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Between the Sociologist and the Secret Police: The Ethical Affordances of Material Religion in Cold War Archives

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Keywords: Secret police, religion, communism, sociology, materiality, Hungary, holy cards, samizdat

Abstract

This article addresses the peculiar challenges and opportunities of researching lived religion in archives produced during the communist era. Inspired by the material turn in the study of religions, this article discusses the significance and uses of collections of the material traces of religion found in communist-era archives in Hungary. Using the private archive of Zsuzsa Horváth (1950–1995), a sociologist of religion who worked in 1970s and 1980s Hungary as a starting point, I relate the context, affordances, and connectivities of material religious objects found in her collection to analogous collections in state security archives. These antagonistic archival collections of material religion are the product of the peculiar tendency of the secret police, scholars of religion, and Cold War western advocates of religious freedom – albeit in pursuit of vastly different aims – to collect material manifestations of religion – images, objects, publications, manuscripts, and spaces – as evidence of the persistence of religious life. I argue that the scholarly archive of Zsuzsa Horváth, with its assortment of religious ephemera, offers valuable insight into aspects of the sensorial and aesthetic worlds of religious communities and reveals the complex moral and methodological entanglements of a scholar of religion working in the shadow of the secret police. Approaching the problem of lived religion through such a material phenomenological lens offers the opportunity to place diverse and opposing archival collections in dialogue with each other in order to unlock their evidential potential for the study of religions during the communist era in Eastern Europe.



Figure 1. A selection of items from the private collection of Hungarian sociologist Zsuzsa Horváth that relate to her research on religious communities © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 572, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.

Introduction

This article addresses the peculiar challenges and opportunities related to researching religion in Cold War-era archives. My reflections were inspired by an as yet uncatalogued and somewhat jumbled collection of artefacts texts, and images from the 1970s and 1980s that compose the personal collection of Hungarian sociologist Zsuzsa Horváth (1950–1995),¹ as

¹ The initial research that led to this article took place within the framework of a collaboration between the Hidden Galleries ERC project (no. 677355) and the Blinken OSA Archivum in Budapest. This led to the staging of an exhibition *Faith-Trust-Secrecy/Hit-Bizalom-Titok*, which opened at the Galéria Centrális in Budapest on February 28, 2020. The digital version of the exhibition can be viewed at <https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/>. Research for the exhibition included core research contributions from Kinga Povedák and Ágnes Hesz, and it was curated by Gabriela Niculescu and James Kapáló. Special thanks go to Katalin Székely for her coordination of the exhibition, and to Robert Parnica and the archival team at OSA for facilitating continued access to materials from the Zsuzsa Horváth collection. I am enormously indebted to them for their assistance and insights both at the time we were curating the exhibition and up to the present, as I continue to explore the significance and resonances of the Zsuzsa Horváth collection.

seen in figure 1. As a historian and ethnographer of religion in Central and Eastern Europe, the questions I bring to Cold War–era archives are sometimes different from those of a historian of communism or the Cold War. My reflections on research methods and ethical concerns that scholars of religions today, working under very different circumstances, share with scholars such as Zsuzsa Horváth, who was researching the politically sensitive topic of religious minorities while being under state surveillance and subjected to intimidation, led to the methodological insights I present in this article.

Much scholarship on the “religious cold war” addresses religion in terms of a global contest that pitched East against West, faith against atheism, and church against state, a contest that was, and still is, often viewed in starkly Manichean terms (Kirby 2002: xi). This framing is far removed from some of the simple items I discuss in this article. Historical interpretations of the role of religion and religious agency during the Cold War, as Dianne Kirby (2002) highlighted, have tethered religiosity in the United States to ideas about its democratic system and Soviet atheism to the failings of its economic and political model. Behind these ideas lay assumptions on both sides of the Iron Curtain about the inevitable decline of religion due to secularization, whether a corollary of the processes of modernity or the product of a forced political program. As Sonja Luehrmann notes, in the postcommunist context, “Questions about religious decline and persistence continue to provoke public debate, but the basic assumptions that ground the debate have changed” (2015: 12). Religious communities persisted and survived the ordeal of communist repression to, in some cases, re-emerge from the underground or to reclaim a central place in the public domain and discourse. Individuals and communities were changed by this experience, but only with the emergence of religious change as a core theme in the anthropology of Christianity have anthropologists and scholars of religions working on Central and Eastern Europe begun to see the transmission of religion during communism as vital for our understanding of postcommunist societies (see Hann 2020: 8; Rogers 2005). In the postcommunist context, scholars are called to question the relative failure of enforced secularization; the ineffectiveness of state security operations; and the persistence, growth, and transformation of many religious communities.

When browsing the traces of religious life found in Zsuzsa Horváth’s collection, the obvious shortcomings to approaching religion in the Cold War in such starkly oppositional terms became clearer to me. Scholarship often reduces Cold War religion to geopolitical concerns distant from peoples’ spiritual lives and existential concerns which, in turn, are subsumed into a narrative of religiously infused triumphalism (Kirby 2002: xi) open to appropriation by postcommunist political actors. As a sociologist working on the very sensitive

and almost virtually prohibited topic of new religious movements in Hungary in the 1970s and 1970s, Horváth's work, connections, and affiliations reflect the perplexing religious entanglements of late socialism. A friend to some well-known opponents of the regime, a trusted confidant of the religious communities she studied, a contributor to the western journal *Religion in Communist Lands*, and an active member of a samizdat network, Horváth lost her official research post and was targeted by the secret police for her activities. As a result, her personal archive – which contains the manuscripts of her research publications and interviews, cassette tapes with recordings of sermons and religious music, her library (which included religious samizdat), personal communications, invitations and greeting cards, as well as sundry religious ephemera – is intimately entangled with stories of secret police archives, counter-archives and activists, and the lived experience of religious communities.

Horváth passed away in 1994, but like many scholars of religion both before and after her, she collected the *stuff* of religion. Without the ability to ask her directly, we can only speculate that she did this for many of the same reasons cited by the contemporary scholar of religions Marion Bowman, who explained that she retained such materials, “as physical reminders of places, contexts, stories, ideas, the affordances of materiality and the importance of relationality” (2016: 384). In this article, using a few of the items buried in the boxes of Zsuzsa Horváth's collection as a starting point, I illustrate how collections of the material ephemera of religious life can provoke new questions about Cold War religiosities. Drawing on insights drawn from the scholarship on material religion, I employ Horváth's collection as a heuristic tool to inform a more grounded scholarship on the religious Cold War. The choice of items from her collection was determined by the serendipitous discovery of analogous artifacts in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security.

