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Secret Police Informer Files as Sources for the Study of Vernacular Religion under Communism

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on a particular type of archival material, the secret police files produced by Communist totalitarian regimes in Romania and Hungary as possible sources for the study of vernacular religion. As an analytical concept, vernacular religion refers to “religion as it is lived” (Primiano 1995). It understands religiosity as an interactive process, an ongoing intersubjective negotiation and interpretation of religious ideas and practices. Vernacular religion is thus an ongoing creative process during which individual believers and the local religious groups they are part of mould their ways of religiosity – often in the face of, and in interaction with church or state authorities. To capture its complexity, researchers mostly access vernacular religion through ethnographic fieldwork.

Relying on the methodological findings of Christina Vatulescu (2010), Catherine Verdery (2014) and Sonja Luehrmann (2015), however, this chapter argues that when applying critical reading, this multivocal and generically versatile material could be used as an ample source for the study of vernacular religion. It shows that not only do these documents inform us about how people under communist dictatorships practiced and experienced religion, but in countries like Hungary, they constitute a rare window on this particular dimension of religion.

Religion during communism has typically been studied from a top-down perspective, focusing on the regime’s church policy, the entanglement of churches with state authorities, the pursuit of religious groups and especially their leaders, and the directives and methods of religious persecution. Certain churches and denominations have been at the forefront of research, depending on their relationship with the state and the level of their dissent from the regime. Not much is known, however, about how everyday religious believers experienced this period and what it meant to live a religious life in an environment where the expectations of the state about what a proper citizen should feel, think and do often conflicted with religious norms or the inner drives of a religious person.

The vernacular religion approach was conceived as a means to study religious practice from a bottom-up, practice oriented perspective. Formulated by the folklorist Leonard Primiano, vernacular religion emerged as one of several alternatives to the terms ‘folk religion’ or ‘popular religion’, which in the last decades came under harsh criticism for defining the religion of the “masses” in distinction from the religion of the elite, and thus implying that it is somehow

a less up-to-date, less correct or incomplete reproduction of religion proper. Critics, including Primiano, also argued that religion is much more than institutional dogma and practice.¹ According to Primiano vernacular religion is “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano 1995, 44). It is an on-going creative process during which individual believers constantly negotiate their religious ideas and practices while interacting with their environment. Thus to understand vernacular religion, argues Primiano, research should pay attention to “the processes of religious belief, the verbal, behavioural, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief” (Primiano 1995, 44–45). Thus the vernacular religious approach has the benefit of drawing our attention to aspects of religion and religious practice that formerly have been overlooked or less de-emphasised. By focusing on the religious practitioner and understanding religiosity as an on-going interpretative process, this approach presents individual believers as having creative agency in shaping their religion, instead of simply being passive receptors of official doctrine. By stressing the intersubjective and interactive nature of this process, this approach also helps us to grasp the complex power relations behind religious practice. And finally, by pointing out the versatility of expressions of belief, it broadens our perception of what makes religion.²

Since the vernacular religious approach is primarily inductive in the sense that it focuses on the believers and their practices, vernacular religion has mostly been researched through ethnographic fieldwork methods. In this paper, however, I argue for the value of secret police files as one of the rare sources for research on vernacular religion under communism.³ My arguments are mainly based on my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL), where I consulted materials concerning clandestine religious movements (mostly Roman Catholic), members of abolished monastic orders or unrecognised religions, and village priests and to a lesser extent on my experience in the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS) where my research focused on various religious minority groups in Transylvania.⁴

Reading secret police files

The source value of secret police files has been the subject of much discussion ever since they became accessible for the public and researchers. As many have pointed out, most readers who came across secret police files, historians among them, read these documents as though there was a referential relationship between their content and the realities of the past (Vatulescu 2010, 13; Takács 2014, 110; Laczó 2009). The main task of historians was thus to investigate the

nature of this relationship: are particular statements in the files correct or incorrect, did informers, agents or secret police officers lie when they reported about what their targets had said and done (Takács 2014, 110; Verdery 2014, 62 – citing Poenaru 2013: 219) or did they record things truthfully. This factual approach in the search for ‘truths’ has been criticised for failing to reflect on the fact that these documents were produced according to the logic of the state security agencies (Takács 2014, 110).⁵ Subordinated to the task of identifying and controlling the enemies of the regime, these files, it can be argued, are more of an ideological construct than a credible reproduction of what informers, witnesses or the targets themselves experienced.

This discursive critical approach has led to a re-evaluation of secret police files as source materials. It has been argued by several researchers working on secret police materials from different countries that instead of telling us about the reality of the past, secret police archives first and foremost provide us with information on the inner workings of the secret police (Farkas 2006, 154; Verdery 2014, 39–40; Rainer 2008, 18) and on “the values, apprehensions and fantasies” they entertained (Vatulescu 2010, 13). Understood in this way, the files reveal how state security services perceived and presented society and therefore, as Katherine Verdery has put it, secret police archives are “less useful as a source of knowledge than as a form of it” (Verdery 2014, 159). It has also been pointed out, however, that the textual reality constructed in the files had actual and tangible influence on reality in many ways – in other words, the files had (and still have) performative power (Vatulescu 2010, Verdery 2014, 60–73; Luehrman 2015, 42–43). Therefore, the right questions to ask about secret police files according to this approach should focus on how they were produced and what they did to their subjects and to society: how their existence and the activities that produced them influenced personal identities, interpersonal relationships, social norms, arts etc. (Verdery 2014, 63; Verdery 2018; Vatulescu 2010).

