

# TENDENCIES OF RELIGIOUS CHANGES IN MODERN HUNGARY

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Religious people hold dual citizenship, subjects both of God and Caesar. They need not feel schizophrenic in consequence, nor do they have to serve two masters, as they may serve the Lord in both capacities. In Hungary, the construction of the anti-environmental Danube power plant at Nagymaros was prevented by a nationwide protest movement even before the change in the political system. A spiritual power plant had been in operation at the same Nagymaros as early as 1971. This is where meetings of young Catholics were held, at first illegally, then quasi-legally, and since 1980, fully legally. How many people in Hungary aspire to such dual citizenship? How do they experience their twofold role?

## In a minority

While practically all Hungarians declared themselves as adhering to one *religious denomination* or another at the end of the forties, twenty years later only half of the population declared themselves believers, and another ten years later only two-fifths did so. The loss of religious faith was faster and deeper in Hungary than in any Western European countries during the same period. All this is the result of *worldwide secularization* combined with the *atheism forced upon people* by a Stalinist state. However, there has been a *religious renewal*. The interest of young people in religion is growing, as is the number of intellectuals who think of themselves as believers. There are thousands of small religious communities and self-supporting units striving to realise a religious way of life. There is an increasing interest in religious knowledge and in religious art. As a result of two opposing trends, the spread of atheism has stopped and, after the change in political system, a slight reversal can be anticipated.

For the past forty years, *denominational ratios* appear to have stayed relatively steady. Forty years ago (when denomination still featured on census

forms) 70.5 per cent were Catholics, 21.9 per cent Calvinists, 5.2 per cent Lutherans, 1.5 per cent Jews, 0.4 per cent Greek Orthodox, 0.4 per cent of other religions and 0.1 per cent professed no religion. In the past hundred years the proportions of Catholics has steadily grown, a trend that continued in the past forty years. A new element is the rising number of those baptized who profess no religion and stay outside religious traditions and culture. (Among children the proportion today is 30–35 per cent and may reach the same proportion in the adult population by the onset of the 21st century.) In the period of secularisation and enforced atheism, the Calvinists suffered the heaviest losses. Only half of those declaring themselves believers go to church even at Christmas or Easter, and the proportion of those practising religion is under one fifth. Among members of small denominations (in Hungary mostly Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, or Pentecostals) this proportion is much higher, exceeding 70–80 per cent. The religious population are a minority in another respect as well: the religious people are found mostly among the elderly, the unschooled, the poor and village-dwellers. Religious intellectuals are scarce, and though a majority of the members in the present government are practising believers and the three parties of the governing coalition profess to be Christians, the current proportion of actively religious professionals is 2–4 per cent, as against the general 10–15 per cent.

The consequences of a minority situation are often assimilation, a set of *minority complexes*, a pseudo-martyr role, a rejection of responsibility as well as a denial of the facts, in favour of the pretence that “we are still a Christian country”.

### Types of religiousness

Superficial observations would show that *traditional religiousness* is still alive in villages, while towns display a new type of *intrinsic* religious behaviour, characterized by the recognition of minority status, a more absorbed spirituality, an increased intellectual interest, and a sense of community and solidarity. Taking a closer look, however, it turns out that both the traditional and the new types are in a minority. In towns as well as in villages, *extrinsic (formal)* religiousness prevails. The type rooted in folk customs and penetrating all the events of daily life is still alive, albeit only in small, reservation-like villages. Even today, children in the countryside are more likely to be born into Christianity than those in towns; yet it is also true that more young people *lapse* from religion after confirmation in villages than in towns. The community and spiritual life in Hungarian villages is also undergoing a crisis, which

is another reason why atheism has reached new levels in villages. At the same time, there are a growing number of cases where traditional religiousness is grafted onto the new type. In towns, especially in those of over 50,000 inhabitants, intrinsic religiousness is present mostly among secondary-school pupils and university graduates. In a considerable number of cases, they come from small communities.