The Religious Cold War from Below

As outlined above, the central concerns addressed in most scholarship on religions during the Cold War, wide-ranging though they may be, have tended to sideline religion as lived, practiced, and transmitted by communities in the former communist countries. Access to the lived religious past, to the experiences, events, practices, and things that shaped the lives of embodied individuals and social groups – even when dealing with such recent history, comes with methodological and epistemological challenges. Ethnographic or sociological scholarship on religion published during communism is relatively scarce, and due to restrictions on academic freedom both in terms of the object of study and the theoretical lenses that could be applied, the scholarly research produced during the era has been viewed as less than trustworthy

or lacking in significance for the research questions scholars today pose in the postcommunist context (Rogers 2005: 5). State records of religions, whether those of communist-era ministries or secret police archival collections, also have obvious limitations. A third set of sources on religious life can be found in counter-archives, which aimed at “correct[ing] the blind spots left by state logics of documentation” by recording acts of religious resistance among other things (Luehrmann 2015: 135). The difficulty is not, as Zsolt Horváth points out, that there is an overall lack or “unavailability of historical sources”; rather, the difficulties of historical interpretation “are caused by an abundance of radically different types of records,” and these records are highly conflicting and polarizing (Horváth 2008: 248).

This article moves beyond conceived notions of hostile versus benevolent archives to recognize that all archives “achieve” things their compilers never intended. Inspired by the methodological insights of the so-called material turn in the study of religions and the anthropology of Christianity, this article focuses on one aspect of archival documentation of religions present in collections from secret police archives, counter-archives, and the collections of scholars working at the time: religious images, objects, and the ephemera of religious life. They reflect the nature of religions, which are fundamentally material, bodily, and sensorial, no matter how abstract or otherworldly their ideas might be. The secret police, scholars, and advocacy groups all found purpose in collecting religious materials as evidence of or to bolster a particular image of religious life, whether as anti-state activity, heroic resistance, or as a social phenomenon.

Historians and anthropologists of Cold War religion have recently begun to study the material religious items and objects held in secret police archives (Kapaló and Vagramenko 2020; Kapaló and Povedák 2022) while new research has drawn on the value of collections of items assembled by advocacy groups such as the Keston Archive (de Graffenried and Zoe Knox 2019). However, the material collections gathered by scholars who worked on religion under communism represent a lacuna in research on religious materialities. This article compares the ways physical religious artifacts appear in archives, their collection by various actors (whether the secret police, scholars, or activists), and the categories these actors apply to them and their evidential uses. The items from the Zsuzsa Horváth collection discussed in this article illuminate the assorted entanglements – personal, political, and religious – that existed between the antagonistic regimes of truth about religions during communism.

The different archives mentioned above each relied on forms of material evidence to promote a particular view of reality that was framed by a powerful narrative of Cold War rivalry and reflected in different logics of classification. The article thus explores the ways in which

material religious artifacts present in intimately entangled archival collections can participate in our reconstructions of the past, and how the ephemera of religious life dutifully collected by activist, agent, informer, or scholar can assist in addressing the interpretational challenges associated with Cold War polemics to reveal lived religiosities that transcend ingrained oppositional readings. This article, therefore, tackles a methodological problem of scholarship on religions; namely, how to navigate the assorted associations and slippery meanings of seemingly innocent items implicated in a deeply political context.

Texts versus Things

Before introducing examples from Horváth's collection, it is important to outline some of the tendencies we encounter in archival research on religion in the Cold War as well as some methodological points regarding material approaches to religion and their relation to the archival sources available for the study of lived religion. Approaching archival sources on religion during communism with an attentiveness to the material religious items they preserve, as I am proposing in this article, can serve a number of related methodological purposes.

By focusing on the role and fate of high-profile church figures, international transatlantic relations, and legal analyses of church-state relations, Cold War studies of religion have inadvertently generated a view of religious life as wholly subject to the oppositional rivalry of global Cold War polemics. To quote another author in this special issue, through this top-down lens, "interactions, experiences, and possible outcomes matter only in terms of geopolitics and ideology – and how they fit into and reflect the paradigm of rivalry" (László Szabolcs this issue). Approaches to the history of religions during communism, pursued largely through state archives and church archives, have placed overwhelming attention on religious leaders who resisted, such as Cardinal József Mindszenty in the Hungarian context (see below), or those that have been accused of collaboration, such as Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Teoctist (1986–2007). Such emphases have produced a perspective on history profoundly shaped by attitudes toward decommunization and the identification of perpetrators and victims (Blaive 2019). This highly polarized way of approaching religion in the Cold War has produced a simplistic understanding of the moral complexities and ethical dilemmas faced by ordinary faithful who could be cajoled, threatened, blackmailed, or enticed into collaboration or, indeed fall afoul of the regime for simply practicing their faith (see Apor, Horváth, and Mark 2017).

Scholars have long argued that the phenomenon of religion should not be reduced to the actions, doctrines, and formal practices of hierarchies and institutions. The material turn and the closely related vernacular turn in the study of religions developed in large part as

antidotes to two related tendencies in the academic study of religions: the privileging of texts (usually sacred texts), and the foregrounding of beliefs (usually canonically prescribed ones) over the lived reality of religious communities (see Morgan 2009, 2017; Hazard 2013; Harvey 2014; Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012). The study of material religion starts from the basic premise that “all religion is material religion” (Engelke 2007: 4) in the sense that religions always require some form of material mediation (see Keane 2007). Scholars have gone beyond this critical observation, however, to assert that certain meanings and ideas present in religions are generated through our experience as embodied beings in a material world and, as such, these ideas are not necessarily translatable directly into words or doctrines (Hutchings and McKenzie 2017: 5). By focusing on the creative, material, visual, and sensorial cultures of grassroots religious communities, scholars of material religion have sought ways of generating a more holistic view of religious cultures liberated, at least in part, from the patriarchal and institutional bias inherent to much text-centered religions scholarship. This article does not rehearse the many theoretical avenues that have been explored in relation to religious materialities (see Bräunlein 2016; Chidester 2018; Hazard 2013; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Vásquez 2011, 2017), and it intentionally steers away from theoretical remarks in order to keep my examples as grounded as possible in the historical context.

An important dimensions of the functionality of religious materialities highlighted in material religion scholarship that is particularly relevant to the examples I present here relates to the ways they generate and maintain specific forms of relationality between “individuals, communities and traditions, defining and penetrating the boundaries between them,” (Hutchings and Mackenzie 2017: 5), sealing or undermining bonds, transmitting or negating values, and marking or indeed erasing events. Faced with diverse archival collections that were generated by diverse actors with contradictory motivations and classificatory frameworks, material religious items may serve as a gateway to understand religious encounters, and as a key to unlock the entanglement of religious lives with an interventionist and repressive state.

