

# Protestantism in Hungary

GEORGE CUSHING

The foreign visitor to Hungary is often perplexed by the uniformity of church buildings in the countryside, and concludes that they must all belong to the Roman Catholic Church. It is only by noting the symbols on the tower that distinction can be made between Catholic and Protestant. Another source of surprise is that the Reformed (Calvinist), Lutheran and Unitarian churches have all inherited an episcopal tradition. For these reasons, and because the state of the historic Protestant churches in Hungary today can be understood only with reference to their history, it is worthwhile briefly to recall how they came into existence.

The Reformation in Hungary coincided with the Turkish invasion and occupation of most of the present-day area of the country. The westernmost region of Hungary remained largely Catholic, and indeed provided the springboard for the Counter-Reformation, while Transylvania, which became a principality subject to the Turks, became a base for the reformers. In the middle, Protestant preachers travelled far and wide, finding it far easier to spread their ideas in the Turkish-occupied lands than in the west. There were virtually no large towns on which to base their missionary activity, and the tides of Lutheranism, Calvinism and finally Unitarianism swept across the countryside in confusing streams. Not surprisingly, the initial organization of the new churches was based on Catholic precedents; many of the new leaders had been active in various orders of that church, and in any case the situation was too fluid to allow great breaks with tradition. Later there were modifications to the government of the churches, but the bishops stayed. When the Turks were expelled at the end of the seventeenth century, ruined churches were rebuilt and new ones constructed in the contemporary idiom, baroque—hence their uniformity today. This style lasted a very long time: the fine Lutheran church in the old town of Buda, for example, was built in typical baroque style in 1896.

An admirable general picture of religious conditions in modern Hungary was given in the relevant chapter of Trevor Beeson's *Discretion and Valour*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it should be emphasized that Hungary is not Poland; the mosaic of

the Reformation legacy still exists, and while the Catholics are in a majority, it is not an overwhelming one, and neither Catholics nor Protestants can claim to possess the Hungarian national church. Western Hungary remains predominantly Catholic, while in Eastern Hungary Debrecen is often called, and not without reason, "the Calvinist Rome". The Lutherans, scattered widely over the northern part of the country, are often descended from Slovak or German families. Visitors to the Catholic centre of Pécs in the south will learn that the true Hungarian virtues are to be found there, just as those who reach Debrecen will be told that Calvinism is the real Hungarian religion. Many villages possess two churches, and the older generation was educated in denominational schools; nationalization of these took place in 1948. The scene before that time emerges as more ecumenical than might have been expected. The writer János Kodolányi, for example, attended a small Catholic school in a mainly Calvinist village in southern Hungary. He describes how on Sundays he first attended mass, singing with the other children from the school in the choir of the dilapidated church, and immediately afterwards went with his best friend to the large Calvinist church where once more he sang in the choir.<sup>2</sup> That this was by no means uncommon is borne out by various accounts which conclude that while the two clergymen of necessity had to oppose each other, their flocks intermingled quite happily. Many families were of mixed Catholic and Protestant origin. The problems caused by this mixture are vividly outlined by the poet Gyula Illyés, who concludes "I had a foot in two camps and only realized it when it was too late to change. I was articulated, so to speak, to both of them. In the tension between them my sympathies, my behaviour and even my general attitude were all torn in two. Even today I often feel the wound. They taught me that of two opposing sides both might be right; they taught me to discover and consider all truths, which is the most perfect labyrinth. Unwittingly they taught me real Christianity; that we can love our enemies."<sup>3</sup>

These accounts illuminate some of the peculiarities of the religious scene in Hungary before the second world war, and many of them live on under the present régime. The Reformed and Lutheran churches concluded similar agreements with the state in 1948;<sup>4</sup> they had been recognized and supported by successive governments, and continued to receive subventions from the state. The leaders of the two churches were deposed and replaced by more compliant bishops, and this has been the pattern ever since, except for a brief period in 1956 when the former leaders resumed office. Today Bishops Bartha and Tóth of the Reformed Church and Bishop Káldy of the Lutheran Church serve on government committees: they travel widely abroad and are not slow to act as spokesmen for the present régime.<sup>5</sup> Their activities have often caused considerable unease outside Hungary (as indeed do those of the more recently-appointed Cardinal Lékai of the Roman Catholic Church). It is extremely difficult to strike a balance between the relative freedom in certain respects, such as publication of church journals

and books, including a modern translation of the Bible (in a country perpetually short of paper), and the undoubted constraints placed upon the Churches by the State through the Office for Church Affairs. Nor is there any answer to the question of how far local church life can be carried on effectively because of the co-operation between the State and leaders of that Church. Obviously the situation varies from place to place, but there are some notably vigorous church communities. Moreover new churches have been built in rapidly-expanding areas. Here perhaps the most striking building is the Outer Kelenföld Reformed Church in the southern suburbs of Budapest; designed by an award-winning architect, it resembles a hexagon slightly tilted to one side. (See photograph opposite p.176 — Ed.).