Conversely, the extent to which information in secret police files could be fabricated has also also debated. Krisztián Ungváry has pointed out, there was a limit as to how far the information provided by informers could diverge from reality in the course of this passage through the secret police system, since, at the end of the day, the secret services’ goal was to “learn what the citizens really thought,” and they had a complex system of cross-checking the data they worked with (Ungváry 2014, 92–93). An essay written by an anonymous informer in 1958 seems to support this argument with the author claiming that the best advice he was given early on by

one of his case officers was to refrain from blowing up things: “it is not for us to enhance the effect and it is not for us to distort the size of danger, because with that we would undermine our credit. [...] From this I knew that we are responsible for every word we write down and every opinion we make.” This essay was written – along with three others – on the request of the Hungarian secret service for methodological purposes (ÁBTL 4.1. A–3253 – published in Takács 2013, 104–122). While there is evidence that secret police files sometimes do contain fabricated information (see for example Takács 2014, 122–125), several researchers have argued that despite their factual unreliability regarding the lives and deeds of targeted individuals, secret police files may provide valid insights into broader social-historical issues (Kula 2004, 203 – quoted by Gieseke 2010, 5; Farkas 2006: 154; Luehrman 2015, 22; Verdery 2018, 212). In order to move beyond the textual reality of the files, it is argued, researchers have to “read between the lines” applying a narratological approach that takes into account the position and aim of their authors and the logic and discursive frames in which these documents were produced (Luehrman 2015, 40; Rainer M. 2008; Takács 2014). In the following pages, I will try to show how, in applying this approach, secret police files can shed light on several aspects of religious life during communism.

In the secret police archives there are several file types that include information on religion and religious practice. The richest sources from a vernacular religion perspective are informer’s files and documentary files of particular religious communities, but penal files of religious leaders or religious activists may also sometimes contain valuable data. Those charged with reporting on religious matters constituted a diverse group. Some were recruited with the aim of informing on a particular target religious group of which they may often have been members or had close connections to (see Cașu and Kapaló this volume).⁶ Others were assigned to work in local communities on various groups such as ethnic minorities, kulaks, former army officers, gendarmes, doctors, lawyers or teachers. These informers were often instructed to report on local priests and the religious activity of the local community as well. Priests and pastors were also represented amongst the rank of informers with the primary task of reporting on fellow clerics and on internal affairs of their churches (see Cindrea this volume).

With the exception of informer’s files, which collect all the reports given by a single informer, secret police files generally comprise various document types from informer’s reports to analytic reports or case summaries written by higher rank officers, evaluations, action plans, hand written or transcribed confessions, interrogation minutes, transcripts of tapped

conversations, reports on shadowing, surveillance photos, and confiscated materials (letters, books, pamphlets, images, photos of confiscated objects). All these “genres” were produced with a particular aim and follow various discursive schemes that have to be discerned for a correct or satisfactory understanding of their meaning. Secret police files are also polyphonic or, as Katherine Verdery has argued, heteroglossic in that they reflect the voices of informers, case officers, their superiors as well as the voice of the people under surveillance, who all use a variety of linguistic conventions (Verdery 2014, 51). Although in the context of the files these voices are subjected to one dominant interpretation which presents the surveilled people as enemies (Verdery 2014, 52), critical reading can help their re-contextualisation and open them up to other possible interpretations. Therefore, to see what secret police files can really tell us about vernacular religious practice, we should first understand how the documents they contain were produced.

Of all the document types, informer’s reports have received by far the most scholarly attention – which is not surprising if we think about the central role they had in the workings of the secret police and their significance after the fall of communism in lustration processes and political debates around it. In the discussions about what can and cannot be learned from these documents, many researchers have stressed that these texts were collective products of multiple authors and demonstrated how the secret services, through their working procedures influenced and determined their contents (see Farkas 2006, 148–149; Rainer 2008, 16–17; Verdery 2014; Pihurik 2011; Takács 2013; Gyarmati 2014, 69). Informer’s reports are therefore selective, manipulated (and as a result, manipulative) representations of their subjects – even if they seem to be truthful, and often lively accounts, of what informers had seen and heard.

The distortive influence of the secret service was already at work before the actual surveillance had started. Informers operated under the close guidance of their case officers from whom they received well-defined assignments at their regular meetings. The detail of the instructions they were given before completing a task is a good indication for how close this guidance was. In 1960, for example, a parish priest in Hungary reporting under the cover name “Szirmai Béla” was ordered to gain the confidence of a theology student, through whom he could gather information about a clandestine Catholic youth movement. In order to succeed, his case officer told “Szirmai” to invite the student to his home, offer him coffee and watch television together with him. He also instructed him to adopt an “ecclesial manner” during these visits (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–23166, 286). In another case an informer, a projectionist with the task of reporting on

a village priest to whom he was distantly related, was instructed to “deepen” their relationship by paying him occasional visits, talking about common relatives and asking advice on beekeeping. Since he was a party member, his case officer noted in his action plan from 1967 that “the agent’s behaviour pattern has to be specified as different from [the target’s] doctrinal and political approach in terms of economic and political issues. This in turn could facilitate debates [between the two], and by properly guiding and educating the agent, the overall attitude of [the priest] could be revealed.” (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-28356/1, 64–65) By telling the informers what to look for and how to behave, the secret police directed their gaze and predefined what they saw (Farkas 2006, 148).

