

New religious phenomena in Hungary

1. Introduction

In the eyes of the man of the street in Hungary — as well as think in other Middle and East-European countries — the non-averages, unusual, uncommon religious phenomena are called as sects or cults. What are these new religious phenomenons?

A) sect: an extreme group of an institutionalized, church-form or denomination-form religion, which separates from the “mother-religion”

the extremity can be in theology, in way of life, in relationship with the outer world

From this last respect the sects can be:

1) prophetic, adventist, fighting against the evil world they see their way and truth the only way and truth (Davidian)

2) withdrawing sects; they withdraw themselves from the evil world to the peaceful and saint world of the community of devotees (Amish, Mennonite, Hutter)

3) the pentecostal sects, they live in the sea of the secular world in the islands of the joyful communities.

The greater part of the old sects has disappeared, the smaller part has turned into church or denomination. Among new sects which are traditional and new form sects. The new sect are theologically traditional, but the way of life, the habits and rites are significantly non-traditional. (Family)

The new sect be placed on the scale of spontaneity and institution, from the quite spontaneous groups the seriously institutionalized organizations (Congregation of Faith during 20 years has become the 4. biggest church in Hungary)

B) new religious movements originating from the sixties combining elements of different religions. From the respect of their relation to the outer world we can place them similar groups, which we have used for sects (Unification Church)

C) the ancient oriental religions that appeared in the post-communist countries in the latest decades and their authentic (Krishna) or deformed (non-authentic) movements that are evangelizing in the West.

D) syncretist movements which are just appearing in these countries but were founded formerly (Baha'i)

E) quasi religious and spiritual (ideological) movements (psycho-cults, neo-pagan cults, healing communities and organizations promising self-redemption and releasing spiritual powers) belonging to New Age.

F) the movements within traditional churches

Besides them the man of the street can consider other phenomena as new religious phenomena after the political changes:

G) the smaller Christian — mainly neo-protestant — churches, which have had not or have had only very little publicity (Baptist, Methodist, Jehovah Witnesses)

New religious phenomena gained ground and publicity after the political changes in the democratic era and appeared as alternatives for the traditional, official,

institutionalized religions.ⁱ These phenomena are "religious" in different senses but their common feature is that they offer a vision of the religious or holy world with the answer to the basic questions of the human existence.

2. In the period of the controlled religious freedom (1945-1989)

The communist system tried to limit every spiritual value not only the official religions but also those that belonged to the new religious phenomena. Back in the eighties during the so-called soft dictatorshipⁱⁱ there were reports like the Croatian "Review of the clerical and anarchical activity of some members of small religious communities, movements and sects." In the decade before the political changes in most of the examined countries alternative religious phenomena (that were new compared to the official religions) have appeared mainly concealedⁱⁱⁱ but sometimes in public.

Besides the ubiquitous repression the following differences can be found in some of the countries:

- In most of the countries different sects and new religious movements were not dealt with equally. The few privileged ones had controlled freedom and others were more persecuted. Since most of the believers of the new sects and religious movements were more committed, educated and conscious, these movements experienced a lot of hatred and repression (especially in the Soviet Union) from the state authorities.
- To balance the Catholic (and the other "official") churches (following the theory divide et impera) certain freedom was given to some groups^{iv} (considered as sects even by the governing powers).
- Self-seeking young people living in non-religious (in most of the cases communist and atheist) surroundings and interested in spirituality orientated themselves to spiritual, religious and pseudo-religious and mainly New Age movements^v.
- Leaders of quasi-religions gained publicity as the representatives of new sciences (especially parapsychology) not only in scientific magazines but also on television^{vi}.

3. The situation after the fall of the communist regime

The new situation (after 1989) gave a great opportunity of developing and spreading of new religious phenomena.

3.1. What has appeared at the new religious market?

In the examined countries 30 to 70 religion sect or movement registered as association, cultural organization or church have

- emerged and gained publicity,
- arrived from mainly western countries,
- been formed (as new religious phenomena with a national character)^{vii}.

And there are lots of unregistered groups. The average people and the majority of the catholic believers call them "sects"^{viii}.

In every examined country all types enlisted in the introduction can be found with a variable number and ratio. We have few and not reliable data^{ix} concerning the approximate number of the believers, followers, members, clients, supporters and the casual visitors of the communities and organizations devoted to the new religious

phenomena. It seems that only 1-3 per cent^x of the adult population which is religious in any sense is tied to the examined religious communities and organizations. With looser ties up to 4-5 per cent is connected. In the countries of the analysis the spread of the new religious forms reached its peak in 1993-94. There was a period of stagnation and a slight fall.

In Poland Jehovah's Witnesses are in leading position and only some of the Christian sects can approach or outnumber them: the Adventists, Mormons and the nation speciality, the Catholic Mariaviten Church with its 39,000 membership. The dozen of communities belonging to Hinduism and Buddhism have a membership of a couple of hundreds and the New Age-type groups having not only casual clientele but permanent membership are not more populous either.

