

Ádám Szabó
A Secretive Heretic
Professor Ernst Soner's Academic Speeches



Theses of Dissertation

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. László Szörényi

University of Szeged

Doctoral School of Literary Studies, Program of Neo-Latin Literature

2018.

Subject and aim of the dissertation

The present thesis offers an analysis of a set of recently discovered Antitrinitarian texts: a 1610 letter by Polish Socinians to the German medical doctor, herbalist, and philosopher Ernst Soner (1572–1612) of the same communion, also some solemn academic speeches that Soner delivered as professor at and later as rector of the University of Altdorf; all of them are written in Latin. Today the letter is to be found in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, whereas the speeches are preserved in a composite manuscript volume in Budapest, Hungary. These documents provide us with invaluable information about Soner's crypto-Socinian or Nicodemite way of life and expand our understanding of his theological and philosophical views.

Structure of the dissertation

The thesis begins with an outline of Ernst Soner's life and oeuvre, giving a short bibliography of works made about Soner, and paying special attention to his education as well as to the institutional and intellectual context of his professional career (history of the Altdorfian Academy, Aristotelian philosophy in Altdorf and in Padua). It was also necessary to delineate the history and main characteristics of Socinianism, especially its activity in universities of Central Europe, where Polish peregrinates tried to convert local students and professors into Antitrinitarism.

After these introductory chapters comes the representation of the new invented sources. The first text under scrutiny is the 1610 letter which, in addition to offering us a glimpse into the everyday difficulties of Soner's secretive way of life, reveals some major differences between the recognized dogma of the Polish Antitrinitarians and the professor's own theological outlook. The Polish Socinians rebuke their German brother for subordinating his Antitrinitarian persuasion to his academic pretenses in two respects. On the one hand, they disapprove of his Nicodemism; for although Soner undeniably believed in Socinianism, he was unwilling to lose his professorship or risk his life for it. On the other hand, he is reproached for his recent, pseudonymously circulated, work on the human soul in which Aristotle appears to be much more valued than Sozzini's creed. In other words, he is accused of being an Aristotelian philosopher rather than a devout Socinian.

Concerning to the manuscript, the present thesis does not analyze the contents of the composite volume in their entirety. Only the solemn speeches are examined, whereas six other, short speeches (rhetorical exercises) also by Soner are mentioned only in a synoptical

way. The analysis follows the same pattern in each case: first a succinct history of the particular problem addressed in a speech is offered, then Soner's own ideas are evaluated from a philological, intellectual historical, theological and philosophical perspective. His sources and the ways he employs them are studied in detail, paying special attention to covert references and sophisticated allusions meant for fellow Socinians in the audience.

The first speech, *De libertate philosophandi oratio*, is about challenging authorities in general and the importance of constantly taking a critical stance. In a certain sense, the speech can be read in terms of the coming rationalism, and in this regard it is close to Socinian thought. The subject of the speech had been treated by Soner's master, Nicolaus Taurellus, and the arguments advanced by Soner follow those of the Hispanic theologian Juan Bautista Monllor, whose tractate of similar title was the longest and most detailed treatment of *libertas philosophandi* at the time the speech was delivered.

Moderately critical stance and rational thinking play an equally major role in the second speech, *An Organon Aristotelis studioso sit necessarium*, in which Soner deals with Aristotelian logic and its relationship with theological truths. While endeavoring to prove that Aristotle's *Organon* can be applied to discover, explore, and defend the highest theological truths, hence reading it in the original is essential for theologians, Soner found himself opposed to many of his contemporaries. The examples he chose to buttress his arguments are mainly taken from everyday practice; they serve to demonstrate the usefulness of Aristotle's logic in solving problems of religious polemics past and present, including those found in the Bible. The speech reads as an implicit rejoinder to Antitrinitarian adversaries, among them the author of the 1610 letter, who condemned Soner for overemphasizing the theological applicability of Aristotelian thought and methods.

The third document analyzed, an end of term speech Soner delivered in his capacity as the newly elected rector of the *Altdorfer Akademie*, tackles another central problem of philosophy. *Ernesti Soneri panegyrica de fato* begins with reflections on successful and failed students, then it grows into a theological-philosophical discussion of fate. The title is slightly misleading, though, for the speech does not deal with fate in general but focuses instead on the widely discussed problem of the influence of celestial bodies on human life. Soner shows restraint again: although he does not reject the reality of astrological influence straight away and regards the stars as powerful forces, he claims that they do not in any way encroach upon the freedom of humans to make decisions.

Although the subject matter of the fourth speech, entitled *De stella magorum duce*, is astronomy, it makes detours into the enclosures of theology and philosophy. Here Soner

wants to prove that the celestial phenomenon observed in Bethlehem could not have been a fixed star, or a planet, or an angel, which God created for an exclusive, ephemeral purpose, but it was definitely a comet.

The fifth speech assesses the truthfulness of a statement by Aristotle and seems to belong *stricto sensu* to Soner's medical works. However, *An vere pronuntiavit Aristoteles lib. 2. De anima cap. 9. hominem sensu tactus superare bruta, ab iis autem superari caeteris sensibus*, is more dedicated to natural philosophy than to a particular problem of biology or medicine. It scrutinizes the place of humankind in the created universe, paying special attention to causes and effects, while trying to defend conclusions drawn by the Stagirite.

The sixth, last speech is entitled *An ars praestet naturae*. The short piece discusses an important, and perennial, question that concerns philosophy and aesthetics. The answer offered by Soner is, unsurprisingly, Aristotelian; he reasserts the superiority of nature over art. The speech is mostly a collection of excerpts from the *Cursus Conimbricensis*, a monumental series of commentaries on Aristotle's works compiled by Portugal Jesuits.

