théma21 **ARTICLE** 1
Theological Life Today In The 21st Century
ISSN 3141-8058
thema21.hu/en/

Beyond Identity Politics...

Fazakas Sándor
Debrecen Reformed Theological University
ORCID: 0000-0003-3099-7123

Translated by: Tóth Sára

English translation
Published: May 25, 2026
License: CC BY 4.0

Abstract. The concept of identity is experiencing a boom. Identity politics, and the demand for the formation of collective identities, has become a strategic instrument of political power in modern societies. Meanwhile, for the self-understanding of the churches of the Reformation, it is no longer dogmatic-confessional and liturgical traditions or differences that are ultimately decisive, but rather rootedness in the socio-cultural environment—and the question of identity that follows from it. This leads to fragmented identity constructions and to vulnerability in the face of collective identity formation—especially where the concept of identity has become a kind of buzzword whose content remains largely undefined, together with all the consequences this entails. Addressing these problems requires social-scientific, philosophical, and theological reflection on both the dangers of political identity formation and the legitimate elements of Reformed self-understanding. In this context, the question must be asked again: what role and significance can theological reflection have in the internal life of the church? The phenomenon deserves further study; the present essay merely points out the problem.

Keywords: identity politics; culture; moltmann; reformed identity; identity

"Identity! Reformed identity!"— in recent years this pairing has often appeared in statements by individuals or church leaders. This has been especially the case where the aim was to display the distinctive features of a Reformed Christian profile, to articulate the community's self-understanding in contrast to other confessional or religious groups, or to stress belonging to the unity of the nation. Yet defining what Reformed identity means on the individual and communal level is a more complex task. For the most part, such definitions are limited to stressing historical continu-

ity, the life and work of significant figures, key events in church history and shared historical experiences, as well as fidelity to so-called "biblical and confessional" foundations (without defining these precisely). Behind such efforts, however, stands a conception of identity detached from history, one that ignores the ruptures caused by historical developments and present challenges. Yet the concept of identity is very much in vogue—and here we can only point out the problem indicated by the term.

We see that contemporary Protestantism is extraordinarily fragmented in its self-understanding. At the same time, it is uncertain and vulnerable. This is true of Reformed identity in general, -image, and, more specifically, of Hungarian Reformed self-understanding in particular. The reason for this lies not so much in our relation to our confessional-dogmatic inheritance, or in the different interpretations of that heritage, but rather in the concrete lived reality of the church.

In other words, the differences among Reformation Christian churches are not necessarily explained by the plurality of confessional, theological, and liturgical traditions. A far greater role is played by socio-cultural determinants: rootedness in one's own context. For the self-understanding of the empirical church in a given time and place, adaptation to the environment becomes more decisive than dogmatic, ecclesiological, and liturgical particularities. We may also observe that contextual factors also play a greater role in articulating opposition, difference, and distinct identity.[1]

It was in this spirit, for example, that the episcopal system was reintroduced from the sixteenth century onward, despite the theological criteria of the Reformation understanding of office; or that ecclesial activities came to be financed from the state treasury in the spirit of Act XX of 1848, despite the Reformation demand for congregational autonomy and the models of free churches in Europe, so often invoked by Imre Révész.

Accordingly, within a given national or regional church body, differences arise less along theological or liturgical lines and more from how churches, adapt in mentality to their environment, including political public discourse; and how far they participate in processes of modernization or in identity-political projects led by political and social actors. A wide range of historical and contemporary examples could be cited: the church under East-Central European socialism or under South African apartheid; Protestant churches in modern liberal democracies or, conversely, in anti-Western and anti-liberal "illiberal" democracies; churches in relation to nation-building projects, and so on. In the 1950s, the "official" theology and press organs of the Hungarian Reformed Church sought to present the socialist-communist state order as an instrument of divine providence, through which the church itself was to

[1]For analysing and understanding collective identity formation, with regard to the drawing of boundaries between "us" and "others," the enhancement of the in-group and the devaluation of out-groups, that is, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, see Henri Tajfel: Social Identity and Intergroup Relations, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982; Henri Tajfel – John C. Turner: "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in: S. Worchel – W. Austin (eds.): The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, Chicago, Nelson Hall, 1986, 7–24.

hear God's revelation. Those who opposed this claim on theological grounds were accused by the church leadership of rebelling against the Word. Today—or at least in recent years—what counted as good Christian and national identity, even within church circles, was often whatever political public discourse defined as Christian and as aligned with the value system condensed in the slogan "God–homeland–family," without this being critically examined in the light of Scripture as a whole.

During the South African apartheid regime, church and congregational life organized along ethnic lines, with no meaningful interaction between communities, appeared entirely self-evident. In recent decades, Protestant churches in Western Europe—especially in Germany, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries—have made migration, the refugee question, resistance to far-right political forces, or the ecclesial and social recognition of same-sex marriage central themes of church life, in line with the values of their societies and the political priorities of their states.