Despite such signs of life, it is impossible to escape the impression that the traditional Protestant churches are in a state of gentle decline. This is not entirely due to the narrow field in which they are allowed to operate by the state: they are by nature very conservative, like the Catholic Church in Hungary, and old traditions die hard. As Trevor Beeson puts it, "In a curious way the Hungarian people still regard themselves as a bulwark against the Turks, which is one reason for their continuing loyalty to the Christian tradition."<sup>6</sup> But a church must look ahead rather than to the past, and the emphasis at the moment is backwards rather than forwards: church buildings are regarded as cultural monuments and many of them attract considerable sums for restoration and upkeep from the state. The establishment of the Lutheran National Museum next to the Deák Square church in Pest shows a desire to protect and record the Protestant heritage in Hungary, as does the revival in 1981 of the Annual of the Ráday Collection of the Reformed Church, designed to publish articles on its history. Such statistics as are available confirm this decline: it is instructive to compare those provided in *Discretion and Valour*<sup>7</sup> with the figures given three years later in the semi-official handbook *Hungary 77*,<sup>8</sup> according to which the Reformed Church then had 850 active ministers out of a total of 1306, serving 1502 places of worship, while the Lutheran Church had 374 ministers and 673 places of worship.

In 1979 Miklós Tomka, a sociologist particularly interested in the field of religion, published an article in the journal *Valóság* entitled "The Balance-Sheet of Secularization"<sup>9</sup>; in it the author presented the results of an investigation into the extent of religious observance in Hungary. Some of the results are worth noting: in Catholic families 86% of them had their children baptized, 68% were married in church and 86% had a church funeral, thus demonstrating what the author calls a certain "stability of custom". At the same time the Reformed Church had shown a slow but steady decline over several years. There was a marked difference between town and country: in Somogy (south of Lake Balaton) 87% of the members of an agricultural collective declared their belief in God and 30% attended church regularly, while 46.6% desired their children to be brought up "in a religious way",

12.8% opted for totally secular education, and 37.3% sought a mixture of religious and secular. By contrast in Budapest regular church-going dropped to 9-10% and those who never attended a place of worship rose to 53.6% of the sample of 531 adults. The picture here was modified by the intriguing figures of 8.1% who admitted to being religious and following the teachings of the church and 36.2% who were "religious after their own fashion". These figures, naturally, are based on limited samples and on fairly general questions, but the general picture is a reasonable one.

That this is not the whole story, however, and that there is reaction in the historic churches to what is felt to be state domination has been shown by such groups as the Confessing Calvinists, who in a document entitled "Confession and Opinion" sharply criticized their church's leadership and traced its decline from the agreement with the State in 1948. This activity can be set alongside the more recent "Basis Communities" of the Catholic Church, which have clashed with both the hierarchy and the State, particularly in their attitude to military service. Some of the priests who have supported the mainly young members of these groups have been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment on grounds of anti-State activities.<sup>10</sup>

A further dimension is given by the small Protestant churches which function under the aegis of the Free Church Council, which itself represents them before the Office for Church Affairs. These include the Baptists, Adventists, Methodists (now divided into two recognized groups<sup>11</sup>), the Church of God, the Free Christians, Evangelical Pentecostals, Christian Brothers and Nazarenes. Their members total some 50,000 in all. The Baptists have the longest history and the largest membership. Some of these churches owe their origin to parent churches in North America—it must be recalled that there was a huge emigration of Hungarians to America at the beginning of the century, and many families maintain strong links with Hungarian communities there. Until the establishment of the Free Church Council and their recognition by the State in the recent past, these small churches were regarded with considerable disfavour; the word "sect", which is still commonly used to describe them, is pejorative. At present they enjoy greater security than at any previous period in their chequered history. They are active and lively; there is a world of difference between the solemn formality of a typical Calvinist service and the atmosphere of, say, the Methodist Church in Budapest, whose congregation comes armed with notebooks to record details of the sermon.

The best description of the religious life of a largely Protestant community (including both historic and free churches) was given in a detailed survey by László Kardos, who investigated the role of the churches in the community of Bakonycsérnye.<sup>12</sup> The village, in Western Hungary, had at the time some 3800 inhabitants, employed mainly in mining and agriculture; of these about 100 were members of the Socialist Workers' (Communist) Party. It was a relatively prosperous community with a new school, replacing an earlier

church school, and a cultural centre which was in limited use. The miners had originally been of Slovak origin, which meant that the main church was Lutheran; there were smaller Catholic and Reformed communities, and a number of free churches.

