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náboženská společenství. Nadto, i když se ruská realita v mnohém změnila, některé z těchto proměn, respektive jejich ideový a mocenský *background* a formativní výsledky autorka ve své knize fakticky předpověděla. Věcně nám to může být nemilé, avšak kognitivně je to věru pěkný výsledek výzkumné práce – která by proto měla být široce čtena, ačkoli se na první pohled zdá překvapivě brzy obsoletní. Možná však, že kniha poskytuje naději i po té věcné stránce: existovala-li poměrně široká škála kritiků „Kyrillovského pravoslaví" před ruskou invazí na Ukrajinu, Bohorodička možná časem vyslyší Pussy Riot a Путина прогони (Putina vyžene).

ZDENĚK R. NEŠPOR

Kees de Groot (ed.), Comics, Culture, and Religion. Faith Imagined,

London: Bloomsbury Academic 2023, 264 p.

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The scholarly monograph "Comics, Culture, and Religion. Faith Imagined", published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2024 and edited by Kees de Groot, is a comprehensive (264 pages), highly topical, interesting, and cognitively valuable publication. It touches on the relationship between religion and popular culture, still non-obvious for many. This non-obviousness is linked to the socially entrenched vision of a hierarchical (top-down) model of culture, with a clear division between high culture and low culture. In such an arrangement, religion, as a traditional element and resource of high culture, re-

mained separate from everyday life, including popular culture and its audience.

Kees de Groot offers a distinct perspective on these two areas, closer to the realities of the post-modern world. It presupposes a move away from a hierarchical model of culture to a heterogeneous and dynamic one, where the 'high' intersects with the 'low', where popular culture is not a separate (inferior) fragment of culture, but an immanent part of it. Following the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, Kees de Groot describes such a picture of reality as 'liquid modernity', i.e. a world in which there is no longer a clear 'centre' that would give a permanent and stable dimension to reality, but where social and cultural processes occur in a dynamic and undetermined way. And he advocates considering today's relationship between religion and popular culture against this 'fluid' background.

As a sociologist, Kees de Groot offers readers a sociological perspective on analysis. From such a point of view, it is important to study religion and popular culture in terms of the social conditions of their functioning and interrelationships. After all, the aforementioned disappearance of the hierarchical model of culture has also affected the status and *modus operandi* of traditional religious institutions, which have lost their dominant position and importance. In turn, this has resulted in the evolution of many daily religious practices and associated customs. Profound transformations have also been taking place at the level of religious imagination and sensibility. In contemporary culture, the aforementioned trends are also reflected in the texts of popular culture; in their creations and modes of reception, which is brilliantly demonstrated in the texts presented in the monograph.

Another noteworthy aspect of the publication is its attention to the vibrant presence of religion in popular culture (and therefore in contemporary culture). The religious practices discussed in the narrative are evidence that the need for such experiences (including on the social plane) has not disappeared at all – even in countries with advanced secularisation. Instead, it has shifted towards a broadly understood spiri-

tuality. In this aspect, we can also speak of a situation of fluidity, of a blurring of boundaries and of movements from the 'centre' towards the 'periphery', i.e. from organised forms of religiosity to a subjective and individual way of arranging relations between subject – religion – popular culture. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned 'peripheries' are not analysed within the framework of academic theories (which is not to say that they are in opposition to them), but mainly through the observation of activities taking place in a specific socio-cultural context of a local (e.g. Norway) and global scope. Thus, the aim is not to create theoretical concepts (e.g. to define religion), but to focus on culture understood as *praxis*, on how reality within a particular social practice was transformed into human experience. This approach has allowed the author to reflect on the relationship between religion and popular culture from the level of everyday life and its relationship to social, political, cultural, and market contexts. This includes an individual and deeply personal experience of religion.

Comics are given as an example to demonstrate the links that exist between the spheres of religion and popular culture. It is noteworthy that this contemporary popular culture text is significantly valued in the monograph. It has rightly been recognised as an important part of global visual and popular culture, and a significant text of contemporary culture, i.e. one through which the relationship between religion and popular culture can be expressed. It has been considered in its numerous varieties (from graphic novels to manga) and has proved an inspiring subject for research. This interest in comics should also be viewed positively, as it has hitherto been poorly represented in scholarly discourse – especially when it comes to its relationship with religion. The proposed sociological account of comics, therefore, aims to value and deepen the knowledge of comics as an essential element of popular culture, being both subject to and influenced by certain social interactions in the context of the system religion – popular culture. Secondly, comics are a kind of 'window' providing sociological insights for a better understanding of the broader religious practices in contemporary culture, often fascinating in their diversity and cross-referencing.