Based on her research in the archives of the Soviet Knowledge Society, Luehrmann asserted that even though Soviet archival sources are “permeated by regimes of truth and power,” they were “connected to the reality outside of themselves,” which allows us to view them as sites of action. The presence (and absence) of religious materialities in archives reveals them not simply as sites of action, as Luehrmann argues, but also of exchanges and transactions in religious life and, as such, as an active “participant in the process of religious transmission” (Kapaló 2022: 259). These methodological lenses also help capture some of the practices associated with non-elite religious actors, such as women and other marginalized or less studied

groups (see Case 1 below), further contributing to a more holistic understanding of lived religion in the Cold War.

The mutually complementary methodologies developed by scholars of the material and vernacular turns in the study of religions implicitly counter another bias evident in post-Cold War historiography. Discursive approaches to religions (and to social life in general), inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, have led to a relative reductionism of the material world to the “effects of discourses, expressions of signs or symbols, ideas or ideologies” (Bräunlein 2016: 366). Historians of communism, by privileging the written record and the discursive practices of hegemonic institutions, have contributed to reducing religious agencies to an epiphenomenon of political developments, emphasizing their reactive character as opposed to their creative and generative potential. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kapaló 2022: 257), the impact of the archival turn in the social sciences, which accentuated the role of the archive as an expression and instrument of societal control and social transformation (Zeitlyn 2012), was felt in Eastern Europe roughly at the same time the archives of the communist regimes became accessible to researchers. This coincidence proved pivotal for historical analyses of the workings of communist states. The insights this development has generated for our understanding of knowledge production, power, and technologies of the self, as Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, gave a “strong theoretical orientation” to the generation of scholars that focused on discourse and ideology rather than everyday lived experience or practice (Fitzpatrick 2012: 8).

Foregrounding the material, spatial, visual, and sensorial worlds that present themselves in and through archival collections on religion allows researchers to access the real bodies and material lives in ways that research on regimes of truth, discourses, and social categories often occludes. In this vein, Luehrmann describes her attempts to “pierce through” the layers of “rhetoric and standard formulae” in the Soviet records she explored in the hope of being able to “filter out facts” about religious life in an explicit rejection of the idea that communist archives speak “only of the internal workings of Soviet state bureaucracies” (Luehrmann 2015: 3). Both Foucault and Derrida recognized the possibility for *the* archive, or any actual archive, to disrupt or subvert the very system that created it (Zeitlyn 2012: 463). The presence of material religious items within the disparate collections generated during the Cold War implanted the possibility for just such a disruption or challenge to the “evidential purpose” or intention of the creators of archives to emerge. The encounter with traces of lived religious experience, agencies, and practices that these images and objects represent, which were never

intended to form deliberately curated historical remains, have opened up new lines of interpretation for scholars of religions (Assmann 2008: 98).

The tendency of the dominant discursive approaches to archives to theoretically restrict access to lived realities and social lives has been compounded in the case of research on religions because of the general tendency among scholars of religions to emphasize ideas, beliefs (largely drawn from texts), and cognitive processes over religion as lived (Harvey 2014: 33). The combination of these two factors has contributed to a general reluctance among historians of religions in the Cold War to view state archives as useful sources for the study of religions per se, instead relegating their value to informing our understanding of the state and its processes.

As outlined above, due to both methodological and political imperatives, the scholarly treatment of religious life has largely reduced religious agency to a reactive phenomenon induced by atheist social engineering and interpreted it as determined by Cold War rhetorical battles and agendas. The repression of religious life did shape religiosity and religious consciousness, but we cannot understand precisely how this functioned without an effective and concerted effort to get in touch with grassroots practices, experiences, and sensations. The examples that follow draw attention to the material traces of religion and the interconnections they forged between the diverse actors in the field and between communities, secret police agents, and sociologist of religion Zsuzsa Horváth. My aim is to point to one method of bringing archival research on Cold War religion as close to the ground as possible.

Zsuzsa Horváth and Her Collection

The Zsuzsa Horváth archive was donated to the Blinken OSA Archivum in 2019 alongside materials belonging to her long-term partner Mihály Csákó, who was also a sociologist. Csákó was responsible for posthumously publishing a collection of Zsuzsa Horváth's works on religion entitled *Hitek és Emberek (Beliefs and People)* (Horváth 1995). Much of the context for my reading of her personal archive comes from Csákó's brief biography that opens the volume, which recounts her career, scholarly practices, and convictions in relation to the sociology of religion as well as his personal reflections on her scholarly identity, voice, and personality (Csákó 1995). Csákó's explanation of Horváth's research projects proved invaluable in making sense of the jumbled collection of photocopies, leaflets, publications, holy cards, invitations, and fieldnotes I explored in the dozens of boxes, folders, and envelopes that compose the archive.

The collection preserves numerous transcribed interviews – some of which form the foundation of Horváth’s published works – and a large volume of photocopied books and journal articles in Hungarian, French, English, and German, which reveal her intellectual formation and scholarly tastes. The materials also give us insight into the influences that shaped her research questions and how she conducted research in practice. What is striking about Horváth’s approach is that she chose to work intensively with communities, many of which were illegal or semi-legal at the time, using participant-observation and in-depth interviews, and analyzing the publications and materials religious communities were producing (Csákó 1995: 17). Horváth was convinced that given a context in which state restrictions and surveillance of religious life meant that people would be reluctant to respond to survey questions on sensitive topics, she needed to build strong personal relationships with the communities she researched through sustained engagement, gaining their trust in extremely adverse circumstances. Csákó explains how she worked based on this conviction:

In the first year, Zsuzsa spent two and a half or three days per week in the community, including, of course, Saturday and Sunday. She was part of family occasions (weddings, births), she was regularly invited to Sunday lunch at every household, she almost became like a family member of the community she studied. She conducted in-depth interviews in every family. She knew the community’s history, family ties, and faith relations across the whole country, she drew their family trees. If someone asked me what the difference was between this and the work of an ethnographer, I would reply that there is no difference. (Csákó 1995: 18)

Alongside Horváth’s interview and fieldwork materials, which warrant a dedicated research project in their own right, her archive contains an at first seemingly random collection of ephemera, most of which is connected to the religious communities she researched. It is from this pool of materials that I have selected examples to illustrate how material religious items mattered in late socialist Hungary, and what their *evidential* potential (Morgan 2017: 14) is for the scholar of religions during communism.

