

LEHEL VADON

## ROGER WILLIAMS' PRINCIPLE OF "A FREE CHURCH IN A FREE STATE" IN HUNGARY

Mihály Horváth (1809--1878), the eminent Hungarian historian from the Reformist Era, whose historical writings were both pioneering and remain vital source materials right up to the present day, when investigating the moral and intellectual development of our nation and the freedoms of conscience, thought and speech, as well as the relationship between church and state arrived at the great principle of "a free church in a free state", which had been borrowed from the "society of the Federal North American States" and is linked to the name of Roger Williams,<sup>1</sup> the ardent-spirited, the piously zealous and indomitable clergyman, the first to launch this great new principle. The state founder and religious reformer Roger Williams (1603--1683) arrived in the New World in 1631, 11 years after the passengers of the Mayflower had set foot on American soil and 7 years after the first Puritan settlers came in search of a New Sion and New Israel. The popular and uncompromising pastor came into conflict with the Puritan theocracy due to his democratic principles and was forced as a result to leave Massachusetts. In 1636 he became the founder of Rhode Island and the town of Providence, where the clergyman accepting the principle of equality of the English levellers, and himself tending towards Baptism opened up his estate to "those of all consciences": Anglicans, Catholics and Jews ensuring the perfect balance of thought and its practical realization. In his new state and parish, he practiced religious tolerance and created a pure, perfect democracy, in which complete power was given to the people.

The enlightened and liberal prelate and politician Mihály Horváth studied in his numerous articles and books the history of religion, and while examining the church-state relationship, accepted Roger Williams' model state both from a religious and political point of view, and considered it of exemplary value to the societies of Hungary and Europe in general. Horváth's study on Roger Williams was the first book, and the first scholarly monograph to be written on an American author in the history of American Studies in Hungary.

Mihály Horváth, in his carefully edited and comprehensive study followed the "conflict-ridden life of the educated, active and zealous Williams", right from his arrival in the New World, his struggle with the Puritan theocracy, his exile, his founding of

Rhode Island and Providence, his friendly relations with the Indians, his role as a peacemaker between the settlers and the original population, his fight against negro slavery and his political and diplomatic missions.

During the period of the development of the Hungarian middle classes, Mihály Horváth, the representative of liberal progress and anti-reformation was interested above all in the principle of a "free church in a free state", in which Williams formulated the theory of total religious freedom and which according to him was the "main guarantee of public peace and tranquillity, the Magna Charta of all freedoms". Horváth summed up the role of Williams in reforming religion and his historical role and significance in the following manner: "he was the first to express the great doctrine of intellectual freedom, and based upon this principle, he founded a new state, in practice proving its unique correctness ... offering limitless freedom to every religion, freedom for believers and non-believers alike, total freedom of thought and in order to safeguard the great principle, the complete separation of church and state."<sup>2</sup> ...during his whole life he taught revolutionary principles<sup>3</sup> ... with great courage and strength, he started to fight for the principles, which have come to be totally accepted in the United States, but remain far from victory in Europe."<sup>4</sup> He praised the law-maker and state founder for his views on society, based on social justice as well as the logical consistency of his philosophical approach to religion, which had brought to life and explained his "great principle" : "he concentrated on fundamentals, and recognizing their nature comes to conclusions which remain valid and correct, regardless of time, place or circumstances."<sup>5</sup>

Mihály Horváth was the first in Hungary to write with scholarly care on the Puritanism that had come into existence in the young American colonies, and the church organizations of the Puritans. Williams while employing Puritan phraseology opposed his modern, liberal thinking to the Puritan theocracy and heavily criticized Puritan moral and religion. Horváth placed particularly great importance on his treatises, which demonstrated Williams' literary ambitions, in which he expounded his religious doctrines, and in which the "basic principles of Christian free thought were so thoroughly discussed, that it would be hard right up to the present day to discover writings in which the rights of society and the individual, and the mutual relationship between church and state had been so clearly expressed as had been the case with these pamphlets. This little-known Puritan philosopher, with his consistency passes beyond the most liberal of the publicists of the present century."<sup>6</sup> As an example of this, he cites the duel of treatises fought between Roger Williams and John Cotton during the

1640's<sup>7</sup> which was reminiscent in both spirit and language of the religious debates in Hungary.

Mihály Horváth with his frequent references to his age and nation, with his clear and at the same time artistic style, reminds us strongly of Roger Williams' treatises and pamphlets. As was the case with the vast majority of his writings, he wrote his work with the express aim of affecting his nation, lifting it up and inspiring it.

Williams' principle of "a free church in a free state" was first represented by Canon Vurda, delegate of the Chapter of Győr at the diet of 1843, when he called for "a free country, free religion and free church" for everyone, and was applauded by the whole House.<sup>8</sup> It is no mere coincidence that Mihály Horváth's study on Williams appeared during the year after the "Ausgleich",<sup>9</sup> when as a result of the creation of the liberal state and its legal system, liberals were demanding the separation of church and state, religious freedom and equality. The study first appeared in 1868 in the *Budapesti Szemle*,<sup>10</sup> proving its significance and importance, the work was re-published twice during the years when the struggle between the church and state became particularly fierce. The second edition of 1873 was probably a result of the continuing strain in relations between the Hungarian state, church and the Vatican. It seems clear too that in the 1890's, right in the middle of newer church-state disagreements, the reformist press republished the work which supported the reforms planned by the Wekerle government in religious matters both in form and spirit.

## NOTES

1. Horváth, Mihály: *Williams Roger a "szabad egyház a szabad államban" elv megteremtője s megtestesítője.* (Roger Williams the founder and embodiment of the principle of "a free church in free state.") Pest, Ráth Mór kiadása, 1868. p. 5. and p. 8.
2. Ibid., p. 56.
3. Ibid., p. 67.
4. Ibid., p. 25.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
6. Ibid., p. 47.
7. The dual of treatises fought between Roger Williams and John Cotton reminded Sarolta Kretzoi of the spirit of the religious debates in Hungary. See: Kretzoi Miklósné: *Az amerikai irodalom kezdetei 1607--1750.* (The Beginnings of American Literature 1607--1750.) Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976. p. 174.
8. Horváth Mihály op. cit., p. 5.
9. The compromise between Austria and Hungary in 1867.
10. Horváth, Mihály: "Williams Roger." *Budapesti Szemle* 1868. Vol. XI. pp. 91--147.