The New Age-type movements and organizations are represented in Croatia with a fairly significant membership. The majority of them are registered as humanitarian, pedagogical, medical, charity, feminist and other civil associations, many of them are members of humanitarian organizations and universities. Certain movements have their own political party as well^{xi}. This is more characteristic of Slovenia where besides the classical theosophy and antrosophy the Spiritual University (which had a dynamic overture in 1989/90 but is loosing its popularity) and other movements spread the theories of the different trends of New Age.

In Hungary the Congregation of Faith (which was founded in Hungary and belongs to the Pentecostal Christianity) with its 40,000 members has grown up to the 4th or 5th biggest church overtaking the Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and the dozen of 50-100 years old neo-protestant^{xii} churches catching up with the Baptists. Scores of other Pentecostal congregations are active (with a membership of 200 to 5,000). The Mormons were growing the fastest in the latest years and have 3-4,000 members. The ratio of the Krishna believers is the highest in Hungary compared to the number of population^{xiii}.

Pentecostal communities and Jehovah's Witnesses have a high population in Lithuania but in this country – as a national feature – the old and new New Apostolic Church^{xiv} has the highest population which was growing the most intensely in the nineties. Typical Lithuanian phenomenon is the small-scale Association of Ancient Baltic Faith, the Visarionas and the White Brotherhood movement.

3.2. What do they offer?

As well as in the western countries the main reasons for their spread are the followings:

- feeling of belonging somewhere
- finding answers to basic questions
- seeking cultural identity
- holism and seeking the unity of body-soul-spirit
- need for recognition and individuality
- seeking transcendence
- need for spiritual conduct
- need for a vision, a new world
- need for commitment

– need for comprehensible, clear answers and safe faith

Many of the authors of the research papers admit that the traditional churches cannot satisfy these needs even in their countries. In post communist countries an additional important factor is the curiosity of the forbidden fruit and the western import goods. It is a common experience that the need for novelty does not exclude the dogmatic, fundamentalist answers required by many.

Some of the authors of the researches do not find the supply-and-demand theory satisfactory. They find the success not only in the intelligent and efficient missionary activity but also in brain wash and other methods violating human freedom and dignity. But the confirmative reference to the psychological and sociopsychological researches are missing.

The solution to the secret of the success of the dynamically developing Lithuanian New Apostolic Church is informative which can be of general validity. The most sympathetic attraction for the joiners is the similarity of the God-services to the Catholic ones and the lack of Catholic practices and requirements which were less acceptable for the former believers. The most important motivations in the case of the New Apostolic Church are the communication which provides access for the simple people and radiating love, always available, simple and warm-hearted priests, easily and clear-cut liturgy and feeling of safety.

3.3. Who are the followers?

In every examined country (but in different ratios) the followers are:

- believers in God or God seeking anti-clerical people who do not belong to traditional churches, are estranged from them or having a bad relation with them.
- unemployed, immigrant and ethnical minorities who are not integrated in the society properly or belong to lower layers^{xv}
- mainly young people belonging to middle or upper layers, having an average education, open for spiritual experiences
psychically and/or spiritually wounded ones.

Have the traditional churches

In the examined countries – apart from double membership – few of the practicing believers of the traditional churches are becoming members of the communities of new religious phenomena. It is more characteristic that the loosely connected believers or those who practice their religion formally or in their own way go over. Many non-believers join too. Upon this basis the theories of "soul fishing", which is emphasized by the churches is to be criticized.

As a national feature, it has to be mentioned that in Slovenia the believers of the New Age come from atheist families and their parents were in high positions in the former era and now they turn to occultism and ezoterics to answer their basic questions. In opposition to the mainstream the Lithuanian trait is that the majority of the members of the New Apostolic Church were formerly Catholics and they still consider themselves Catholic. At the same time it is characteristic also in Lithuania that the majority of those who are joining the new Christian communities were not involved in religious communities or were not religious at all^{xvi}.

According to Hungarian data the membership of the new religious movements is younger than the average while – apart from the Pentecostal movement – the average age of many neo-protestant congregations is fairly high. Being younger than the average usually means urban life and higher social-cultural positions too. The majority of the examined new religious communities are women. Male majority is only characteristic of Buddhist groups only.

4. New religious phenomena in Hungary

The new religions appear in Hungary (and of course in the other Central and Eastern Europe) as a special hybrid, exhibiting characteristics drawn from both first- and subsequent-generation movements. In these countries the new religions have a membership that consist of native young converts and the greater part of the leaders are a lot of more seasoned and experienced members who may have been in their movement for twenty or more years and who no longer exhibit the youthful enthusiasms they once displayed. The missionary leaders from the West will have learned some of the pitfalls of being a member of a minority religion, as they themselves might have done some twenty years before. Therefore, for example, they are more likely to encourage the native converts to keep in touch with their families, rather than cutting themselves off, not to brake their studies in secondary and high schools, to continue their work in "outside", to lead their new lives, that are not as radically different from the rest of society as they differ from the rest of society. as they might be in a —E. Barker's term — "new new" religion.

Most of Hungarian new converts do not know the founders of movement personally, they do not meet a charismatic person, but rather a rationalized, institutionalized organisation. Exceptional case of course the domestic, home groups and movement. For example the main reason of the great success of the home-founded Congregation of Faith is the living founder, the charismatic chief pastor. May be a new member meets first kind persons or friendly small communities, but later in the greater congregation, in the temple the direction of the communication from the top.