In the structure of the volume, four primary areas of analysis of comics containing disparate themes relating to religion are distinguished. The first one concerns how religions interact with comics. It contemplates how religious institutions or other actors communicate specific content or ideas linking to religion through the medium of comics. Among other things, it describes the disputes and controversies provoked, these often going beyond religious discourse. The second area relates to how comics interact with religion. It concerns how religious beliefs, symbols, rituals, and prominent figures of the religious world are portrayed in comics. The third strand relates to the question of how comics in specific practices of their reception could fit into the context of religious/spiritual experience. The idea is to explain how the social role of comics is linked to the social role of religion and discuss the culturally formative significance of comics in the everyday construction of the experience of *sacrum* and in making meanings of reality. Part four offers a different perspective on analysis and poses questions about comics as a source of knowledge, considering how comics could generate knowledge about culture, religion and the interconnectedness of religion and society, how they could be used for religious education or as a source of sociological knowledge. The volume concludes with a summary of the monograph by Kees de Groot.

Having outlined the issues covered by the book in general terms, it is worthwhile giving an overview of its content and discuss its individual parts and chapters.

The volume begins with the introductory text 'Comics and Religion in Liquid Modernity' by Kees de Groot. In it, the author explains the intentions behind the publication, outlines its fundamental aims and lines of analysis, and, above all, the idea of a sociological view of the relationship between religion and comics, which, as mentioned, guides the entire publication.

Part I of 'Comics in Religion' consists of three chapters. The first of these by Irene

Trysnes is entitled 'From Subordinates to Superheroes? Comics in Christian Magazines for Children and Youth in Norway'. The author considers how religious organisations and associations use comics to promote religion among children and young people. For her analyses, she chose two firmly established religious periodicals on the Norwegian publishing market related to the dominant Protestant tradition in Norway. Their primary task for more than 150 years has been the education and religious upbringing of the younger generation and the popularisation of various forms of involvement in the life of Christian communities. The object of this research was to define and describe the traditional functions fulfilled by religious cartoons in the above-mentioned magazines and, above all, to trace their extremely interesting evolution that has taken place in recent decades. This change consisted of an appreciation of two elements previously explicitly subordinated to ideological objectives. Firstly, it was about the empowerment of the young, who had gained the status of intellectually independent readers and full members of the religious community, who no longer needed to be controlled and disciplined. Secondly, it was about the comics themselves, which ceased to act as a means of pushing conservative religious-educational content and began to convey subject matter seamlessly combining religious education with entertainment. They also showed a picture of a world open to the value of ambivalence and (cultural, religious) otherness. The author links these shifts to wider socio-cultural transformations, such as the empowerment of the child's status in society, the move away from the institutional model of religiosity in Norway, and the greater presence of the media sphere and popular culture in the lives of children and young people. In describing these transformations, Trysnes refers, among other things, to the concepts of 'liquid religion' and 'mediatisation'. Thus, it can be said that the magazines analysed in the chapter were subject to a phenomenon of multiple 'liquefaction': the liberalisation of their content, the appreciation of the status of young readers, and the change

in the function of comics. It was therefore the evolution heralded in the title: from subservience to being a 'superhero'.

