc Zsigmond. In the Protestant press, the first conscious reflections on media were published remarkably early. For instance, the first film critiques

were published in a column of "Református Élet", but there were also attempts to clarify the role of gramophone and radio in evangelisation. Even though verbal communication was prioritised due to its theological foundations, a generalisation is justified when claiming that in 1930's Protestant intellectuals did not initially view the arrival of new media as a threat but instead as a novel and wonderful opportunity. In accordance to the view, Ravasz publishes gramophone records of sermons, and finds the role of playing sermons in radio of great importance. A youth paper, "Erő" (mainly targeting the age group of secondary school students) included a column called "Rádióiskola" ("Radio-School"), which not only gave practical advice for making an own radio receiver at home, but recognizing that radio also enables two-way communication, the paper taught the youth to build short-wave amateur radio devices also capable of transmitting sound. Communication over radio was intended to play an important role in further building of the developing community around the paper.

However, the initial enthusiasm was followed by the recognition of the limits and even dangers of new technology.

At a certain stage the new technical media started to pose a threat to the mediating role of the church, which led to the publication of a growing number of articles which all conclude that even though radio is an excellent vehicle for spreading good news, sacral content is not for transmission through technical media. Consequently, László Ravasz makes an attempt to gather the conditions of new media use into a theologically founded, conscious system. Ravasz indicates that the Holy Scriptures are the connecting link between God and man. Due precisely to its prominent position, its divine nature, Ravasz placed an emphasis on verballity, verbal mediation, and in addition defines believers themselves as a medium: "the faith is from hearing: listen to it carefully, and share the message of God with others. Ravasz claims that understanding the word of God cannot be described by communication models: next to the verbal aspect, which can be transmitted by technology, there is another aspect which cannot be reproduced: faith. The most intriguing feature of Ravasz' approach is the return to the traditional Reformationist view that condemns all mediation between God and man: he uses the phrase "seeing reality" as a frequent metaphor for perfect understanding. The immediate, direct encounter grants



perfect understanding, and the other way around, the condition for being able to understand perfectly is an encounter without mediators, which however, according to Ravasz, can only take place by the mercy of God, due to faith.

As a possible reflection of Protestant interest in media, the literature study books published by Hungarian Protestants between the World Wars placed a considerably stronger emphasis on the problems of mediation than study books by rival publishers. The literature books for secondary schools funded by the Evangelical and Reformed churches reflected on new media (radio and gramophone) also in the lower grades, however the study book compiled by Ferenc Zsigmond was directly based on Tivadar Thiennemann's widely-known mediation-centred approach to literature. The traditional Protestant view of media was thus a fertile ground for mediation-centred literary theory, furthermore, at a time when the arrival of new media demanded a reaction from almost all segments of culture, it was indeed the traditional Protestant view to media that ensured a competitive reaction.