Another great difference, that the new religions in West appeal disproportionately to young people who have not been either socially, economically, or politically disadvantaged, but who might claim that they have been spiritually oppressed. In Hungary those whom the new religions attract can claim, not only to have been brought up in a spiritual vacuum, but also to have suffered from relatively severe economic and frequently social and political oppressions. Many of those from Hungary who are attracted to the new religions wish to espouse the very rewards of capitalism, consumerism and materialism, from which the Western membership wanted to escape.

5. Size of membership

	<i>active members</i>	<i>supporters, sympathizers</i>
<i>earlier small churches</i>		
Jehova's Witnesses	25.000	32000

Baptist Church	11000	45000
Evangelical Pentecostal Congregation	5000	7000
Seventh Day Adventist Church	4500	10000
Mormons	4000	2000
Nazarene Church	3000	5000
Hungarian Free-Christina Congregation	1800	3500
Early Christian Apostolic Church	1200	3000
Methodist Church	1000	3000
Congregation of Living God	400	
New Apostolic Church	400	200
Salvation Army	200	2000
<i>New Christian and Christian like sects, movements</i>		
Cogregation of Faith	40000	60000
Community of Love of Christ	4000	
Fundamentalist Christian Movement of Mission	2000	
Evangelical Brotherhood	2000	4000
Christina Advent Congregation	1500	4000
Agape Congregation	350	100
Evangelical Free Ecclesia	300	
Evangelical Manahaim Congregation	250	1000
The Voice of Silence	200	
Unification Church	200	1000
Congregation of the Late Rain	200	600
The Voice of Bible Congregatiopn	150	500
Family	150	600
Disciples of Christ	150	300
Christian Brotherhood	100	300
Rosicrucians	100	300
Panthocatholic Traditional Church	100	200
<i>Non-Christian churches, groups, movements</i>		
Church of Esoteric Knowledge	2500	
Baha'i	1050	
Krishna-Conscience movement	1200	3000
Karma-Kagyüpa Community (Buddhist)	1000	
Community od Hungarian Religion	500	500
Church of Scientology	500 (10000)	
Muslim Community	300	
Gate of Doctrine (Buddhist)	250	3000
Arya Maitreya Mandala Church	250	2000
Karma Decsen Özel Ling	100	
Csan Buddhism	100	

All of the member of new sects, cults, movement and quasi-religions in Hungary about 100.000, this is 1.5 % of adult population, the % of suoporters another 2-3 %. Among the members mainly front the 20-30 years old, who live in cities, students and white-collars.

6. The reception of new religious phenomena

There are three attitudes:

- a) suspicion toward all of them, giving the derogatory qualification of "sect" (the greater part of society)
- b) supporting, protecting, defending them (mainly by liberals)
- c) trying to qualify them with categories "good" and "bad" (those who have more information and knowledge about them).

ⁱ The research reports in different countries classify them into different categories: e. g. sects, psycho-religions, Pseudo-Christian sanctifying groups, messianistic movements, end-of-the-world movements, Asian groups. In certain countries even the Neo-Protestant churches that have been working for at least one hundred years (Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal) and the classical Protestant churches (Reformed, Evangelical) are classified as alternative religions.

ⁱⁱ The Hungarian terminology for the period

ⁱⁱⁱ Such as UFO clubs, yoga club, natural healing, parapsychology

^{iv} E. g. Jehova's Witnesses in Poland

^v This tendency was the strongest in Slovenia. The "Workgroup of Spiritual Movements" was at the same time a political movement striving for democratization, free atmosphere and the possibility to satisfy immaterial needs.

^{vi} In Lithuania besides parapsychology neo-pagan communities had appeared from the sixties disguised as cultural – especially folkloristic – movements.

^{vii} Mainly healers and neo-pagan movements with a national character (e. g. the urbanized version of the Lithuanian Ancient-Baltic or the Hungarian ancient shamanism)

^{viii} Even Jehova's Witnesses, Mormons, Krishna believers, members of the Pentecostal movement or the spiritual movements within the Catholic Church are considered as sects.

^{ix} Sometimes the data of the religious communities themselves or the data of state authorities, researchers, churches, media.

^x In Hungary their percentage is less than 1 %. In Croatia apart from Catholic, Orthodox and Muslims the ratio of all the other religions is 7 % but its minor proportion belongs to the followers of the new religious phenomena.

^{xi} The Stranka naravnog zakona (Party of Natural Law)

^{xii} Including Jehova's Witnesses which is growing but not so rapidly

^{xiii} With a core membership of 1,000 and 2-3,000 supporters

^{xiv} Which were working in Klaipeda before the world war but could not keep up continuity during the soviet regime

^{xv} In Hungary not only the minor neo-protestant communities are doing a successful missionary work among gypsies but also the Baha'i movement.

^{xvi} An exception is the ethnically organized Pentecostal movement formed partly by Russian and partly by Belarus immigrant believers which did not attract the Lithuanians because of the "foreigners".