In Hungary, we see a reverse tendency: within the Reformed Church, including at official levels, anti-Western and anti-liberal attitudes and suspicion toward ecumenical organizations have intensified in parallel with prevailing political rhetoric. This is striking in light of the church's own historical heritage—for example, the convergence of national liberalism and Protestantism during the period of absolutism, the call for free and critical Christian thought during the decades of dictatorship, earlier sister-church relations, and its active and respected participation in ecumenical working groups—all of which sit uneasily with the current pattern of distancing and opposition.

In questions of gender roles and sexual ethics, meanwhile, the struggle against a vaguely defined "gender ideology" has often overshadowed other themes of Reformation theology. For example: what does justification by faith mean in today's social contexts? What is the contemporary relevance of sin, the knowledge of sin, repentance, reconciliation, and peacemaking in relation to present social injustices? To what extent does eschatological teaching relativize the categories of human communal life that we know and so readily take to be Christian?

The list could be continued. The point, however, is that the themes of ecclesial public discourse have not primarily arisen from biblical interpretation, hermeneutical clarification, theological-ethical reflection, or the lived reality of congregations shaped by Word and sacrament. Rather, they have emerged as the result of largely unreflective adaptation to a "Christian and national" socio-political environment and to the media sphere that amplifies it.

These examples also show that the problem does not really lie in the desire to shape a community's self-understanding or to explore the sources of identity—all this can be done reflectively and with a commitment to self-criticism. Since the 1990s, most European societies have engaged in efforts to uncover the historical roots of

collective identity, to analyse them through the social sciences, and to interpret them culturally.[2]

Within this interpretive work, a key insight emerges: the question of identity becomes problematic when it becomes political—that is, when it no longer expresses and sustains a sense of belonging, but becomes a strategic instrument of power and its maintenance. In such cases, identity is shaped through identification with the aims of those in power, while belonging itself provides security. Opposition to the ruling power, if it seeks to gain or regain power, must construct an alternative identity: it must respond to popular sentiment, translate social dissatisfaction into symbols and narratives, and articulate a new and credible "we." In this situation, identity easily becomes an instrument on both sides.

These examples also show that the problem does not really lie in the desire to shape a community's self-understanding or to explore the sources of identity—all this can be done reflectively and with a commitment to self-criticism. Since the 1990s, most European societies have engaged in efforts to uncover the historical roots of collective identity, to analyse them through the social sciences, and to interpret them culturally.[3]

The question is to what extent the church becomes involved in such dynamics. The temptation becomes especially acute when politically constructed identities draw on Christian concepts and values as part of their strategy. What, then, is the church's response? Will adaptation to socio-cultural and mental dispositions once again determine the foundations of its self-understanding—so that revelation is derived from the temporary order of the world rather than from the Word, as has so often been the case in history—or does the church possess theological discernment capable of distinguishing between the inflationary use of a concept and its properly theological meaning? Can the community of believers recognize, and make visible, that the concept of identity easily becomes reductionist—a buzzword, a "plastic word," in Uwe Pörksen's sense?[4] Such a concept can be extended indefinitely and is therefore remains largely undefined. At the same time, it leaves no space for dialogue, for differing experiences, or for personal narratives. It presents itself as scientific while exempting itself from critique. It acquires a quasi-fetishistic character, since it tolerates no contradiction. It claims normative authority while enabling a form of linguistic colonization, in which "experts" define what something is and how it should be understood.

Or can the church recognize that, theologically speaking, self-identity—including Reformed identity—is something more than this: namely, the capacity to testify to our faith within a given social and cultural context? It is not simply a matter of referring to a historical confessional document (thereby inadvertently attributing to

[2]Lutz Niethammer: *Kollektive Identität*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2000, 22.

[3]Cf. Niethammer: Kollektive Identität, 40.

[4]Uwe Pörksen: *Plastikwörter*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1988.

it a fetish-like status of the kind described above), but of bearing theological witness to the content of faith. In other words, it is a matter of theological judgment whose dynamism is not derived from the spirit of the age, but from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Experience shows that the church turns to identity-substitutes when faint-heartedness takes hold within its own life. Jürgen Moltmann puts this well: "The danger of little faith lies in the fact that faith itself begins to die, because it wants to cling to the familiar and reaches for guarantees. […] Weak faith wants to preserve and protect itself because fear has taken hold of it. It wants to defend its 'most sacred treasures': God, Christ, the doctrine of faith, and morality, because it evidently no longer believes that these are strong enough to keep themselves alive." By contrast, Christian identity arises entirely from identification with Christ: it is understood only as identification with the Crucified, insofar as the human being receives the good news that in him God has identified himself with sinners and with those abandoned by God, among whom he himself also belongs. This double movement of identification is the process in which Christian identity comes into being.[5]

After all this, the question remains what role theology as an academic discipline, and its capacity for reflection, can play within the life of the church—especially under the pressures of inculturation outlined above. Will the institutional church, adapting or compelled to adapt to its environment, seek to control theology, expecting from it a principled legitimation of its a priori (identity-political) decisions? Or will academic theology insist on its autonomy, appealing to the freedom of scholarship and of conscience? If the latter prevails, there is hope that the concept of Reformed identity can acquire positive content: understood as the task of offering a coherent account of the faith and of identifying with the cause of Christ.

[5] Jürgen Moltmann: *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 92007, 24.