Although it is not my aim here to analyze Zsuzsa Horváth’s contribution to the sociology of religion, I must briefly introduce the communities she researched from the mid-1970s to fall of communism in 1990 (Horváth continued to research religion in the postcommunist period up to 1995, but for the purposes of this study, I am concerned only with her activities up to the system change). Her research career began with a detailed case study of

the Evangéliumi Pünkösdi Közösség (Evangelical Pentecostal Community) in the mid-1970s. It examined the social composition of the community over time and the particularities of its faith life. From this study, Horváth proposed a new hypothesis that membership of the Pentecostal community strengthened social mobility among members as it eased the problems associated with shifting life circumstances (Csákó 1995: 20). This study was followed at the end of the decade by her research on the Szabadkeresztyén Gyülekezetek (Free Christian Congregations), a neo-Pentecostal movement, which Horváth conducted together with ethnologist Magda Matolay.²

Under the aegis of the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, they selected two congregations, one in Budapest and one in the countryside. This research came to an abrupt end when they were both fired from the institute. The reason for Horváth's dismissal is recorded in a Biographical Card File in the Radio Free Europe archive, which states that she signed petitions objecting to the retaliations against the organizers of Charter 77 which were sent to the Presidential Council of the People's Republic of Hungary and to János Kádár.³ Only one short article based on her research on the Free Christians appeared in English in the spring 1984 issue of the journal *Religion in Communist Lands*, published by Keston College in the United Kingdom (Horváth later visited Keston College in person thanks to funding by a foreign foundation) (Csákó 1995: 10). The article summarized the main characteristics of the Free Christians and the reasons for their fluctuating appeal. As Csákó remarks, the results of this research can still be found among the reports of the institute and could be made available for secondary research (Csákó 1995: 21), and many of the transcribed interviews and recordings she made can be found in the collection preserved at the Blinken OSA Archivum.

Apart from a brief early career phase between 1976 and 1979, Horváth was unable to work officially in her field and was forced to take on other kinds of work to make ends meet. In 1985, however, she received a request to contribute an article on Hungarian Catholic Base Communities to a Canadian volume containing studies on the sociology of religion. The idea of the Base Community was articulated by Liberation Theologians in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church who sought to establish a new way of being a church. Self-organizing Base Communities were encouraged as a means of bringing the Church closer to the people, especially the poor and marginalized. The ecclesiology behind Base Communities stressed

² A brief biography of Magda Matolay by Zoltán Pál can be found on the website of the Courage Registry: <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n89305>.

³ "Non-Scientific Momentums," accessed July 5, 2023, <https://www.osaarchivum.org/blog/non-scientific-momentums>.

charisma over the power and privilege of the church hierarchy. Horváth researched five movements including the Bulányi movement⁴ and Regnum Marianum (see case 2 below). Although the notion of Base Communities emerged from Liberation Theology, which emphasized the unjust economic situation of the poor, several of the Hungarian communities studied by Horváth were founded or developed to keep the Christian faith alive during communist repression and, thus, constituted part of the Hungarian religious underground that operated illegally or semi-legally up to 1976, when such efforts were declared an internal matter of the Catholic Church. Catholic Base Communities constituted what Szilvia Köbel classifies from a legal perspective as “Resisting groups within state-approved churches.” In the Socialist Worker’s Party’s struggle against “clerical reaction,” they were considered to constitute a fifth column and therefore focused on trying to eliminate the influence of such movements especially on young people (Köbel 2022: 86-89).

Despite the many obstacles that affected her career, Horváth persisted in researching these suspect communities (from the state’s point of view). As a scholar of *kisegyházak* (small churches) and new religious movements, Horváth was concerned with gaining an understanding of the social composition of the religious communities she researched, their change over time, and the link between social mobility and the membership of so-called sects, an approach to religions that fit the dominant secularization theories of the time (Csákó 1995: 19–20). However, her work also subtly challenged the reductionist framing of her predecessors in field, such as Imre Kovács and László Kardos who, in line with Marxist thought, (wrongly) concluded that members of such congregations were mainly poor peasants who sought an illusory otherworldly solution to their economic marginalization in the interwar period. Instead, Horváth demonstrated that members of Pentecostal communities enjoyed higher levels of social mobility than comparable groups in their social class (Csákó 1995: 19–20).

More significant than her published conclusions regarding the social mobility of religious group members was her unique methodological approach and sensibility, which was influenced by her acute awareness of the impact of state-socialist ideology and policy on religion and academic scholarship. This is one of the main reasons Zsuzsa Horváth’s archive is so valuable: on the one hand, she represents a rare example of a scholar working on religion

⁴ Known to outsiders as Bulányists, after the Piarist monk György Bulányi, the small interrelated groups in this movement referred to themselves as *Bokor*, or the Bush. Following György Bulányi’s expulsion from his monastery in 1951 and the removal of his right to conduct mass, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment, but after his release in 1960 as part of a broader amnesty, he continued his work with small underground groups despite attempts by the Catholic hierarchy to prevent him continuing to teach and lead his communities.

who managed to conduct in-depth, ethnographic-style fieldwork on emerging and new religious movements during communism. On the other hand, like so many contemporary scholars of religion, through the close relations of trust she had with communities, Horváth perhaps inadvertently gathered the ephemera of religious life she encountered and experienced. Using this unique (in my experience) collection of materials, the two cases that follow sketch some of the divergent meanings and uses of religious materiality in the evidential regimes employed by the both the state and the scholar.

Case 1: The Jesus Picture Received in “D”

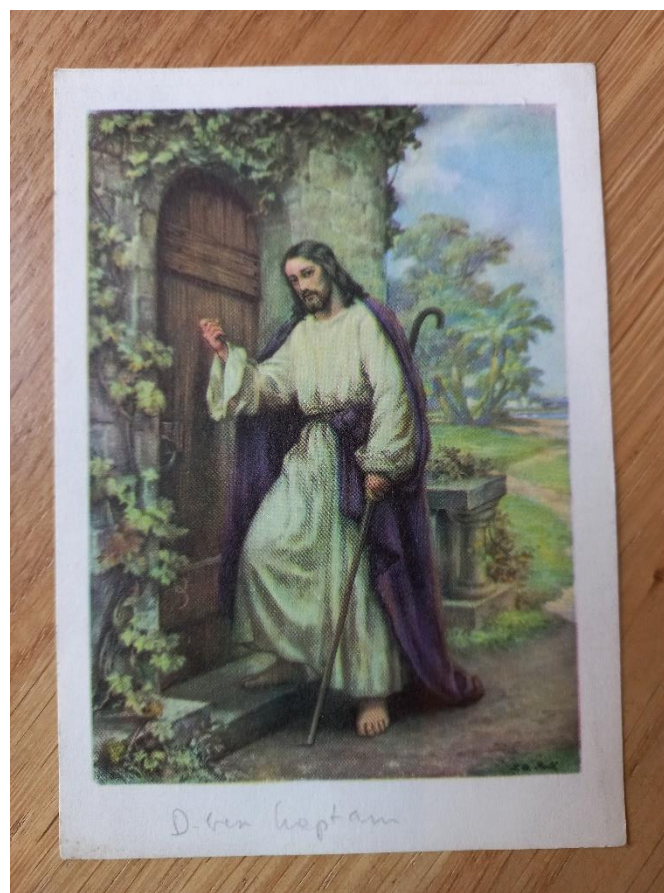


Figure 2. A holy card with the title *A zörgető Jézus* given on the reverse. Zsuzsa Horváth has added a handwritten note “D.ben kaptam” (I received this in D. [the initial of a name of a place])” © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 572, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.