The instructions of the case officer also defined how informers wrote their reports. These texts were produced following different practices (see Gyarmati 2014, 69). In the Hungarian case, most informers submitted handwritten reports to their case officers, which they wrote either prior to their meetings or at the meetings under the supervision of the case officer. Handwritten reports were then often typed up by assistant staff, which gave room for modification, especially if the typewritten version contained only selected segments of the original. In some cases informers reported only orally to their case officers who made a written summary later, in which case we can talk about actual co-authorship.⁷ In any case, the reports constitute selective ‘secondary’ accounts of the informer’s experiences, composed according to the goals of the secret services.⁸ Whether reporting orally or in writing, the informer’s ‘ideal reader’ was of course always the secret police (Takács 2013, 23) and it was in her or his best interest to fulfil the expectations placed upon her or him. Most informers did more than just recount what they had seen and heard – they were already interpreting their experiences and did so from the perspective of what they understood to be the secret police aims or agenda, deploying learned linguistic clichés (Farkas 2006, 149).

How and what informers reported also depended on their relationship with their case officers (Rainer 2008, 17). Reports were followed by three sections: an *evaluation* stating if the report was operatively valuable, a *note* containing additional information on the case and commenting on the informer’s work or attitude, and a *list of assignments* the informer had to carry out until the next meeting. When read together with the reports, these sections reveal the dynamics of the informer–case officer relationship. In this respect, informer’s files containing the reports of an informer in a roughly chronological order are especially revealing: they show us how much

informers were influenced by the evaluations they got from their case officers and how their approach to their jobs changed during the course of time.

A particularly good example comes from the file of informer “Bátori”, a teacher living and working in a small town in the east of Hungary. His task was to report on the local intelligentsia, but he also had a series of assignments concerning local religious life. In December 1958 he was ordered to explore the extent to which the Church distracted people from “productive work”. He carried out his task diligently and concluded in his report that none of the three local churches (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Reformed) prevented people from carrying out their daily jobs, and supported his argument by giving a detailed account of service schedules and reporting that catechism classes were often cancelled in each of the denominations. “Bátori” did suggest, however, that workdays in December should start at 6 in the morning and end earlier than usual to prevent people from attending early morning church services during Advent season. No matter how hard he tried, his report was not received well by his officer, who scolded him for failing to report on the methods local churches used for recruiting believers and for “activating the masses”. He was ordered to do the same assignment again, but there is no proof in his file that he ever did so. However, he clearly tried to please his superiors when around Christmas of the same year he was instructed to find out what “the church taught through its ideal [sic!], religious teachings against Marxist education and whether it agitated against collectivisation”. Since he couldn’t visit religious education classes because of the winter break and because he was advised against talking directly to priests or students, he attended three Roman Catholic masses. In his neatly written account, the informer recalled some elements of the sermons and interpreted them as being hostile against the regime. His readings are so far-fetched that some of them deserve verbatim quotation.

On 21 December 1958 the young Roman Catholic priest said the following:

What could we expect from Jesus at Christmas? Everything. God owns everything on earth and in heaven. If we give something, we only give back something that belongs to God. (Meaning: nothing belongs to the state. The material world does not exist.) [...]

What did the three wise men of the East bring with them? And what showed them the way? The eastern star. (The church thus propagates the star of God instead of the star of the international proletariat.)

He also said about the last line of a religious song, “Because this is the king of heaven and earth” that “this is how the church keeps the conception of the monarchy alive for the believers.” In fact his interpretations are so preposterous that one cannot help but wonder if he was trying to be sarcastic after being scolded. His case officer nevertheless found his efforts moderately interesting by dryly remarking in his evaluation that “the agent claimed that the church aims to agitate against our social system during masses,” but was seemingly more interested in the fact that the Reformed pastor boasted about receiving church taxes from all local party members – a piece of extra information provided by “Bátori” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15468, 211–214).

How informers reported on certain people was also influenced by the relationship they had with them. Although the anonymous agent quoted above was warned against acting out of revenge (Takács 2013, 104), it is clear from the files that informers were more inclined to give unfavourable or incriminating accounts when they were reporting on someone they did not like. Although never writing in too friendly a manner about religion and religious people, “Bátori” gave an especially malicious report when he had a clash with the Reformed pastor over conflicting festival schedules. Their conflict started when, according to “Bátori”, the priest threatened to report him to the authorities for keeping his students away from religious education classes by scheduling the Mother’s Day chorus rehearsals at this time. In turn “Bátori” accused the pastor in his report for deliberately putting the confirmation ceremony to the exact date of the school’s Mother’s Day celebration, by which – writes “Bátori” – “he prevented a party member’s daughter from participating at the ceremony” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15468, 216). The opposite is also true; informers often gave neutral or favourable descriptions of surveilled individuals, downplaying the danger they might pose for the regime, or refrained from reporting at all (Farkas 2006, 153). There are, for example, numerous reports where informers depicted priests as leading a reclusive, apolitical life (even if other sources proved the opposite – see for example: ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–26516/1, 140) or denied that the sects they had to surveil were politically active. Informers, it seems, did not always try to serve the goals of the secret services and they did not always try to identify the “enemy.”⁹