Only a third of religious people declare themselves to be *believers in terms of the doctrines of their church*; the others think of themselves as *religious after their own fashion*. A majority of these latter do not practise their religion, lack a sense of identity with a congregation or parish, have minimal religious knowledge and some are anticlerical. The rest, a clear minority, lead more-than-average religious lives but feel their religion to be *individual*, cut to their personalities, and in some aspects they are critical of their church, particularly of its leaders.

The zone between religiousness and non-religiousness is broad. Some of those religious after their own fashion quickly drop out. Among university students, the proportion of those professing religion after their own fashion is two or three times that of those who follow the doctrines of a church. The number of the latter is exceeded even by those who answer "I really consider myself to be a *seeker for God*". In this circle, the proportion of *staunch atheists* (an approximately equal number of materialists, non-materialist and Marxist atheists) is relatively small, a third or a quarter of those who regard themselves *indifferent, unsure, pragmatic, free of ideologies or rationalists*.

I have had the opportunity to examine this dual citizenship as experienced by young Catholics and Protestants who, attending church schools or belonging to small religious communities, are more religious than the average person. One of many groups is characterized by a split personality of the "everything in its own place" approach, a *schizophrenic* state of mind of Sunday religion and weekday utilitarianism: "Body and mind are to be separately developed, each according to its own laws". Or, "When I say 'I', that means my personality. When I say 'we', that means Christians". "I accept Marxism concerning social problems, and religion concerning faith". "My tastes are not influenced by my faith, nor is my faith influenced by my tastes". The religiousness of the second group is the best characterized by calling it *laic*. They question the authority of religion, churches and the clergy in some important fields: "My religion aids me in many areas of my life – but definitely hampers me in my research." "As for me, Christianity means first of all the expression of my national identity." The third group includes those of overzealous behavior (we might even call them *bigoted* and *dogmatic* as well). They harbour prejudices concerning the world as a whole or some of its aspects: "A Christian must recognize barriers

around his personality." "Faith is more important than knowledge, even in science." "The finest poetry is in the prayer book." "A Christian may choose only a profession befitting a Christian." The members of the fourth group suffer a *conflict* in their dual citizenship: "I feel that my faith and knowledge must not contradict each other. At the same time, I also feel that the two cannot be brought into a harmony." "I long to enter non-religious communities as well, yet I must not serve two masters at the same time." "To remain an individual even as a faithful Christian while also evolving my personality, yes, that would be fine, but the two cannot go together." A fifth group includes people in whom the two citizenships are in *harmony*, with the transcendental and secular spheres welded into one: "As a religious person, I can be all the more of an individual." "Art, I think, is part of the supernatural. And that concerns the work of non-Christian artists, too." "I belong to both a religious community and a non-religious one. On the basis of the law of communicating vessels, I suppose the values of one reach the other." The overzealous strategy has a more-than-average number of supporters among people professing traditional religion: the wordly and split ones attract mainly people of extrinsic religiousness; those of intrinsic religiousness can be chiefly found in the conflict-ridden or harmonious groups.

Of intellectual Christian strategies, one group aims at the individual, another at the small community, a third at the institutional church, and the fourth at the link between church and world. The scenarios of strategies aimed at the *individual* are as follows: 1) to love more, 2) to reach deeper into one's soul, 3) to become a more worthy Christian, 4) to become a more conscious Christian, 5) to be present as a sign in the word. In the second kind of strategy, the nature of the link is the *basic unit* of Christianity, or the Church: 1) family, 2) small community. The third group is that of the strategies desiring *to reform the institutionalized church* in either a moderate or a radical way: 1) improve standards amongst the clergy, 2) increase the numbers of the clergy by recruiting laymen, 3) improve the liturgy, 4) transform congregations or parishes into efficient organizations, 5) shape congregations or parishes into living communities, 6) create an open, ecumenic church, 7) create a democratic church that works from the bottom up. The fourth kind, the strategies of dialogue, urge a change in the relationship *between the church and the world*: 1) creating a more political church, 2) appearing on public platforms, 3) moving out into the world through charity (social and psycho-hygienic), 4) participating in social life through cultural activities, 5) creating links in all directions and every way with the secular sphere, 6) evangelization and missionary work through dialogue.