Despite having been fired from the institute, Horváth and Matolay continued to conduct (their now independent research) on the Szabadkeresztyén Gyülekezetek. The first mention of

Horváth in secret police files appears in April 1980, when Horváth and Matolay are noted by an informer as having approached a Reformed Church minister using the cover name “Daniel” on March 29, 1980 about conducting a survey among small churches belonging to the Free Church Council and also requesting information about the Bethanist movement (ÁBTL 2.7.1. NOIJ Hajdu, 1980. 10 April).⁵

While sifting through a collection of envelopes in her collection numbered with temporary archive references, my curiosity was piqued by a small card with an image of Jesus entitled *A zörgető Jézus* (Jesus knocking on the door) on the back along with Revelation 3:20–22, the Bible verse that begins: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” On the front of the card we see a note jotted in pencil, “D-ben kaptam” (I received this in D) (figure 2). This item, one of a number of such holy cards, hand-made greeting cards, and invitations, preserves the physical and personal traces of this period in their research in the city of “D.” With access to the secret police file containing this first appearance of Horváth, the officer penning the summary of operational activities gives away the location to which Horváth was cautiously referring with the letter “D”: the city of Debrecen.

As Csákó notes in his account of Horváth’s career, and as we see in the numerous lists of encoded names and places that can be found in her personal archive, Horváth went to great lengths to protect the identities of her research participants, creating multilayered ways of encoding people’s names and true identities. This was not standard practice in 1970s Hungarian social sciences.⁶ In her published works, she refrained from giving away the location of the communities, and the jotted pencil note on the holy card “D-ben kaptam” appears to be a reflection of Horváth’s firm ethical stance.

Holy cards are a ubiquitous item in the Catholic tradition. Having become popular with the advent of mass printing, they were created as a means of commemorating acts of pilgrimage and devotion to particular saints. On one side, they would typically feature an image of the saint, and on the reverse side, there was usually a prayer or sometimes some advice or instructions. The meaning and uses of holy cards expanded over time: they became a way of commemorating family members’ wakes or funerals and significant religious events, such as first communions, confirmations, or ordinations, and they could be carried as protective

⁵ Thanks to Ágnes Hesz for this reference.

⁶ Multiple examples of Horváth’s method of creating coded reference initials for participants can be found in her collection. Some examples are featured in the exhibition Faith-Trust-Secrecy/Hit-Bizalom-Titok <https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/> (accessed on 11 July, 2023).

talismans (Calamari and DiPasqua 2004). In this way, they served as mnemonic devices embedded in religious and family networks and culture. Leonard Primiano, the pioneer of vernacular approaches to the study of religions and himself a collector of holy cards, points to the “dynamic local/regional/national/international interconnectivity and intersubjectivity of such ephemeral and humble objects” (Primiano 2016: 381).

Although not immediately associated with protestant and evangelical forms of Christianity, similar cards such as the image of “Jesus knocking on the door” – usually accompanied by passages from the Bible on the reverse – also circulated among these communities. While not direct objects of devotion or meditation, they illustrated for the Protestant faithful certain ideas about the nature and presence of Christ and thus served to connect lived memories and social life with theological ideas (see Morgan 1999). The card received in “D.” is one such item, a seemingly insignificant item of religious ephemera that marked a relationship, a meeting, and a transmission of a religious message from one carrier or holder to the next. From whom Horváth received this card and under what circumstances emerged from the connectivities traceable from the assemblage of other items in close proximity to her collection.

Before returning to the identity of the giver of the holy card and the clues it offers in relation to Horváth’s research and practice, I would like to explore similar, seemingly innocent and commonplace holy pictures that found their way into the archives of the Hungarian secret police. Two examples illustrate why these examples of material religion mattered to – or could be made to matter by – the secret police. For members of mainstream historical churches, religious faith and practice were not illegal in Hungary during the communist era. Churches, however, were subject to a “hostile” model of separation from the state, whose aim it was to weaken, and ultimately eliminate, their role in society (Köbel 2022). The secret police played a pivotal role in achieving this aim alongside the other institutions of the state, principally the Office of Church Affairs and the Secretaries of Church Affairs that operated at the county level. The Hungarian secret police, known as ÁVÓ or ÁVH,⁷ was engaged in operations combating so-called clerical reaction, a term used to refer to the supposedly political actions of churches carried out under the guise of religion. Total surveillance in the interest of complete control of

⁷ In the period between the end of 1945 and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the Hungarian secret police went under at least three names. The abbreviations ÁVÓ (which stood for Hungarian State Police State Defence Department, *Magyar Államrendőrség Államvédelmi Osztálya*) and ÁVH (State Protection Authority, *Államvédelmi Hatóság*) remained in everyday unofficial use throughout the communist period even though from 1956 onward, the secret police operated as the State Security Department of the Ministry of the Interior under the somewhat obscure title *Belügyminisztérium III. Főcsoportfőnökség*. See Müller 2012.

churches meant that the secret police were engaged in every level of religious life through their agents and informer networks. That they should observe and instrumentalize the material dimensions of the life of communities comes as no surprise to a scholar of religions, but the extent to which small things could become instruments of state security and made to matter in other ways is instructive for our understanding of both the realities of religious life under surveillance and the significance of the items Horváth preserved.



Figure 3. Image of Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary © Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security), ÁBTL 3.1.1. B 91185.