Informers’ work has been compared to doing ethnography – most notably by Katherine Verdery (2014, 6–8), but also by other anthropologists (see Horváth 2009). As Verdery puts it, surveillance was a “different way of doing ethnography”; like anthropologists, informers made “close examinations of everyday behaviour and interpret[ed] what they found”.¹⁰ They did so with similar investigative strategies: they were encouraged by their superiors to note down

everything that could possibly be interesting and to contextualize the information they have gathered.¹¹ Some informers were indeed ‘good ethnographers’ in the sense that they provided detailed reports with subtle observations about their environments. They also resembled anthropologists in that very often they did not just record what they had experienced but also interpreted what they saw – or thought they had seen. An informer called “Marika”, a member of a Catholic youth group, wrote in one of her detailed reports from the summer of 1959 about her group’s visit to Pannonhalma, a Benedictine abbey and one of the few remaining church-run secondary schools in Hungary. Here she wrote about a young boy, who – according to her observation – was deeply impressed when hearing that the abbot and headmaster of the school, along with four other Benedictine monks, was studying in the same school as he did. “He was also very much moved by the fact”, continues “Marika”, “that a figure on one of the school chapel’s relief bore a surprising resemblance to him. This little boy returned home with very deep impressions. I don’t want to go too far with my conclusions, but according to my opinion, this visit to Pannonhalma has brought [him] closer to the priesthood and the Benedictine order” (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–22846/1, 62). Although not written without a pinch of malice, this excerpt, with all its details, clearly could not be wholly fabricated and thus invites us to see it as a rare glimpse into the vernacular religious process: the power of personal experience in deepening one’s devotion to religion.

In this report, “Marika’s” gaze was clearly driven by the secret police’s agenda, since she was meant to inform about how the Catholic Church (and illegal or semi-legal groups on its periphery) influenced young people. Informers, however, often went beyond the somewhat narrowly defined focus of their actual tasks, and provided ‘snapshots’ capturing the tidbits of everyday life – either because they thought their superiors would be interested or because they did not have anything else to report on, but nevertheless had to ‘do their homework’. A case in point is a report by the movie projectionist already mentioned above, whose main task included reporting on local people of German ethnic background and on a local village priest. In this account from 1963 he wrote about a winter night car ride with his boss, the director of the local House of Culture:

The road was very slippery and he told me that we were going to have an accident for sure, because he gave a lecture today on the history of religious faith, where he said many things against God. He then changed the subject, of course. He also noted this time that his brother-in-law visited him from West

Germany and brought him a rosary from France, from some kind of sacred place.
He didn't talk about this topic later.
(ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-28356, 231)

As was the case with this report, case officers and their superiors were often unimpressed by information like this. While these “chit-chats”, as Jens Gieseke called them, had no operative value for the secret police, they do serve as great sources for researchers of everyday life (Gieseke 2010, 6; see also: Takács 2014, 124); in this case they preserved an honest moment of a believer, who struggled with his conscience for having publicly spoken against his religion.

Apart from informer's reports, files on surveilled groups or individuals also contain summary or analytical reports written by case officers or their superiors.¹² As these documents are based on information coming from multiple sources – reports by various informers, shadowing, tapping, police records from previous regimes – in theory they reflect the total knowledge the secret police had at the time about a certain group or person. Part of this knowledge – most probably due to the multiple, and often unreliable provenance of their data – often proves to be incorrect or inconsistent when we look at the details: multiple files, for example, may contain contradictory data about the prehistory of a surveilled person or get names or dates wrong.¹³ Having secret police officers as their authors, these documents are written in highly politicised and ideologically laden language, categorising and representing people according to the logic of the secret police even more strongly than informer's reports did. For example, throughout the 1950s in Hungary, clandestine Catholic youth movements were regularly labelled as ‘clerical fascist’, while in Romania religious groups with an ethnic background often had the compound ‘nationalist-irredentist’ as their permanent qualifier in Securitate documents. However, despite their distortions and factual inconsistencies regarding detail, on a more general level these documents can provide valuable information about the structure and operative practices of the target groups – especially if we have the possibility to read them against other sources. The Securitate file on Jehovah's Witnesses in Cluj county in Romania gives a concise summary about the local hierarchy and structure of the organisation and the ways information, religious knowledge, money or material objects were circulated within this system (CNSAS, D 014428). Analytical or summary reports often include action plans for further operations, which show us how authorities tried to control and manipulate religious groups. The pressure they placed on these groups and individuals fundamentally defined the framework for their religious lives and influenced their actions and strategies.

Files also contain source types that reflect the ‘voice’ of the targets more directly than those discussed so far. Tapped conversations, confiscated items of religious literature, personal letters, and photographs reveal the thoughts, practices and creative agency of religious groups or individuals in ways that secondary reports do not. Even confessions of the accused that were more often than not coerced and manipulated may provide several details about the ideals and practices of the religious group in question.

What can we learn, then, from secret police files about how people “met, experienced and understood religion”, if we combine a critical reading of the files with the vernacular religion approach?