Evelina Lundmark's text 'Cancelling the Second Coming: Manufactured Christian Outrage Online' is dedicated to the wave of moral outrage that emerged in the American public space following the publication of the controversial comic book Second Coming. With an insightful analysis of the emotional media debate, the author describes the mechanisms of the instrumentalisation of comics and the religious themes raised therein. She demonstrates that the crux of the dispute was not a controversial comic strip, but a fight for a particular vision of society. The publication of the 'blasphemous' comic book and the ensuing outrage became a pretext for the manifestation of a specifically American 'political religion' and its associated 'tribal' group identity, i.e. Christian nationalism. It is an ideological movement whose content includes: the idea of a special mission of the American people, strong conservatism, a sense of resentment and threat, and the attribution of victim status. Lundmark shows how the proponents of this trend instrumentalised Christian rhetoric and symbolism (combining it with national rhetoric and symbolism) for a radical critique of contemporary culture dominated by: 'the conspiracy of the left', 'mainstream media', 'liberals', 'followers of Islam', 'homosexuals', 'atheists', etc. Christian nationalism also reflects an American society divided into two hostile camps ('us'/'them'), polarised politically and in terms of worldview, in which 'white Christians' are allegedly ridiculed and persecuted. Behind this is a vision of a society gripped by moral panic and a culture war in which 'traditional American values' are at stake. The author shows how much cognitive value a brilliantly conducted sociological analysis of just one comics title can bring to the debate.

Equally interesting in this respect is the article 'The Reception of Comics on Zoroastrianism' by Paulina Niechciał. It is devoted to the social reception of comics with themes related to ancient Zoroastrianism. However, the analyses go beyond the

context of this confession, now marginal in terms of reach. Rather, the aim of the text is to outline a nuanced interpretation of the discourse of *Zarathustrianism* in popular culture. For ideological reasons, comics on this subject cannot be published in the cradle of this religion, i.e. today's Iran, and therefore the author discusses two selected titles published in India and France. They differed in their approach to religious themes and fulfilled different social functions. In the case of the Indian publication, it was primarily about the popularising and educational functions concerning this religion, while in the French case, the convention of the spy thriller allowed the authors of the comic to refer to real events concerning the uneasy fate of followers of this religion in today's Iran. The author prepared a questionnaire that she addressed to representatives of this community around the world, which aimed to find out their opinions on the aforementioned comics. The social dimension of how the discourse of Zoroastrianism was received in popular culture manifested itself precisely in how comic book audiences perceived it. This discourse concerned the various functions of comics with respect to the market, to education, to popularisation, and to integration (the consolidation of national and religious identity). The mediatising function of comics was also important because, as a global medium, it 'took it upon itself' to transmit traditional religious content in a modern form that fit into the contemporary, transnational structure of Zoroastrianism.

Part II of the monograph ('Religion in Comics') begins with the chapter 'Drawn into Krishna: Autobiography and Lived Religion in the Comics of Kaisa and Christoffer Leka' by Andreas Häger and Ralf Kauranen. This interesting text refers to the comic book work of two contemporary authors: Kaisa and Christoffer Leka. The analyses deal with the universal, i.e. the deep-seated need, to experience and express individual religiosity, and that which is more particular and which could be directly linked to the situation of comic book authors living in a country with a different cultural and religious tradition than

their native one (Hindu vs the Protestant tradition and secularised Finnish society). The key term used by the chapter authors is 'living religion', which means living out a religion far outside its dogmatic dimension. It is characterised by a very individual and even emotive approach (the use of irony, a sense of humour), and a dialogical attitude encompassing a multiplicity of 'voices' on the religion being professed – from the critical to the accepting. It is worth noting that the text analyses autobiographical comics, which are perfectly suited to revealing 'living religion' in action. On the one hand, they recount the everyday religious experience of the protagonists. On the other hand, their creation is a 'side-effect' of the process of practising a 'living religion' by its authors. Finally, the comic strips may be inspiring to readers who follow other religions than Kaisa and Christoffer Leka. Once again, it is shown that it is possible to convey complex content through comics in a simple, but yet catchy way, combining humour and seriousness, religious scepticism and the affirmation of spirituality, and finally, the ordinary and the unusual.

Michael J. Prince writes about more controversial content conveyed by comics. In the chapter 'What Would Preacher Do? Tactics of Blasphemy in the Strategies of Satire and Parody', he analyses the acclaimed title *Preacher*. The eponymous preacher is the figure of the new Christ wanting to restore order in a world abandoned by God. This 'eschatological satire' has proved attractive to popular culture audiences engaging in today's 'discursive communities'. They are individuals who share cultural resources, values, and communication strategies, the primary one being irony. Therefore, blasphemy – the 'leitmotif' of the comic – is also used and interpreted by creators and readers within the framework of satirical rhetoric and outside the strictly religious context, even though the authors of *Preacher* make abundant use of religious meanings, images, and symbols. The type of satire used in the comic book has been defined as 'Menippean satire' due to its multi-layered narrative structure drawing on different visual traditions

and literary themes. Two of these predominate; the traditional Christian story (eschatology, angelology) and the western. Both are parodied in the comic in a 'blasphemous' way. In essence, then, it was not a profanation of the sacred, but an ironic play on meanings aimed at critiquing certain socio-cultural myths of America, which were underpinned by a conservative model of Christianity and associated 'traditional American values'. The author of the chapter vividly and colourfully analyses the comic in terms of the formal and semantic tropes contained in it, classifying it under the 'banal religion' trend.