In 1958, a Greek Catholic priest from a rural community in eastern Hungary was arrested and interrogated on charges of illegal economic activity and spreading anti-state propaganda. György Kriskó was accused of selling church candles to his parishioners at an inflated price and of distributing small holy card-style images of Cardinal Mindszenty (see figure 3), the Bishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary, with the candles. Mindszenty was at the heart of the Hungarian so-called clerical reaction, and in 1958, he became a powerful symbol of resistance to the communist authorities. Mindszenty had been imprisoned by the Hungarian Stalinist regime in 1949 and remained incarcerated until 1956, when during the revolution he was released and sought political asylum in the US embassy, where he remained until 1971. From Kriskó's state security file, it appears that he was targeted for recruitment on

the basis of a “fabricated accusation” as he was someone who was “not at all fanatical and approaches his church responsibilities with a degree of flexibility” (ÁBTL 3.1.1. B 91185, 1958, October 8, 13). He was brought in for questioning about the Mindszenty images and threatened with five years imprisonment if he refused to collaborate with the secret police. From September 11, 1958 on, he worked as an informer under the code name “Kárpáti.” Multiple copies of the Mindszenty image are included in the case file, but each one has been defaced with holes punched through the Cardinal’s face. It is not clear from these pieces of “evidence” whether they were planted by the secret police as part of the act of “fabrication” of evidence, nor do we know by whom the images were defaced, or when such damage occurred. On the reverse of some of the cards we see Mindszenty’s name in poor handwriting and mostly misspelled.

Given the state’s attempt to control cultural production, especially printing, access to even typical, much less politically charged holy cards and images became problematic, resulting in attempts to smuggle these items into Hungary from the West. In 1962, a haul of ten thousand holy cards together with three hundred memorial cards and ten rosaries were discovered during customs checks at the Austrian–Hungarian border. The success of this operation came down to the fact that the secret police had tapped the bishop’s palace in the Hungarian city of Győr, and even though the bishop had refused to accept the illegal delivery of holy cards, the secret police had learned of the shipment and intercepted it.

The monk was subsequently interrogated, the holy cards were used to blackmail him into collaboration with the secret police under the cover name “Hobbs,” and the cleric was sent to collect intelligence on the Verbite order (Povedák 2019). Similarly to the Kriskó case, a holy card is included in the case file as tangible evidence. The recruitment of agents “Kárpáti” and “Hobbs” through the traffic in holy cards illustrates how these material items were turned into evidence by the state security service and served an evidential purpose for scholars of religion by deepening our understanding of changes that contorted the vernacular religious environment and thus transformed simple devotional materials into conspiratorial material agents. By 1980, when Horváth was conducting fieldwork among the Free Christians and received *A zörgető Jézus*, there is no indication that the card could have been used for the same purposes as the two cases I have described above, but her simple note with the letter “D” suggests that she was aware that it could be used to track her relations with communities, people, and places.

Stuffed together in another envelope, I found a collection of cards that reveals unequivocally from whom she received *A zörgető Jézus*. On a folded piece of paper on the back

of a note (see figure 2) into which were inserted a selection of other items discussed below, we read in Horváth's handwriting:

1980. VII. 13. de irt.

Debrecen;

Küldte: Kopasz Jenő

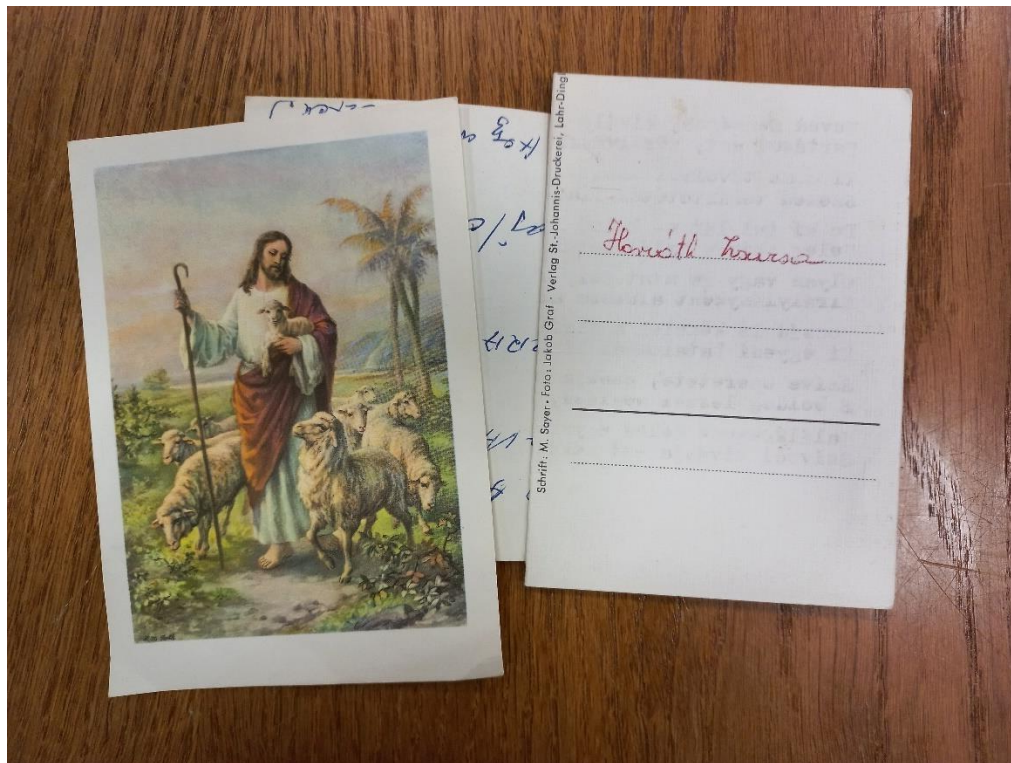


Figure 4. The holy card entitled *A jó pásztor* together with a handwritten note and handmade card © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 430, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.

Jenő Kopasz was a key figures in the *cigány ébredés* (the Roma religious revival) of the 1970s that started in Szabolcs-Szatmár county in eastern Hungary among some of the poorest Roma communities in the country.⁸ During the reconstruction operation that followed catastrophic floods in the region in 1970, Jenő Kopasz, a member of a Baptist congregation and then the Free Christians, was invited by a local woman to open a mission in the village of

⁸ The term *cigány* in Hungarian is equivalent to Gypsy in English and carries many of the same negative connotations. In academic circles, this term has largely been replaced by the terms Roma and Romani. Although I have used the word Roma to translate this term, the word *cigány* is how this religious revival of the 1970s was referred to, and it also reflects the emic term used today by many members of the community.

Uszka that then expanded to Debrecen and Békés county (Povedák and Povedák 2023: 6). Horváth and Matolay conducted several interviews, participated in events, and recorded sermons in Uszka in April and July 1980, with transcripts of many of these found in Horváth's collection.⁹ These materials correspond to the first trace in secret police reports indicating that the two sociologists' research, by then officially *unsanctioned* and thus illicit, was being closely observed.