Vernacular religion in the archives

Scholars of vernacular religion and members of the secret services have radically different intentions when observing religious groups – the former generally intend to learn something about their subjects religious lifeworld and worldview, while the latter desired to fit them into their own pre-existing categories as enemies. Although most communist regimes granted – even if limited – freedom of religion to their citizens, they regarded religions as rival ideologies and wanted to control their influence on the population. Thus the secret police was not so much interested in religion or religious practice itself; instead they were primarily focused on religious organisations that were unrecognised or unregistered by the authorities, on religious activity they considered as hostile, and on the influence churches or religious groups had on – especially young – people.¹⁴ Scholars of religions, whether sociologists, historians, ethnologists or anthropologists, would have definitely come up with different field material to secret police agents; nevertheless there is much in secret police files that could inform a scholarly inquiry into everyday religious practice.

As a result of the agenda described above, files on unrecognised churches or clandestine religious groups contain abundant information on how these groups tried to escape the attention of the authorities. While for the secret police these efforts were evidence of the conspiratory nature of these communities – and therefore their representation in the files is probably overblown – for the student of vernacular religion they tell something about how people tried to adapt their religious lives to the power relations in their society. For clandestine Catholic groups in Hungary – but also for other persecuted religious communities – it was common

practice during the entire era to disguise their meetings as excursions, group holidays, choir activities, private lessons or even dancing parties.¹⁵ These activities provided sufficient cover for religious trainings, spiritual retreats or religious services. According to the files, groups had various methods to mask the actual nature of their gatherings. During his interrogation in 1952, György Bulányi, a central figure behind the underground Catholic youth organisation, claimed that during their meetings held in private flats they always had school textbooks or cards in front of the participants to mislead accidental visitors. He also confessed that during their meetings held in the Pilis Mountains they sang folksongs or proletarian songs (ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-14097, 142). While the latter may have been an addition to make the movement appear boldfaced or impertinent, much of what he stated is corroborated by numerous informer's reports on other groups or by later recollections.¹⁶ In order to keep a low profile, it was also common practice to arrive and leave meeting places individually or in pairs, and to behave very quietly when there. Groups could be extremely resourceful at avoiding being caught. According to a non-literal transcript of a tapped conversation between leaders of an underground Catholic youth group, on one occasion the participants of a meeting acted as if at an engagement party when they were suddenly raided by the police: they chose a groom, put a ring on his finger, started to dance, played music and gave toasts. Although the policemen were suspicious, the youngsters had an answer to all their questions so they left without taking any measures against them (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11959/4a, 97).

Persecuted religious groups were equally cautious in their internal communication, most of them followed complex strategies to transmit their messages or religious materials. A common strategy was to rely on oral communication if possible using a network of trusted couriers, and to use coded language or ambiguous wording if writing was unavoidable.¹⁷ A good illustration for this comes from a case officer's note written after an informer's report on a Hungarian underground Catholic group. In his note, the case officer quotes the euphemistic content of a postcard about a meeting that was to take place "in the backroom of the little tavern in Tabán at 3pm to which I also invited uncle Pista to entertain the company" and deciphers its meaning: the backroom stands for the sacristy of a church in Tabán, Budapest and uncle Pista for István Eglis, a leading figure in the movement (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11959/4, 99). It was also common practice for corresponding members to send and receive letters from and to other people's – relatives or acquaintances – addresses.¹⁸

Adaptation strategies also included the withdrawal of ritual activity to the domestic sphere. In the case of some groups this also meant the establishment of more or less permanent places of worship out of the public eye, mostly in the houses of their religious leaders, sometimes literally underground (see Kapaló 2019). The Hungarian secret police archive holds comparatively less information on secret places of worship than its Romanian, Moldavian or Ukrainian counterparts, probably due to the different religious landscape of the country. A notable exception is the house church of a Pentecostal splinter group in Budapest, the focus of Povedák's chapter in this volume, of which the secret police made a thorough photo documentation during a raid.

Monastic orders and apostolic movements that were banned under communist regimes represent another case of forms 'domestic religion'.¹⁹ After the dissolution of their communities, most of their members had to reintegrate into secular society, find secular jobs and take up secular lifestyle.²⁰ Nevertheless, many of them chose to continue to live true to their vows and tried hard to reconcile their monastic duties with their secular ones. Since the secret police was eager to track down everybody who led a 'forbidden monastic life', we have some information on how this was done: ex-members tried to keep close contact with each other or even lived or worked at the same place, they went to church every day before or after work and lived modest lives. An informer's account about the daily routine at the Solidarity cooperative, established in Hungary 1953 especially with the aim of providing work for former monastic members, tells us that they lived "in a certain monastic order" as they attended mass every morning, read and discussed the Bible together before work, prayed together before and after meals and recited hymns every afternoon (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-20223, 153).²¹

Not only those belonging to persecuted religious groups chose to hide their religious activity from the public. While in theory people could freely participate in the rituals of recognised churches, in Hungary the state discouraged people from being actively religious in many ways. Observing one's religion could hinder one's career or lead to other kinds of disadvantage or retribution, therefore many of those who wanted to fulfil their religious duties but at the same time sought to avoid conflict with the authorities had to be religious secretly. A particularly telling illustration for this is a literal transcription of a personal letter that comes from a documentary file on a clandestine Catholic movement (ÁBTL 3.1.5 O-11959/4, 73-74).²² The letter dates from 1955 and was written by a woman, a first-time grandmother, who amongst other family matters gave an account of her grandson's baptism:

The baptism took place on 4th December, on the wedding anniversary of our son. It was beautiful. Feri, the grandfather did everything. He was working without stopping from 9 am to 4 pm, producing the most delicious and beautiful sandwiches. There was wine and coffee. The whole family was here, 22 people altogether. The child was baptised by a Piarist priest [name]. The baptism ceremony was here at our home. Feri has erected a beautiful altar. He made it so exceptionally nice that everybody was weeping with emotion. My entire home looked like a stage. Everything was shining brightly. [The priest] gave a beautiful sermon. He included the rise of the new stars, which sometimes intrude into families, but will shine only briefly, because people will soon realise that these stars are fake. Anyways, I kept his speech and will read it when I have the time.