In the next chapter of the monograph 'Islam and Anxieties of Liberalism in Craig Thompson's Habibi', its author Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri analyses another well-known comic strip 'Habibi'. However, he is interested not in the artistic but in the social impact of this award-winning work. The author of the comic strip, Craig Thompson, published it on the 10th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. In doing so, he wanted to add his voice to the public debate on the social and political impact of these dramatic events on American society. At issue was not only America's military involvement in Arab countries as a direct result of the terrorist attacks, but also the rise of Islamophobia in American politics and society after 11 September. In this context, Thompson's comic strip was an expression of the creator's (and the American public's) deep concern for the liberal model of American democracy in the face of the social and political polarisation that could threaten it. He posed important questions about the place of Muslims in American society in the face of deep-rooted negative tendencies such as racism. On the other hand, he expressed concern about the ability of Muslims living in the United States to be part of a democratic society founded on liberal values. According to the chapter's author, 'Habibi' is a comic book about the power of selfless love, a work full of extended references to Islamic culture and religion, but containing a contemporary message of hope for the possible coexistence in one society of citizens with different religious traditions but oriented towards the common good and beyond racism, sexism, the injustices of global capitalism, and environmental degradation.

Part three of the volume ('Comics as Religion?') opens with Ilario Biano's text 'Implicit Religion and Trauma Narratives in Maus and Watchmen'. The author analyses two classic works in the history of comics: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Watchmen* by Alan Moor and Dave Gibbson. Biano rightly emphasises the cultural and social potential of these cartoons, which was to stimulate the processes of socialisation and the transmission and integration of certain beliefs and values in American society. They also posed important social and existential questions in the face of, among other things, unprocessed social trauma. It is trauma that the narrative identifies as a central and structural problem of contemporary Western (particularly American) culture. In the case of the *Maus* comic book, it was about the trauma of the Holocaust, memory, and identity. In the case of *Watchmen*, it was about the trauma of the Cold War, the tensions and socio-political crises of the 1980s, and the threat of nuclear war. The original approach to the issue under analysis in this chapter was also to point out that the cultural transmission and reproduction of these collective traumas in comics carries an implicit religious dimension. It manifests itself in the numerous references to religious symbolism in the comic works in question and in the ethical (and deeply religious) call for 'fidelity to trauma', i.e. the personal responsibility to remember it and the need for political and social engagement with the world and to make sense of reality.

The chapter 'Manga Pilgrimages: Visualizing the Sacred/Sacralizing the Visual in Japanese Junrei' by Mark MacWilliams is equally interesting. He, too, draws attention to the key place of popular culture texts in contemporary culture in terms of negotiating cultural resources and making meanings – including those related to religion in the broadest sense. In this context, he refers to the ex-

ample of Japanese comic books (manga) and Japanese animated films (anime) interpreted as areas for 'recycling' religious content and symbols and images in contemporary Japanese culture. The author focuses on examining popular culture texts that refer to the tradition of pilgrimage to holy places. He analyses two types of comics and anime. The first ones (*junrei manga*) are intended to 'visualise the sacred'. They are a kind of guidebook published by religious organisations and temples for use by pilgrims. They contain information about sacred sites, combining entertainment and educational functions with unobtrusive proselytising. The second (*seichi junrei*) means 'sacralisation of the visual' and has a tourist-oriented and recreational character. The latter group of manga and anime, in particular, are an extremely interesting example of the practising of popular culture as a kind of religion and provide an insight into the religiosity of contemporary Japanese people. They are about making a pilgrimage to places that were particularly important to the audience because they appeared in their favourite fictional comic or film stories. The 'sacred' element is not about traditionally lived religiosity, but about fans' 'religious' fascination with popular culture texts. It expresses itself in giving a special status to the places associated with them and on immersive contact with them. It is thus a kind of 'secular pilgrimage' close to the idea of 'invented religions'. The text, which offers significant cognitive value, describes such practices and their place in the Japanese entertainment industry and global 'content tourism'.