### Church life

There is an essential difference between the historical (Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran) and smaller churches with fewer than 30,000 members (Baptists, Jehova's Witnesses, Pentecostals and about three dozen others). The congregations of these latter are *intimate*, their members live in a face to face relationship, and their activities often cover a wide range (help and support, culture, education and merrymaking). These congregations' composition according to age, sex and profession is far more *balanced* than that of the historical churches, and is very similar to Catholic basic communities.

Aside from exceptions in the 5–10 per cent range, the parishes and congregations of the historical churches reveal a picture that differs considerably from those of small churches. Most of these parishes or congregations *are not communities* yet—or no longer so. It is conspicuous that even the Calvinist Church has become thoroughly hierarchical and, in many places, the faithful are neither partners nor brethren, but a mere flock.

According to a recent survey, there are great differences in the Catholic parishes' equipment, personnel, activity forms and range of influence. Of 100 priests, 6, aged 60–70, look after their parishes, each with 3–4 filiae, without any assistance. A single priest, aided by one lay helper, looks after a parish of 400 as well as one of 5,000; in some, forty attend Sunday mass, in others seven hundred, the catechism is taught to fifty as well as to two hundred children. There is no end of examples of unequal burdens. The effect is, of course, visible also in religious life.

Only a quarter of *parish boards* include members under thirty. A third of them are men only, a fifth have no members under 61. In an overwhelming majority of the cases, the parish priests holds the reins, and the number of conflicts between priests and laymen is limited only because there is no opportunity to express opposing views.

There is no *charitable* organisation in one third of Catholic parishes. A massive majority of these are village parishes where a sense of social responsibility seems to be even rarer than in towns. Charity work is haphazard in most villages.

The number of *baptisms* is declining in 60 per cent of parishes, rising in only 5 per cent, the conditions of administering the Sacrament differ widely. 50–90 per cent of those *confirmed* (the number in villages, where confirmation is a folk custom rather than a Sacrament, exceeds that in towns) lapse soon afterwards; confirmation is often bitterly called "The Sacrament of leaving the Church". The number of *confessions* is steeply declining almost everywhere, and a majority of priests urge their flocks to confess more often, *treating them*

as *children*, instead of asking them to lead spiritual lives as responsible adults. "Instead of considering their actions, they confess them", complains a priest of an average village parish about a flock of infantile piety. "Characteristically, for the past thirteen years no one has confessed fornication or abortion to me. The most frequently confessed sins are 'I swore' or 'I quarrelled with the wife', says the priest of a secularized village. The number of *church weddings* is on the decline in two thirds of the parishes; yet there are still a few villages where all weddings take place in church. The (mostly not too intimate) ties established with the couple during the premarital instruction are mostly broken immediately after the ceremony.

In 1989, the year leading up to the major changes in the political system, 10–15 per cent of children attended *religious instruction*, more in villages, fewer in towns. In most places, their numbers rose by 10–40 per cent after the change. Only 15 per cent of parishes or congregations provide religious instruction for children of kindergarten age, 50 per cent for young people, and 25 per cent for adults.

*Cultural and community activities* are poor and only improving slowly. A considerable proportion of religious small communities keeps apart from the parish, in a majority of cases due to the priest's dismissive or uncertain attitude. The parishes' links are uniformly poor with neighbouring parishes, congregations of other denominations and lay communities alike. Although the change in the political system led to the foundation of several hundred parish clubs, libraries, scout troops and newspapers, these are still relatively rare.