Concerning the study of vernacular religion, this letter is valuable for several reasons. It provides first-hand information on ritual creativity, ritual expectation and the power of materiality in rituals: it shows that this family felt the necessity to turn their everyday environment into a sacred place for a ‘proper’ baptism, it recounts how this was done and also intimates the emotional reactions it had triggered. It is also a good illustration of the silent resistance against the regime, not only because of the baptism itself, but because of the obvious anti-communist allusions made by the priest and the significance the writer had attributed to them. In conducting the home baptism, the family took a serious risk of which the writer was apparently very much aware, since she closed her letter by asking “please burn this letter after reading.”

Although the secret police was not particularly interested in religious rituals per se, informers sometimes provided descriptions of rituals. However short and dry these accounts are, they show us something about grassroots ritual creativity. An informer reporting from a village about the local activity of KALÁSZ, a Catholic movement for rural girls, claimed that couples were granted a special “KALÁSZ wedding ceremony” if they chose to marry in the church.²³ This meant that the couple entered the church between the lines of unmarried girls, special KALÁSZ and Virgin Mary banners were placed at the altar, and after the ceremony the bride was initiated as wife in a special ritual (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-20223, 385). Another informer writing in 1961

(ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–30014, 130–131) about a Baptist community from a Northern Hungarian village described the group’s baptism ceremony as follows:

During immersion the preacher entered the baptismal basin, the person to be baptised, clad in a long white shirt, steps into the basin, and the preacher immerses them backwards into the water while saying ‘I baptise you in the name of the Lord’. Once a year they [the community] have a meeting when they put out all the lights and meditate, that is, pray in the dark. Villagers named this night a frisking night..

The final sentence touches on a topic also present in the files: attitudes towards religion and religious people. Since the secret police was very much interested in how much influence the churches had in society, informers were often instructed to report on the intensity of religious observance, whether the particular church’s influence on the population was growing or decreasing, if priests were liked or disliked by their communities. The picture we get from these reports – often provided by priest-informers – is rather mixed. According to an informer from the early 1960s, a Roman Catholic priest serving in a small town complained about the inhabitant’s general disinterest in religion and praised religiously more active village communities (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–20223, 451); at the same time a Greek Catholic village priest talked about how many townspeople observed their religion despite the difficulties this entailed, whilst “one wouldn’t believe how many villagers could do without the blessings of the church” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15468, 252). One village priest was reported around 1960 to have complained about losing young people because “they prefer going to football matches, to the cinema or to other events” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15473, 78–80), while roughly at the same time two others talked about the popularity of their catechism classes (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15473, 94–96 and ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–36307, 109). The amount of donations to local churches also shows considerable commitment from people: in the late 1950’s-early 1960’s two new church buildings were erected near Máriapócs, a Greek Catholic pilgrim site and religious centre in the east of Hungary, both of them mostly financed from private donations (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15473, 78–80 and 94–96). According to these reports the generosity of congregation members made up for the lack of subsidies from authorities, and in some places people also contributed to the income of priests, because they “knew that otherwise they would be left without a pastor” (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–15473, 94–96). Financial matters on the other hand could also lead to conflicts between priests and villagers; for example, a report from 1970 stated that “people especially don’t like

to pay”, while another claimed that a certain priest was only tolerated because he asked for donations only when it was really necessary (ÁBTL 3.1.2. M–36307, 443 and 212).

Several informers from the end of the 1950’s reported that rural party members were regular churchgoers, at one place even paying considerable donations for a new church building (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–15473, 127–128). These examples suggest that the rift between the local communist elite and the church was not as accentuated as one would suppose; there were also cases when people who were implicated for their religious activity avoided retribution because of the support of their ties to local powerful men.²⁴ This does not mean, however, that the authorities did not try to counteract the church’s influence: in 1957 a priest allegedly got into trouble for marrying a party functionary before the couple was married by civil law even though he was encouraged to do so by the local council president (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–15468). An informer’s suggestion to distract pupils from involvement in religious activity by introducing afternoon screenings at the cinema was also greeted with approval from his superiors (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–15468, 205).