Interestingly, there is no mention of the Romani dimension of this research in the only piece Horváth ever published on the Free Christians – in *Religion in Communist Lands* in 1984 – or in the *kutatási jelentés* (research report) submitted to the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy and published posthumously by Csakó (Horváth and Matolay 1995). As Povedák and Povedák point out, although the gypsy mission was part of the officially recognized Council of Free Churches, it was dealt with as a “sect,” and consequently, it was on the radar of the state security services. However, the communist authorities tolerated the activities of the Free Christians among the Roma because they saw that the mission was achieving results regarding social integration that the state could not (Povedák and Povedák 2023: 6).

The note Horváth received from Jenő Kopasz on July 13, 1980, which she perhaps later bundled together with the holy card *A jó pásztor* and a handmade Christmas card (see below), reads as follows:

“ – Now the door is
Still open – ”
(For you)

But at some point in time, the door will be closed.
(He just said that I should write this to you)

Among the fieldnotes in Horváth's collection, we find her account dated July 19, 1980, six days after a prayer meeting and *imaházavatas* – a dedication of a prayer house in Uszka. This brief note, which is written in poor handwriting with spelling mistakes, and with its tantalizing allusion to the image of Jesus knocking on the door that she received in “D” probably earlier that year, almost certainly also from Jenő Kopasz, reveals how this exchange

⁹ Extracts from some of Matolay Magda's interviews from this time can be found online: https://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/magyarorszagi_nemzetisegek/romak/ciganyut/pages/003_szeret_az_en_i_stenem.htm.

of cards reflects Horváth's relationship with her participants. The short note gives her the go-ahead to make the trip to Uszka, a visit that was possible at the time the note was written but which might not be possible in future. The connections between Horváth and the Uszka mission were known, but these seemingly insignificant items offer us a glimpse into what it meant to engage in unsanctioned research on such sensitive topics as semi-legal religious groups and marginalized Romani communities.

In the work of the secret police, the relationship between the visual and the textual was complex but based on a logic of material proof. In the search for truth(s) about communist repression, much attention has been paid to texts generated by secret police forces, whereas far less significance has been afforded to the visual and material traces of communities themselves found in the archives. Researchers of religions, as evidenced by the Horváth collection, collected and preserved some of the same types of visual materials and objects in the course of their fieldwork with communities as did the secret police through their surveillance efforts. Today, these artifacts highlight for us important connectivities and entanglements that otherwise would remain obscured or undisclosed.

Case 2: Samizdat Present and Absent

On July 19 and 20, 1980, Horváth is, as her personal archive indicates, in Uszka, probably with Matolay, attending a prayer meeting and the dedication of a prayer house. The following day, on July 21, a secret police officer produces a report listing her as one of a group engaged in the establishment of a *Munkaközvetítő Iroda*, an employment agency aimed at finding work for unemployed opposition figures. It is from her purported activity as part of this agency that Horváth receives a secret police code name “Közvetítőné” (Mrs. Mediator), while her partner Csákó is given the code name “Közvetítő,” Mediator (ÁBTL 2.7.1. NOIJ III/III–122/1980. July 21).

While we have some clear evidence that the authorities put obstacles in the way of her scientific work, the secret police archival record demonstrates much more unequivocally their interest in her involvement in the production of samizdat materials for the democratic opposition.¹⁰ Horváth and Csákó appear in reports produced as part of a number of different surveillance operations targeting opposition figures, many of whom had connections to them related to samizdat activities. From the spring of 1981 onward, Horváth and Csákó appear in

¹⁰ I am indebted to Ágnes Hesz for having located the secret police materials relating to Horváth's samizdat activities, details of which were included in the exhibition *Faith-Trust-Secrecy/Hit-Bizalom-Titok*.

the informer reports of “Anita,” who, from the reports filed, we learn worked for Horváth as a typist (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–40780 “Anita”). Trusted by Horváth, and it seems in her complete confidence, “Anita” is given various samizdat manuscript materials to type up, which she duly reports to her secret police handler. From these same reports, we learn that Horváth is aware that she is under surveillance and advises “Anita” “not to say anything important as their telephone conversations are being tapped.” The reports represent a rich source for understanding the lengths to which Csákó and went in their attempts to protect the identity of the network members with whom they worked; they also demonstrate the layers of conspiratorial entanglements that defined the sociologists’ existence as their own trusted typist, whom Horváth was also attempting to shield from secret police attention, also operated as “Anita,” an informer diligently offering her secret police handler information to enable him to infiltrate and neutralize the samizdat network.

Based on the reports of “Anita” and another informer named “Hajdu” (the cover name under which the author Sándor Tar operated from 1978 on) starting in September 1981, the secret police surveillance operation resulted in a search of Horváth’s home (Csákó 1995: 29). Through the informer reports that discuss the fallout from this operation we learn that Horváth’s flat had served as a storage site for print runs of samizdat publications and materials in preparation (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–41819/1 “Hajdú”, 62, 66). As Csákó tells us in his brief account of the incident, Horváth managed to prevent secret police agents from confiscating the “towering piles” of fieldwork interview manuscripts, thus protecting her research participants and preserving these materials, now in the Blinken OSA Archivum, for future generations of researchers. After being repeatedly called in for interrogation, Horváth received only a police warning after the house search. “Anita” reports that Horváth decided to quit her samizdat work for some time and that Horváth was delighted that she succeeded in protecting her typist, who we know was simultaneously her confidant and her betrayer. From the reports available to us, we learn that Horváth’s samizdat network lost a significant amount of its work, that some of the samizdat materials were religious in nature, and that Horváth’s wider network included individuals embedded in clerical networks that included József Éliás and Péter Légrády (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–40780, 107).¹¹

¹¹ József Éliás (1914–1995) was a member and later the pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Of Jewish origin, starting in 1942 he led *Jó Pásztor Bizottság* (the Good Shepherd Commission), established to offer spiritual and material support to members of the church with a Jewish background and to lead the official Reformed Church mission to the Jews. In 1951 he was removed from his position, and from 1956 on he served as a pastor in Reformed congregations in various locations in Hungary. Zsuzsa Horváth worked on Éliás’s biography in the early 1980s as well as engaged her typist “Anita” in copying his samizdat manuscript *A konkoly uralma* (The rule of the corncockle). Péter Légrády was a medical doctor who came to the attention of the secret police in the second

Following her research on Free Christians, Horváth researched Catholic Base Communities after receiving an invitation to publish her work in a Canadian volume on the sociology of religion. The volume was never completed, but her paper was eventually published in different versions in French (Horváth 1988) and Hungarian (Horváth 1987). In the Hungarian context, the Base Communities she researched constituted a variety of different movements whose activities were sanctioned neither by the state nor by the Catholic Church. After a softening of the state's stance toward mainstream churches in the 1970s, in 1982 the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party issued a resolution condemning the activities of nonconformist groups operating beyond the control of the official church leadership as "socially dangerous" (Köbel 2022, 88). In connection to this phase of her research, which came after the raid on her home by the secret police, Horváth's personal archive preserves a two-volume samizdat copy of the history of Regnum Marianum, the oldest such Base Community in Hungary. In her study, Horváth describes the significance of this movement, whose origins can be traced back to 1903 and founding of the Regnum Marianum Association: "The groups [belonging to Regnum Marianum] played a very important role in the history of the post-1945 Hungarian Catholic Church: During the period of the harshest political repression, they organized – together with others – the "underground church," securing the church's future" (Horváth 1995, 246).