Sofia Sjö's chapter 'Comics and Meaning Making: Adult Comic Book Readers on What, Why, and How They Read' is devoted to the different reception strategies of comics. The author also hypothesises that people's understanding of how they create meaning in contemporary culture is largely related to the way they engage with popular culture. This also applies to the adults selected for her study. The author interviewed comic book lovers to find out what motivated them to read and how they understood reading comics. The respondents' intentions and reading practices were extremely varied and interesting. What they had in common was their multifaceted nature (ludic, sensual, aesthetic, self-reflective, intellectual) and the overarching goal of finding individual meanings in reality within everyday life. In a secularised world, in order to grasp religious experience, it is necessary to go beyond analyses of traditional religious institutions and practices and to focus attention on those forms of everyday human activity which, through their meaning-making dimension, can be described as 'lived religion'. The readers' actions described in the chapter stemmed from a genuine need on their part and fell within this trend. Getting to know them was extremely interesting and informative.

Part IV ('Learning from Comics') begins with a chapter by Sissel Undheim, 'The Magic of the Multiverse: Easter Eggs, Superhuman Beings, and Metamodernism in Marvel's Story Worlds'. She asks what comic books, or more precisely, serialised adaptations of Marvel comic book stories, teach us, and what they say about the contemporary socio-cultural reality. Above all, she highlights the fact that the three-film series selected for analysis based on the Marvel comic book universe showed the potential of popular culture to creatively operate with cultural resources, including stories, symbols and metaphors drawn from the area of Christian or Nordic religions. The feature of these borrowings was not postmodern, ironic and distanced play with traditional motifs. Rather, the films analysed were metamodern narratives that, unlike postmodern narratives, sought to express a specifically understood emotional 'truth' located somewhere 'in between', e.g. the longing for the universal and the relative, between sincerity and irony, and so on. It is, in other words, truth understood as a 'clash between irony and authenticity'. The open and innovative structure of these stories (crossover narrative, 'Easter eggs', multiverse) and the ambivalent nature of the characters (neither positive nor negative) encouraged audiences to engage creatively in reading the meanings of these popular culture texts. An important part of this

game was to play with ontologies and epistemologies rooted in religion. This play, due to its emotional intensity (searching for hidden, 'secret' meanings) is likened to a *quasi-religious* engagement.

In contrast, Line Reichelt Føreland's chapter 'Comics and Religious Studies: Amar Chitra Katha as an Educational Comic Series' deals with a religious comic series published in India (the Amar Chitra Katha series). The subject of the analyses is the educational potential of comics aimed at teaching religion in India, but also the problematic sides of such use (which should also be taken into account in research on this issue). The complexity of this situation implies the need to take into account the local socio-cultural background. As far as the content of the comic strips is concerned, there is, for example, a seamless interweaving of religious themes (sacred texts, mythology, deities) with secular themes (history, historical figures) and even with ideological themes (the construction of a national identity). There are many interesting threads in the narrative. For example, in the context of how readers interpret the comics, the educational and didactic dimension is sometimes met with contemplation typical of the assimilation of sacred texts. Then, according to the Hindu tradition, the cartoon frames are given power and religious significance. Cartoon illustrations depicting holy figures take on the characteristics of sacred images.

Just how much sociological knowledge a comic book work can provide to an inquisitive researcher is depicted in Christophe Monnot's text 'A Contract with God or a Social Contract?' analysing Will Eisner's classic work *Contract with God*. It is worth noting that previous research on the comic strip (considered the first example of the graphic novel) has been mainly concerned with its artistic innovation. The author of the chapter offers a sociological perspective on the book by treating the 'contract with God' as a metaphor for a social contract. The comic concerns a Jewish emigrant who, having come from Eastern Europe to the United States, struggles with his new living conditions. These reflect a 'social contract' between him, the native culture, and the host culture. The glories and shadows of this bargain, the victories and defeats reflected in the fates of the comic characters, the dilemmas concerning fidelity to native tradition and identity confronted with the need to adapt them to new social conditions – all these themes manifested themselves in Eisner's work and are comprehensively and interestingly described by Monnot. One of the many interesting points raised in the text is the treatment of Eisner as a 'sociologist' who, unlike professional sociologists who describe the socio-cultural situation of emigrants from the outside, described it in his work 'from the inside'. He was helped in this by his sense of observation, but also by his ability to synthesise a wide range of experiences by presenting in the comic characters he created and through their adventures a picture of the fate of an entire social group, its living conditions, and its mentality in the first and second generations after arriving in a new country. Years later, Eisner's work can be seen as an artistic-sociological synthesis of the collective memory of the Jewish diaspora in the United States.