Characteristically, only a third of the parish priests in the surveys answered the question, "What do you expect of the Catholic Church leadership?" Most of them want it to be more courageous and decisive. Though four fifths of the parishes have plans of some kind, a third of those concerns only the maintenance of the church and/or the presbitery. Other items at the top of that list are improving the quality of youth work and catechism classes, church schools or kindergartens, improving pastoral work, establishing communities, family care and boosting cultural activities.

In a considerable proportion of Catholic parishes, *pastoral work* is limited to the administration of the Sacraments. Even in that respect, there are more and less efficient parishes. On a second level there is considerable Catechization; on a third, there is even charity work; on a fourth, all that is topped by cultural and community activities; and on the fifth level, the presbitery serves local social life.

Besides secularization and the previously enforced atheism, the present situation of parishes and congregations is significantly determined on the one hand by a kind of *clericalism* that is jealous of lay organizations and lacks both

timeliness and clearcut ideas, and on the other hand by the *passivity* of Christians adjusting to a *ghetto existence* and displaying a *consumer mentality* even in religion. There are, however, happy exceptions both in towns and villages, places where religion flourished even in the years of repression, where fresh ideas made up for underdeveloped infrastructure, where the faithful carried their parish forward on their shoulders.

### Movements and small communities

In Hungary, the number of small communities made up of members of the historical churches is between two or three thousand. An exact number is difficult to establish for two reasons: 1) they surfaced after an *underground existence* barely a year ago and are still cautious of both the world and the church leadership which do not trust them, 2) it is seldom easy to establish whether the particular group are catechists with a strong community spirit or a genuine small community.

Half of the small communities belong to four major and half a dozen minor *spiritual movements*; 95 per cent of them are Catholic small communities. Of four major movements, two are of Hungarian origin; the others are the international *Focolare movement* and the *charismatics*.

Of the Hungarian movements, *Regnum Marianum* was founded early this century as a community of priests joining forces to educate adolescent boys. Though its main objective remains the education of youth, it now embraces both sexes, from toddlers to adults. Its main values are Christianity, self-cultivation, the love of nature and national identity. The "*Bokor*" (Bush) movement, founded by the Piarist priest György Bulányi 45 years ago, emerged from obscurity in the early 1970s. Its aim is a radical experience of the Christ paradigm, its main values are poverty, donation, non-violence and an aware faith. Owing to its radicalism, this movement was relegated to the sidelines of Hungarian church life. Catholic "*Bokor*" members (like Jehova's Witnesses and Nazarenes) refuse to do military service. In their struggle, they clashed not only with the Communist state but also with the church leadership that collaborated with it. The other point at issue was their criticism of the rigid Catholic hierarchy.

These four movements cover 100–200 communities each. Another half dozen movements, including the "*Bárka*" (Ark), "*Hit és fény*" (Faith and Light), the Neocatechumenic and Taizé groups, account for another 5–10 communities each. A majority of the other half of small communities are *parish communities*; a minority of them are *independent* of movements or parishes.

These small communities are an élite within their denomination. There are, however, still some *hurdles in the way of their recognition and integration*, a problem for all of them and not only for the "Bokor" movement. The lives and values of small community members are *markedly more Christian*, their faith deeper than those of regular churchgoers outside these communities, or even of church school pupils. In the birth of these groups, the following factors must be considered (in varying proportions for each movement and community): 1) the growing influence of *laymen*, 2) a demand for *personal involvement and community life*, 3) *political repression* which forced them to go underground, 4) *deeper religiousness*, 5) *the challenge of small churches*.

One in every three or four Catholic small communities has one or two Protestant members. Thus, these small communities are also bases of a practical "grassroots" *ecumenism* in which the Taizé movement's influence has played a major role. In the early 1970s, young members of these small communities organized the first, at the time quasi-illegal, meeting in the spirit of *evangelization*. (The "spiritual power plant" at Nagymaros, mentioned already, is their achievement.) Their evangelizing activities joined forces with some pop groups and the ensuing amalgam with its emphasis on musical communication proved to be very efficient in attracting young people.