The two volumes of the hardbound but hand-typed samizdat book are simply entitled *Regnum Marianum. I. rész. Alapítás* (Part 1. Founding), which deals with the history of the movement up to 1951, and *Regnum Marianum. II. rész. Megmaradás* (Part 2. Persistence), which continues up to the 1980s. Despite its presence in her personal archive as an artifact, she does not cite this source in her published studies on Base Communities. Of course, we cannot know for sure that it was in her possession at the time she was writing, but its presence in the preserved collection is conspicuous, and it would have been a valuable source to support her conclusions about the role of the movement when it was forced to operate "underground." While reflecting on the impact of earlier waves of repression on the movement –specifically, in the 1960s, when three waves of arrests affected its leadership – Horváth reveals something telling about Regnum Marianum: "They produce little written material – especially in comparison with the *bulányisták* –, and these they don't give to others at all" (Horváth 1995: 253). This cautiousness, she intimates, was the result of the movement having become more

half of the 1970s because of his connections with religious and clerical networks and his ties and frequent trips to Transylvania to visit Hungarian intellectuals there. Starting in the early 1980s, he was a central figure in a samizdat distribution network linked to Csákó and Horváth (Kozák 2004)

secretive and “conspiratorial” in its work, the legacy of which could be felt even in the 1980s, when she was writing (Horváth 1995: 252).

In light of the insights we gain from the secret police archives about Horváth’s personal engagement with the production and distribution of samizdat, her published work on Regnum Marianum is particularly telling: She had firsthand experience operating “conspiratorially” in order to avoid detection by the secret police, and she had suffered personally from having been caught producing and distributing religious samizdat materials. If we read her work without this knowledge, we cannot grasp the significance of the researcher as an *insider* to this aspect of underground cultural production, knowledge that simultaneously presents us with a unique view on one of the many samizdat material artifacts we find in her archive. Because of this back story, the religious samizdat from the Horváth collection preserved at the Blinken OSA Archivum serves as material evidence not only of Horváth’s research methodology but also her life story, which similarly opens new avenues to contemplate samizdat artifacts as unique “indices of their historical time” (Komaromi 2004: 598).

Concluding Remarks

This article emerged from my reflections on two significant encounters with material religion in communist-era archives: the Hungarian secret police archives, and the personal scholarly archive of the sociologist of religion Zsuzsa Horváth. Material methodologies were not part of Horváth’s toolkit, but like so many scholars of religions past and present, she was a collector of things – intentionally or incidentally. The secret police similarly gathered examples of the stuff of religion for their own evidential bases, and these appear in the case files. Like Horváth, I grew up without personal computers, mobile phones, and the internet, and so when I first had the opportunity to peer into the *raw* boxed materials that had been donated to the Blinken OSA Archivum, I understood that I was separated in time from her and her work but, as I have noted, we shared an instinct to collect. The presence of material religious artifacts in archives, whether scholarly or secret police, betrays the tendency to collect, albeit in the pursuit of vastly different and sometimes opposing aims, the images, objects, publications, manuscripts – as *evidence* of religion. The two brief case studies presented here show how material artifacts can illuminate sometimes obscured evidential traces of the encounters, practices, and connections of religious groups, researchers, and their secret police shadows.

The holy cards gifted to Horváth by her Free Christian Romani informants and the samizdat publication of the history of Regnum Marianum point to the necessary subterfuge of her research, her methodological approach of long-term participant observation, and her ethical

commitment to protect her research participants at all costs. She could not openly and directly communicate any of this in her published work. The constraints she experienced and the mark they left on her scholarly legacy can be understood only by taking into account the archive the secret police compiled parallel to her own. Hers is an archive in the shadow of an archive, against which she attempted to prove her work, devising means and methods of protection. The material artifacts presented in this article constitute humble and unremarkable traces of her protective impulse. Csákó makes the point that the political system “created a political community between believers and the religion researcher” (Csákó 1995: 29). While this may be what the state saw, Horváth and her research participants, I suggest, would not have characterized their relationship of trust in such a way. This was a word that Horváth used frequently when speaking with her scholarly voice: she and her research participants engaged in conspiracy together as *co-conspirators*. This has many implications for the way we read Horváth’s work, and indeed the work of other historians, sociologists, and ethnologists of religion during communism.

Bringing our attention to the artifacts in Horváth’s collection and *reading* them in tandem with state security files helps us reconstruct a meaningful and reflective portrait of the life of religious believers in the space we refer to as the religious underground. Horváth’s work was informed by three very different but simultaneously dominant ideas about religion: that it was a dangerous activity to be eliminated, that secularization will ultimately lead to its disappearance, and that it constituted a heroic political space dedicated to resistance to communism. Although she had only limited freedom to address these questions in her publications, the materials Horváth preserved in her collection show that the personal collections of scholars and others can further our understanding of lived religion in the communist period.

My aim was to explore ways of using archives to bring Cold War religions scholarship closer to the ground and to weaken the tendency to see religious life in purely oppositional, political or Manichean terms. Reading the presence – and absence – of material religion in the diverse Cold War–era archival collections accessible to scholars of religions opens up the possibility of peeking behind textual smoke screens, be they created by state security agents or indeed by a sociologist of religion herself, to grasp the methodological and ethical challenges scholars and religious communities confronted together.

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Captions

Figure 1. A selection of items from the private collection of Hungarian sociologist Zsuzsa Horváth that relate to her research on religious communities © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 572, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.

Figure 2. A holy card with the title *A zörgető Jézus* given on the reverse. Zsuzsa Horváth has added a handwritten note “D.ben kaptam” (I received this in D. [the initial of a name of a place])” © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 572, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.

Figure 3. Image of Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary © Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security), ÁBTL 3.1.1. B 91185.

Figure 4. The holy card entitled *A jó pásztor* together with a handwritten note and handmade card © Blinken OSA Archivum, Budapest, HU OSA 430, Donation of Zsuzsa Horváth.