

Sects in Hungary: The Free Christian Congregations

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The charismatic movement has spread all over the world, and these days is penetrating almost every Christian church and sect. The classic Pentecostal movement came to Hungary at the end of the 1920s, but the neo-Pentecostal and Catholic charismatic movement began to take effect only in the early 1970s. The Protestant sect, Free Christian Congregations, turned charismatic within a single year (1974-75). There are some sects in other countries with similar teaching and worship practice, but no exact equivalent of the Free Christians can be found anywhere else. The first Free Christian Group was established in the middle of the 1920s, but it was not charismatic at that time; the overwhelming majority of the original members came from the Reformed Church. Their teaching and communal organisation was mostly influenced by the sect called the Christian Brothers' Congregation, which claimed to be derived from the Darbyites.*

Following the charismatic change in the middle of the 1970s, the number of the sect members considerably increased. In 1968, there were only 312 in the whole country, and this number was stagnant or even decreasing until 1975. By 1980, however, their number had become more than two thousand, seven times as large. In 1968 there were Free Christians in only 17 places (one group in Budapest and 16 in a remote district), but in 1980, we can find them in 16 of the 19 counties of Hungary, in 96 places altogether. Besides sect members, there are more than two thousand "fellowshippers"; some of them are certainly the members' children, as, in common with other sects, only adults are admitted. The formal difference between members and non-members (fellowshippers) is that the latter are not allowed to take part in exclusive group occasions (the Lord's Supper and meetings where the internal affairs are discussed).

Although their groups are growing fast, the Free Christians and the "fellowshippers" together do not play an important part in religious life in Hungary. Their peculiarity is that they are the only sect in the country in

*Followers of John Darby (1800-1882), a Plymouth Brother who became leader of the stricter Brethren after local schisms within the movement — *Ed.*

which the congregations of almost every Church and sect take a serious interest.

This attention can be seen in practice on the public occasions organised by the Free Christians, mainly the so-called "days of silent communion". These occasions are arranged in Budapest and in a provincial town on Saturday and Sunday afternoons twice a month. Five or six times as many people attend these "days of silent communion" as other public meetings. As well as the usual participants, Free Christians from all over the country and people belonging to other denominations or to no denominations also participate. One of the reasons for this interest is that they invite Hungarian and foreign preachers, witnesses from other religious groups, who are widely known by reputation or from religious literature published abroad in Hungarian. This is the only occasion when they can be heard. In the past year they heard, for example, the Indonesian missionary Mel Tari, and the missionary of the Khmer Revival, Todd Burke. Miracles related by foreigners who are acknowledged all over the world are readily believed by the audience.

The participation of preachers and an audience from various denominations is made possible as a consequence of the basically ecumenical mind of the Free Christians. These meetings have the serious attraction that, in contrast to other sects, they are not used for increasing membership, but only for evangelising. The preachers' call is to conversion, not to membership of the Free Christian sect.

The atmosphere of the meetings greatly adds to the popularity of the Free Christians. The behaviour of the participants is unencumbered by traditional church discipline: many of them come and go during the long time of worship, sometimes lasting as long as five hours. They go out for a conversation, come late or leave early, and afterwards the majority remains to talk for a while. Most of them know each other more or less, and they easily address people who have come for the first time. Even the increased number of participants does not dampen the familiar mood. The preachers are mostly laymen, so the language of the worship is quite simple and easily understood by those who are ignorant of theological doctrine or even do not know the Bible well. During these "days of silent communion" there is a great deal of singing, the words of songs are handed out, and the tunes are easy to sing.

The range of interested people is certainly so wide that they cannot all take part in a "day of silent communion". Therefore those who are present often make recordings to enable others who are interested to listen to the preachers and to learn the songs.

Another reason for the popularity of the Free Christians is the place they occupy in the particular religious circumstances of Hungary. Of all those baptised nearly two thirds are Catholics and almost one third Protestants: four fifths of the latter belonging to the Reformed, one fifth

to the Lutheran Church. The Protestant sects do not amount to one per cent of the population altogether, while the number of those belonging to other denominations is about one per cent.

According to some surveys, not more than twenty per cent of the members of the three main churches attend church services, and at least another twenty per cent do not go to church but keep their faith. This proportion fits into the world-wide tendency of secularisation, but was greatly influenced by the active anti-religious politics of the 1950s. This external factor reinforced an internal process of the churches: they became more ecclesiastical, and because of this some believers drifted away from them during the next three decades. Inside the institutional church framework, the effects of new theological trends and religious movements in the churches of Western Europe and the United States can be felt only haphazardly in relation to certain theologians and some small local communities.

The number of communities with intense public worship is very low. A great number of believers are not satisfied with their pastoral care, with the gratification of their religious and communal demands, and some of them even with the policy and organisation of their churches. Outstanding preachers attract many people even in these circumstances, so the attendance in different churches differs greatly.