The publication concludes with the paper 'Comics as a Way of Doing, Encountering, and Making Religion', which can be seen as a summary of the entire monograph. Its author, Kees de Groot, recalls and briefly discusses the three groups of issues addressed in the book. The first group was related to how people practise religion by consuming comics. The second concerned the image of religion that emerges from the comics analysed. The third group concerned the making of meaning in everyday life and the involvement of comics readers in practices related to 'lived religion' in the broadest sense. What emerges from these reflections is a complex picture of contemporary culture, of which a dynamic and diverse popular culture is an important part. This culture is, on the one hand, an object of ideological or political instrumentalisation and, on the other hand, an area of the genuine involvement of people at the level of their everyday lives. The author also emphasises the high cultural

value of comics as fully-fledged contemporary cultural texts fulfilling many important social functions. Referring to the individual texts in the volume, he also poses questions and indicates potential research tropes that could be taken up and developed in further analyses of the relationship between religion and popular culture.

It is worth noting once again the cognitive and substantive value of the monograph 'Comics, Culture, and Religion. Faith Imagined'. The authors involved in its creation present a truly diverse and interesting picture of the relationship between religion and popular culture. Drawing on a wealth of sources, they offer readers multiple approaches to the problem resulting from the representation of different scientific disciplines, traditions, and research areas. They use a range of methods of analysis: literary analysis, surveys, interviews, digital ethnography, ethnographic fieldwork, and the content analysis of comics and other media. The creators of the comics studied, the readers, and the works themselves come from Europe, Japan, India, and the United States. In turn, the authors of the individual chapters come from countries with different histories of comics, of their socio-cultural status and reception. Regardless of this (or perhaps because of it), reading the texts contained in the monograph provides invaluable insights into the religious needs of contemporary people and the ways in which they are realised in popular culture. The sociological approach to this issue allowed the authors to recognise and interestingly describe the multiple social functions of religion, as well as the deep-rooted and unrelenting need for such experiences and their ever-evolving socio-cultural dimension. This is also true in the context of the secularised Western world, where traditional religious institutions no longer organise religious life, yet religious (and more broadly spiritual) needs have not disappeared and people are still looking for new, often very individual forms for their expression. A certain shortcoming of the monograph is the lack of illustrations in some chapters. In a publication about visual culture texts, they are an integral part of the narrative. However, this in no way detracts from the publication as a whole.

In conclusion, one must once again agree with the editor of the monograph, Kees de Groot, that creative and substantive research into popular culture texts, including comics, can serve to better understand the place and function of religion and popular culture in contemporary culture and society. In the last sentence of the book, he suggests the possibility of continuing the research. Surely many readers who have already read the publication with real satisfaction will eagerly add: "Dear Editor. We hold you to your word"!

MARCIN JAWORSKI

Imre Máté, Yotengrit (vol. 1-2),

Győr: Palatia Nyomda és Kiadó Kft. 2004-2005, 178 p., 207 p.

ISBN 978-963-7692-11-8, ISBN 978-963-9906-61-7.

In recent decades, there has been a strong interest in so-called "ancient religion" (I would rather say old/early culture) in Hungary, just like almost everywhere in Europe (and maybe elsewhere too). With this brief review, I want to share some remarks about the 1st and 2nd volumes of one popular exponent of such interest – that is *Yotengrit*, a four-volume series of books published between 2004 and 2008. The author, Imre Máté claims that he has uncovered "ancient knowledge" preserved by a secret group of shamans who lived in the *Kisalföld* (a region in north-western Hungary). Could this be true?