There is also a chapter about short rhetorical exercises, which are found in the volume. Their titles are: *Encomium aulicae vitae*, *Vituperium navigationis*, *Chria de garrulitate*, *Chria de superbia*, *Chria gratitudinem accipiendam ingritudinem vero fugiendam esse docens*, and *An assiduitatis et diligentiae praemia litterarum asseclis sint distribuenda?* Neither of them contains any serious thought (except *Vituperium navigationis*, which shortly refers to pacifism, an important part of Socinian doctrine). Their only value is, that they can offer a source about popular *florilegia*, where Soner searched for classical sentences, in order to fit them into his own texts.

Achievements

The letter and the speeches confirm in general what has already been known about Soner. Each of them can be related to his earlier writings and the influence of his masters is clearly noticeable. However, this should not be taken to mean or imply that they do not add important material to our knowledge of him. Quite the contrary. For although his choice of subjects fits into his intellectual profile, the speeches contain much novel information that can be used to correct or, at least, improve earlier assessments of him and to expand current research on Antitrinitarianism in new directions.

As regards the originality and quality of the arguments Soner advances in his academic speeches, one cannot read them but with mixed feelings. In some cases (in the *De libertate philosophandi* and in the *An ars praestet naturae?*) his sources can be easily

identified. They are either quoted verbatim, albeit without acknowledgement, or have been slightly altered and enlarged. Nevertheless, the choice of sources itself is not without significance. It assists us in mapping his erudition and determining the scope of his intellectual interests. Indeed, his choices indicate that he possessed a rare sense for excellence: although the works he read and quoted *ad litteram* or *ad sensum*, always regardless of the religious affiliation of their authors, are usually of recent date, they were highly respected not only in the period of time in which they were penned but also today.

Even other speeches are based on works by others, they abound in thoughts and ideas that are Soner's own. Despite his unwavering loyalty in these speeches to Padovan and Altdorfian Aristotelianism, Soner does not follow anyone directly in developing his argument. He frequently calls attention to overlooked aspects of the specific problem he is exploring and offers at the same time samples of themes and topics that would become foci of interest in later epochs. Thus the present analysis of the academic speeches confirms the interpretation of contemporary scholars (Caccamo, Salatowski, Bröer), who reject ideologically biased readings of Soner's works and point out his original thoughts without either overstating their importance or trying to make him a dialectical materialist *avant la lettre*.

Curiously enough, only the 1610 letter contains unequivocal references to Socinianism, whereas Antitrinitarian motives are almost entirely missing from the academic speeches. However, this is not just a telling sign of Soner's prudence; it also indicates that for him (Aristotelian) philosophy took priority over Sozzini's creed. Although Antitrinitarianism was closer to his intellectual taste than any other religious conviction, he did not want to accept its tenets uncritically.

To summarize: Soner's solemn academic speeches address problems that were of great interest to many in his time. The solutions he proposed to these problems were sometimes similar, or at least related, to those offered by others, but he always enriched his discussions with thoughts of his own. He was an erudite professor, well-versed in many branches of knowledge, but he was not a groundbreaking personality of the stature of Luther or Calvin, and certainly had no wish to become a martyr of faith. Despite this, he lived the academic life he wanted and was successful in adopting strategies that helped him meet the everyday requirements of such a life.

Publications

- *Tajemnicze przeznaczenie. O nieznanym mowie Ernsta Sonera = Antytrynitaryzm w pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej w kontekście europejskim* (Hermeneutika Wartości 10), szerk. Michał Choptiany – Piotr Wilczek, Warszawa, 2017, 143–159.
- *Az ifjabb Joachim Stegmann és a politika tudománya – Ismeretlen szövegek a 17. század közepéről = Scientiarum miscellanea – Latin nyelvű tudományos irodalom Magyarországon a 15–18. században* (Convivia Neolatina Hungarica II), szerk. Kasza Péter – Kiss Farkas Gábor – Molnár Dávid, Szeged, Lazi Kiadó, 2017, 133-142 (in collaboration with Dávid Molnár).
- *On the relationship between the Antitrinitarians in Poland and in Nürnberg: a letter addressed to Ernst Soner*, *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 59(2015), 203-219.
- *New Sources of Antitrinitarian Philosophy: Speeches of Ernst Soner*, *Acta Antiqua* 54(2014), 277–288.

Presentations

Debrecen, 7–9 of December, 2017.

Conference: A reformáció és a katolikus megújulás latin nyelvű irodalma (III. Neo-Latin Conference)

Title: Egy nikodémista sikertörténet. A radikális heterodoxia rejtőzködési lehetőségei Ernst Soner példáján

Szeged, 5-7 of November, 2015.

Conference: Latin nyelvű tudományos irodalom Magyarországon a 15–18. században (II. Neo-Latin Conference)

Title: Joachim Stegmann és a politika tudománya

Bécs, 2-8 of August, 2015.

Conference: International Association for Neo-Latin Studies, XVI. Congress

Title: *Magister Sacri Palatii Apostolici pro antitrinitariis arguit? Ioannes Annius Viterbensis in historiographia Hungarica*

Budapest, 18 of December, 2012.

Conference: Hungaria Latina Magyar Neolatin Egyesület 2012-es közgyűlési konferencia

Title: Ernst Soner és a nemzetközi antitrinitarizmus

Münster, 5-11 of August, 2012.

Conference: International Association for Neo-Latin Studies, XV. Congress

Title: De Ernesto Sonero et de necessitudine inter antitrinitarios Germanos Transsylvanosque