The Protestant sects active in Hungary today generally come from abroad, mostly from the United States. Until the end of the Second World War they underwent a good deal of harassment from the mainline churches who were worried about the defection of their members. They often denounced the sects, and the state authorities enforced hard measures in consequence. The sects have been able to function legally since 1945. The number of their members has not changed much since the early 1950s as they do not have a strong influence on their environment. They are mostly known to people who live in the neighbourhood of a group. The effect of the anti-religious policies mentioned above plays a crucial part in the standing of the sects, which were even harder hit than the mainline churches. The latter could publish their periodicals and books, and broadcast a monthly half-hour programme on the radio, while the sects, apart from a Baptist journal, have no means of publicity at all, nor were any of them allowed to have travelling missionaries. Face-to-face recruitment, typical of the sects, comprises only relatives: informal connections are hindered by officials in jobs and by teachers in schools. These conditions remain the same today. Deceased members are in most cases replaced by the children of member families. The attraction of the sects has diminished, because after being legalised, they have had more or less the same rights as the orthodox churches, so they have lost their oppositional advantage; at the same time, as a result of institutionalisation, they have become less and less different from mainline churches.

The Free Christians shared these features with the other sects before the charismatic change, yet we cannot say that the interest in them was caused by their charismatic aspect. The Hungarian Pentecostals never enjoyed similar popularity among religious people. Because of their ecstatic behaviour they were thought to be maniacs by both religious and secular critics; absurd stories were spread about them, and even today this prejudice makes them isolated. During the last decade they have changed a great deal, and do not now overemphasise baptism in the Spirit and speaking in tongues as they did earlier. As regards enthusiasm, their public worship is not so different from that of the Free Christians. On the other hand, their present structure is more centralised, more organised and more ecclesiastical, and consequently they are less open. Their isolation is increased by the fact that ecumenism is not as characteristic of them as it is of the Free Christians. Although this is not necessarily a feature of the classical Pentecostal movement their defensive situation had induced a rather strong Pentecostal self-consciousness, which helped to bring about this process of change.

The features making the Free Christians popular have peculiar antecedents. The fact that they were ecumenically minded from the beginning is closely connected with the lack of Free Christian consciousness even today. This can be explained by the way the two most important groups were established. The first one was originally a Bible circle of the Reformed Church, leading an intensive religious life, which was expelled by the Church at an early stage, before it had realised what the nature of the group was. Characteristically, in the first years their worship was exactly the same as that of a small Reformed group without a pastor, and the situation changed only when they made contact with the Christian Brothers' Congregation. The history of the other group is quite similar, but they were expelled twenty years later. They also functioned within the institutional framework of the Reformed Church, but as an inter-denominational Bible circle, where laymen and clergy belonging to various denominations were preaching. They did not try to become independent of the Reformed Church. In one place quite a few sect members, greatly influenced by the Reformed Church in a manner typical of the lack of Free Christian consciousness, still consider themselves Reformed even though they joined the sect voluntarily ten or fifteen years ago. It is a kind of self-defence against an environment in which they are considered faithless to their Church and their religion. The lack of Free Christian consciousness is expressed in sect ideology by rejecting denominational discrimination and attaching positive value to general Christianity: they claim that the Body of Christ is one and indivisible and that different names can result in separation; they claim that anybody can have only part of the truth, so merely belonging to a denomination cannot guarantee salvation.

Ecumenism has had relatively little influence in the history of the Hungarian Churches and sects (unlike quarrelling and jealousy). From the beginning, the Free Christian sect has often been attacked by the Reformed and the Baptist Churches, though they have never really been endangered by the spreading of it. The Baptists still outnumber them by about eight to one. The experience of these attacks has made the Free Christians careful. There have been a great number of people who wanted to join them recently, but the members of the sect try to persuade them to stick to their own Church, especially those who are already active church members and attend public worship regularly. If they are expelled, however, generally in consequence of their charismatic activity, then they are admitted to the sect. On the other hand, anybody who feels it necessary may be baptised by immersion, as immersion is distinct from admittance, although it is not obligatory for members. Those who have been immersed but not admitted also widen and strengthen the inter-denominational connections of the Free Christians, by remaining in their own denominations.

The present liberal thinking and practice in religious life has been greatly helped in its development by the crucial inner crisis the Free Christian sect underwent during the late 1960s and the early 1970s when they had some cases of adultery. The Free Christians, like other Protestant sects, believe adultery to be a sin, and the sinner must be expelled from the congregation. The situation became serious when the leader of the Budapest congregation, who was also a national leader, was found guilty. The leaders did their utmost to hush up the scandal. They claimed that the commandments of the Bible are not inflexible, and that one must consider the particular person and each particular case. But scandal could not be prevented, some details of the case leaked out, and a wide range of religious people were deeply shocked. Unfavourable opinion about the leader extended to the whole Free Christian sect, and brotherly relations between the sects deteriorated (e.g. Free Christians did not receive invitations and their invitations were not accepted). The leader himself had enjoyed high prestige within the sect, so his expulsion and the procrastination accompanying it caused factions to form within the Budapest congregation and the whole sect was in danger of disintegration. Another difficulty arose from the fact that the former leader was an excellent preacher, and there was no one of similar calibre to replace him. The sect members had to find some external solution to save themselves. Their leaders felt helpless; all they were able to do was to pray for miracles, and in order to break out of their isolation they opened the doors wide to anybody who wished to attend their meetings.