The secret police in Hungary was also highly interested in the financial situation of priests, since especially after 1956 economic crimes offered one of the few legitimate pretexts on which priests or religious institutions could be convicted (Tabajdi–Ungváry 2008, 215). It is clear from the files that many priests faced financial difficulties; their salaries were low and frequently withheld for various misdemeanours, and thus many of them had to rely on the support of their congregations.²⁵ According to the reports, it was not unusual for a priest to earn additional income from some kind of agricultural activity – we know about at least two, who kept bees –, and several of them were disapprovingly described as good businessmen (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–15468, and ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–28356).²⁶ Certain ‘suspicious’ business activities were closely connected to standard spiritual services and were part of the usual economy of the church. For example, a village priest was reported to sell gas stoves he received from abroad to local villagers. According to the report he claimed to get the stoves from former villagers relocated to Germany, for which he said masses for their dead relatives in return. Authorities nevertheless did not give credit to this explanation and firmly believed he was working for his own profit (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–28356, 256). These reports, together with the ones relating to spare time activities and social ties of village priests help us to draw a picture of the lower clergy as a social class.

Informers – though often indirectly – also captured moments when people negotiated religion or religious beliefs. Attitudes towards expressly religious people or members of religious minorities were often negative, which, as the reports suggests were probably due to their proselytising activities. In the 1950's, young, urban members of clandestine Catholic movements frequently complained about how hostile their environment – fellow students, colleagues, superiors – were against them and their worldview; as one informer reported: “she told me that notwithstanding her patience and attempts to avoid conflicts, her colleagues found her dislikeable, and she couldn't make Christian life attractive to them” (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–11959/4a, 73). As another report states, a Baptist glazier was also regularly mocked by his colleagues for belonging to a ‘sect’, which he accepted “with Biblical citations and religious conviction.” From the same file we also learn about a Jehovah's Witness who, while working in the fields, read out the Bible to fellow villagers in vain, “because people generally thought the whole family was nuts, and only laughed at them.” Therefore, as the informer notes “their activity in the village is not dangerous, since no one takes them seriously” (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–14916, 79 and 64).

A report given by informer Bátori about a conversation he had about religious miracles when returning from the shrine at Máriapócs on a horse-cart in the summer of 1958 stands out for its degree of elaboration and vividness. When talking about the shrine's miraculous Virgin Mary statue, one of his fellow-passengers, an emigrant visiting from Canada – and Bátori's main target at the time – claimed that he was in fact an atheist and only visited the indulgence day of the shrine because his wife asked him to pay votive masses for her. He went on to give rational explanations for weeping Virgin Mary paintings and told a story about how priests in Czechoslovakia faked a Virgin Mary miracle by moving her painting on a string. Bátori stepped into the conversation and “enlightened” the other passengers, that one of their common acquaintances also attributed the healing of her granddaughter's leg to the Virgin Mary of Máriapócs: “The kid had to use crutches. In the church, however, she slid from her grandmother's lap and started to wriggle on the floor. Thereupon I pointed out that this superstition was refuted by the nearby tuberculosis hospital. Her leg was treated there and that is why her condition improved. Neither is it a ‘miracle’ that is helping her this summer, but the fact that she is being treated in the hospital” (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–15468, 147). The apparent irony in this little vignette – people disclaiming miraculous events after participating in a major religious pilgrimage – opens up alternative interpretations: it could be read as a genuine expression of disbelief, but also as a reflection of what kind of attitude people thought they

should express towards matters of faith when in the company of people they probably could not fully trust.

Informer's reports also reflect that there was one aspect of life where adherence to religious rituals seemed stronger: death. According to one example dating from 1959, a funeral of a young girl "almost turned into a scandal" because she was buried without a priest, with one person exclaiming: "this child has not even been baptised, let's not bury her as a pagan, let's pray the Credo" (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-15468, 252). In another file, a priest informer wrote about the boisterous reception of the civil funeral service: "The relatives of the dead person, that is her husband, is very angry at the priest, because he did not ring the bells for the funeral and did not hand out the church banners for the ceremony. It was impossible to explain to the relatives that bells and banners don't go with the civil funeral" (ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-42002, 35).

Finally, reports may also give us a sense of how people struggled to adapt their religious life to an antireligious environment and how religion informed their daily lives and the way they understood their position in the world. There are accounts of uncertainty and perplexity when it came to fulfilling both one's ritual obligations and the obligations of a socialist citizen. In 1954, a priest-informer reported, for example, that a woman asked him in the confession booth if her daughter was allowed to do the extra work she was assigned in her factory on a compulsory religious holiday (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11959, 75), and young Catholic activists also sought advice from their spiritual father (a secret police informer) on how to fulfil their duty to advocate faith without being ridiculed by their peers (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11959/4a, 62). Many, on the other hand, found solace in understanding their persecution in terms of religion, seeing communism either as a temporary punishment by God or God's tool to convert people to the faith (ÁBTL, 3.1.5 O-11959/4, 222; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11959/4a, 142 and 143).

My aim here was to show the potential of secret police files as sources for the study of vernacular religion. As these examples demonstrate, for all their limitations and shortcomings these documents provide varied information about vernacular religious life. When read with a critical approach they reveal several aspects of religiosity under communism: most notably the ways in which religious groups and individuals adapted to oppression and developed strategies to deflect the attention of the authorities, but also expressions of spirituality or the position and role religion, churches and their representatives had in a socialist society. The considerable lack

of ethnographic data from this period makes secret police files even more valuable; they provide us with a rare and unique window on how religious people experienced their faith during communism and by applying the vernacular religious approach to these files we are able to move away from showing religious subjects simply as the victim of the regime and point instead to their resilience and agency.

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¹ For more on the terminological debate surrounding the concepts of folk and popular religion see Badone 1990; Dinzelbacher 1997; Kapáló 2013.