Undoubtedly, the small communities are the élite force of the historical churches today: they intend to provide a warm hearth for those outside, a reliable haven in which people will not be disappointed, where individuals are not cogs in a social machine, but vessels of irreplaceable value.

### **Towards a new Christian course or a Gaudiopolis?**

"A new era is backoning to Hungary's Christianity. We have survived forty years of persecution! Bruised and diminished in numbers, we are considering our options. While cleaning away the debris, we are simultaneously taking care of valuable building material and avoiding hidden minefields. Many problems must be solved. On the one hand, we feel the increased need for Christianity, and are part of the religious renewal. On the other hand, we are painfully aware of our smallness, our limits, our helplessness. We are glad to say that, since the 1970s, it has been possible to give evidence of the renewal in figures. Yet we are awed by the multiplicity of options, but we have just no idea about how to use them." So wrote the sociologist Miklós Tomka, in early 1990. One of the hidden mines is a *national church triumphant*, maintaining close ties with those in power. The memory of the Christian course between the two world wars is still attractive to many Christians. It is there in the thinking of all those

bishops, chaplains, the ordinary faithful, whose ideas are not adjusted to the present. Albeit to a smaller extent than among non-religious citizens, an *identity crisis* can be felt even by Christians of dual citizenship. Against that, "Christian politics" is used as a panacea by many people. They vote for Christian parties, urge the introduction of obligatory or a least optional religious studies in schools, and consider themselves, though a small minority, as the majority. Those Hungarian Christians unsure of their identity also tend to use adjectives (most often 'Christian', of course) instead of ideas, and to speak of the devil (identifying him as the liberals). Though there is clearly a possibility that the ideology of the Horthy era may rise from the dead, several factors work against such a rebirth: 1) the *unpleasant memory* of that rightist, reactionary, ultra-conservative period, 2) those forty years which, beside the losses, were also responsible for the emergence of a new kind of solidarity, the sense of community of a minority that shared its thinking, and *readiness for dialogue*, 3) the *spirit of the Second Vatican Council*, 4) the *Jesus paradigm* itself, in which, according to St Paul, there are no more Jews or Greeks, slaves or free citizens, men or women, can be continued in today's Hungary by saying that there are no longer religious or non-religious people, former communists or formerly persecuted, government supporters, Christian democrats or liberal democrats, Catholics and Protestants. That is, we have them all. We have them as valuable differences, complements of each other. And thus there is a chance for a Gaudiopolis based upon the spiritual power plants, a secular merger of the two states.

Nevertheless, the road to Gaudiopolis is rocky, with a number of hurdles to be cleared away. Much has to be done. 1) Religious people should possess a better *psychophysical condition, consciousness and identity* together with the gift of forgiveness. 2) There is a need for a more up-to-date, *dialogue-oriented theology* presenting an *image of man* as well. 3) Rigidly hierarchical, obsolete *church institutions must be democratized*, 4) Small communities must be supported, promoted supplied with things to do and means withal, 5) *Lay helpers* must be found to assist the abandoned and exhausted priests. 6) The guarding of tradition must be balanced by *modernization*. 7) Hungary should be made a missionary target, though *evangelization must be dialogue-oriented* and a service rather than a constraint. 8) Spontaneous and politically, illegal or quasi-legal initiatives must be institutionalized with a simultaneous *socialization of institutions* that have obtained monopoly status and work in inefficient, antidemocratic ways. 9) *Social platforms* must be used. 10) *Cooperation* must be established *between denominations*, especially between Christians and Jews, and between the two rivals for the past four hundred years, the Roman Catholic and Calvinist churches. 11) Churches must participate in education and socialization by presenting something valuable and different.

*Keeping tradition alive and working for radical reform* are equally important. Adapting ourselves to something new is not enough in itself since, as a sociologist put it, "The devil's hoof of a self-repetition peeps out from under the cloak of change". It would be wonderful to believe that Hungarian Christians, doomed to sudden liberty, will find a way that combines *sticking to the score and improvising skills*.

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