During this period, understandably, Free Christians could contact others only in a peripheral manner. In this way they began to make contact with preachers who had become non-denominational as a result

of their charismatic views and being short of preachers, they invited them. The congregations proved open enough to accept new ideas. It was particularly impressive when one of these preachers was able to convert a group of the members' children. These young people had not attended worship since their adolescence, and had become estranged from the faith and way of life, although their parents had prayed for them for years.

At congregational meetings, miracles followed miracles; a number of the members received baptism in the Spirit, prayed and sang in tongues and were healed by faith, while some younger ones, inspired by the Holy Spirit, composed new songs. This enthusiastic period restored the sect, and the inner discord subsided. External relations, however, continued to deteriorate, with the aversion of other denominations growing. Their distrust was somewhat justifiable: there were too many miracles among the Free Christians. Neither the sect members nor the leaders had had sufficient experience to resist extravagance, to free their groups from charlatans and dangerous neurotics. Moreover, the sect was discredited by the fact that anybody who wished to join was admitted to it, and some of the new members did not combine their conversion with a permanent change in their material way of life. The other denominations thought the Free Christians were too liberal in their doctrine and morals, and that was another reason for remaining aloof from them. The sect was certainly rather chaotic in this respect, as the former system of norms had been unbalanced by internal arguments, and they had made some more doctrinal concessions for the sake of guest preachers and new members. The sudden increase in their numbers meant a strong temptation for the leaders.

Only after a few years did the sect regain its reputation and popularity with members belonging to other denominations or even "hidden" members. The leaders now receive information about the preachers invited to their meetings. At public worship there is no loud praying in tongues and they avoid ecstatic manifestations. They are more careful with miracles, for example healing by laying on of hands, reserving them only for special occasions. They have the same system for admission of new members as before, but some candidates have to wait for years to make sure that they are committed to a religious way of life.

Some aspects of their former liberalism still remain doctrinally; they adhere to John Wesley's words: unity in the essentials, freedom in the inessentials. Their remarkable tolerance is shown by the fact that they have been able to keep members who still have not accepted their charismatic doctrine. The sect has no explicit system of norms. They think no member has the right to judge another, that our affairs should be arranged directly with God. It is He who shows everybody what they do wrong and what sins they have and gives them the strength necessary to

change. Consequently, the leaders interfere only to a small extent with the life of a particular member or a spontaneously organised group, not as is usual in some other sects.

In order to ensure unity, the leaders positively endeavour to form real communities and provide everyone with pastoral care. There is, however, a wider circle than the leaders, the activists who have gifts besides speaking in tongues (e.g. distinguishing spirits, prophesying, casting out devils, etc.). The members may each choose their own spiritual adviser from these activists to discuss not only their doctrinal problems but also their everyday difficulties. In larger congregations the members voluntarily formed prayer groups; these small groups usually come together to read the Bible, to pray and sing, and to chat quite informally.

This change brought about new customs, caused by the influx of new members. The atmosphere of the occasions has become less reserved. This can be seen in the change in the manner and role of singing. The singing used to be accompanied by the organ or the harmonium, but now guitar has an almost exclusive part. The rhythm of most of the new songs is much quicker than before, and sometimes it is accompanied by clapping. The members enjoy movements which illustrate the story of the songs and the physical contacts involved.

It is not only this different style of meetings which has contributed to the positive opinion about the Free Christians, but also their missionary activity among gypsies. This is nearly as important in Hungary as the conversion of young drug addicts in America. The majority of the 300,000 gypsies in Hungary live in very bad social and cultural conditions. The non-gypsies, especially in the villages, are seriously prejudiced against them, which results in continual conflict. Gypsies are thought to be slackers, drunkards, criminals, and very often the administration of state regulations on social policy is hindered by these local prejudices. Free Christians have gypsy groups in 13 places in the most backward region of Hungary. During "days of silent communion" converted gypsies nearly always take a part; they give testimonies and sing. The Free Christians' work among gypsies is acknowledged and appreciated even by the secular bodies.

The great increase of the sect is not likely to continue to a similar extent in the next few years, as their opportunities to spread are no more than those of the other sects. But their role in Hungarian religious life is not dependent on their numbers. Their most important function is that they are propagators of the neo-Pentecostal movement for the other denominations. They help establish new groups, make them strong, and mediate between them. Their "days of silent communion" are occasions for coming together and exchanging information. They work as a kind of catalyst, helping to overcome the repugnance of the leaders of other sects to the charismatic movement.