² For more on the concept and theory of vernacular religion see also Primiano 2001, 2012; Bowman 2003, 2004a and 2004b; Bowman–Valk, 2012.

³ In communist Hungary, research on religious practices were not encouraged by the authorities, especially in the first two decades of the regime, therefore there are only a few scholarly studies from this period and there is also a paucity of contemporary ethnographic data.

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⁵ As Tibor Takács noted, historians often inadvertently reproduce this logic by unreflexively taking up the language of the files (Takács 2014, 10).

⁶ On the involvement of Hungarian churches with the secret police see: Tabajdi–Ungváry 2008.

⁷ Phrases like "the agent reported" indicate that the report was noted down by someone other than the informer. Grammatical errors, spelling mistakes or linguistic styles that are at odds with the educational level of the informer could also be signs of a different author (see Pihurik 2011, 149). Notes and evaluations following a report may also point to the differences between the orally given account and its written version: it is not rare for case officers to note that the informer had said more about a subject during their conversations than was included in the written report.

⁸ Informer's reports were "secondary accounts" also in the sense that they often conveyed information based on gossip and unsupported hearsay. This is indicated by the presence of indirect speech with structures like 'I heard', 'it is said', 'allegedly' (see Gervai 2013, 173).

⁹ The irony is that whatever and however informers wrote, they could not defy the logic of the secret police. As Péter Esterházy argued in his captivating work about his father's informer's files, there's no such thing as a harmless report: reports already did something by having been written. Depicting someone as neutral or even friendly to the regime, for example, may have lead to their roping in, while meaningless, 'empty' accounts together could always build up to something meaningful (Esterházy 2002, 92; 79; 85).

¹⁰ László Borsányi, a Hungarian cultural anthropologist and informer of the Hungarian secret police has dismissed any parallels between doing ethnographic fieldwork for academic purposes and doing surveillance for the secret police stating that whereas anthropologists had the freedom to chose their field and topic of research and knew what they were looking for, informers were only told the target of their surveillance but not the reason for it (Borsányi 2009, 67). There is ample evidence in the files to contest his claim, but there must have been cases when informers did not exactly know why the secret police was interested in a certain person.

¹¹ See also Esterházy on how his father was instructed to always include in his written reports the identity of his sources and the circumstances under which information was obtained; especially in reports about the overall mood of the public (Esterházy 2002, 67).

¹² About the path of information within the system see for example Gyarmati 2014 and Verdery 2014, 40–44.

¹³ This happened in the case of Mihály Virasztó, former religious specialist of the Turan Believers of One God: according to some documents his father was a tax officer, according to others a peasant. His files were also inconsistent about the time he spent in prison before and during WWII and the exact dates of his incarceration (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–14980/18; 3.1.9. V–149713; 3.1.9. V–153994).

¹⁴ A summary report in a file on one of the Hungarian clandestine Catholic religious movements from the 1950's claims that the movement used religion as their main tool for masking their 'hostile activity' stating that they recruited new members with the help of religion and hid their attacks on people's democracy behind Catholic ethical and theological (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–11959/4, 193–194).

¹⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–11959/4; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–11959/4a; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–10203; 3.1.9. V–14097; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–16252/2a; Bögre–Szabó 2010, 355; For other groups see for example: Petrás 2017 and this volume (on Hungarian Jehovah's Witnesses); Huhák (Campers – <http://hu.culturalopposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n31559&type=collections>).

¹⁶ According to an informer's report from another file, children participating in such excursions had to wear pioneer ties so that they could use public transport as a group without attracting attention (ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O–11959/4a, 23). In some cases there was more to masking measures than providing a cover up: in her recollections, a member of an apostolic movement said that she received religious training from her spiritual leader in the form of German language lessons so that none of them had to lie if they were caught (Bögre–Szabó 2010, 360).

¹⁷ A summary report on the Jehovah's Witnesses of Cluj county in Romania gives a full overview of the group's communication strategies: they only used coded reports, employed couriers who met with the leaders in crowded public places and used prearranged signs to get in touch with one another (CNSAS, D 014428).

¹⁸ See for example: ÁBTL, V–14097/3, 100.

¹⁹ For more on domestic religion in communist societies see: Kapaló 2018.

²⁰ Reintegration was especially difficult for nuns because there were considerably fewer church positions for them than for monks, who could go on working as parish priests or chaplains.

²¹ On the Solidarity Cooperative see: Bögre–Szabó 2010, 99–100 (footnote 48) and 284–288.

²² The file does not contain any information about the identity of the corresponding parties (apart from their names) or about their connections to the movement.

²³ KALÁSZ (Association of Catholic Girl's Clubs) was founded in 1935–1936 with the aim of helping village girls become devoted Catholic mothers (Magyar Katolikus Lexikon – <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/K/Katolikus%20Leánykörök%20Szövetsége.html> – accessed on 1 May 2019).

²⁴ See for example ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–28356/1 103. I also know of a similar case from ethnographic fieldwork in Püspökszilágy, Hungary, where the positive evaluation by the local council leader saved the founder of a neo-protestant splinter group from harassment by the police.

²⁵ This support sometimes consisted of supplies of food such as wheat or flour. See for example: ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M–26516/1, 119.

²⁶ This was not unusual in the pre-communist era either.