The author discusses each church separately. The Lutheran church, which in 1950 had claimed the allegiance of 72% of the population, had lost members to the free churches. In 1965, the date of the survey, its income of some 50,000 *forints* per year\* came from church taxes, paid by 614 members, and offerings. Church attendance and demand for religious instruction had declined up to 1956, but after the revolution of that year (in which the Lutheran minister took part and was later dismissed), there was a sudden upsurge of activity. A new young minister was appointed in 1961, his charge including five smaller churches and pastoral oversight of the few Calvinists in Bakonycsernye. The church council consisted of 38 members, none of whom served on the village council; few of them were among the leaders of the agricultural and mining collectives. The life of the church centred on the customary Sunday services; the morning congregation averaged 100-120, the afternoon one between 30 and 60. Women formed two thirds of the congregation, and a similar proportion of older folk attended. There was a good demand for Bible classes on Sundays, and special youth services attracted between 60 and 150 folk. These attendances, from a communicant membership of some 500, were considered good in the light of national statistics which stated that only one in ten Lutherans were regular churchgoers. Cottage meetings were popular, the attendance being around 30-35. As for religious instruction, only 59 Lutheran and nine Catholic children were registered for it, 6% of the total number of children at school, and most of them were girls. The fact that parents had to ask specially for such classes at the school and were warned by the teachers of possible consequences was in itself a barrier. Confirmations fell by half between 1951 and 1965 to 35 per annum. Baptisms were down by a third to 40 during the same period, but László Kárdos compares this with the total of only eight "atheist baptisms" (to replace the church ceremony) in the whole village between 1957 and 1965. Marriages had declined from 20 to 12 per annum, though this could be accounted for by the increase in "mixed marriages" with members of the free churches. Some 35-40 weddings took place in the village each year, and of these 30 were church ceremonies. Funerals were normally religious occasions; only six secular funerals had been held between 1957 and 1965, and of these four had included church representatives. Two or three new members were received each year, not making up for the loss to the free churches, some 300 of whose adherents had once been Lutherans. Finally the author classifies the Lutherans as 65-70% nominal members, the rest being active, and of these latter 10-12% were totally committed and dependable in all circumstances. Half of the congregation were miners, 45% peasants and the

\* Approximately £1500—Ed.

rest of mixed occupations, though these did not include teachers, tradesmen or local officials.

The Catholics consisted of 300 families, half of whom were comparatively new arrivals, and they attended a daughter church in a parish whose main church was in the next village. The income was 20-22,000 *forints*, and the priest, who had been there for 25 years was not particularly active, though well-liked. One mass sufficed on Sundays and feast-days, with an average attendance in good weather of 50 to 100, rising at Christmas to 300. The maximum number of confessions was 400 per year. All the children were baptized, but very few were registered for religious instruction (as already noted), and this in any case was held at the main church in the next village. The active members came from 50 families, who were mainly small traders, miners, local officials and intellectuals.

The 80 Calvinists in the village had always maintained close connections with the Lutheran church. They were mainly middle-aged and Hungarian in origin (not Slovak or German, as in the previous two churches). The Lutheran pastor held services for them in his church, and a Calvinist minister visited them monthly and for the major festivals. They paid taxes to the Lutheran church, which then transferred half of them to the Reformed church authorities. On ordinary Sundays the attendance was 12-15, and on festival days 20-22. Baptisms and weddings were strictly observed, but no children were given religious instruction. There had been only 15 confirmations in 13 years. The active membership of 20-25 had hardly altered since before the second world war.

The first of the free churches to establish itself towards the end of the last century, the Nazarenes, had drawn its members mainly from the Lutheran community. They had never been numerous, and now consisted of 30 mainly elderly folk from the poorest section of the community. Their refusal to bear arms had brought them into conflict with the State, and some had been imprisoned; some of the younger members had joined the church only after completing their military service. They were known in the village as serious and disciplined people, setting high moral standards and given to good works. Religious instruction they believed to be a family matter, and they were generally apolitical.

The Baptists had arrived after the first world war, soon followed by Pentecostals, and both amalgamated to build a meeting-place in the centre of the village. Now there was a vigorous church with an attendance of 200-250 on Sundays, while weekday Bible classes attracted 50-60, representing a wide cross-section of society. Singing was accompanied by a harmonium and often a youth orchestra with modern instruments, which proved a great attraction to the young folk in the village. The services were lively and visiting preachers provided variety. There was a strong sense of community. Although the baptized members numbered only 180 there were very many adherents. Sixty per cent of the congregation were miners, and many of

them were young. The more affluent villagers attended this church and were generous in their giving. The author saw this community as midway between the conservatism of the older churches and the outright non-conformity of the Nazarenes.

Three more very small groups were identified in the village : the Primitive Christians, consisting of six adults and 25 children, the Adventists, regarded as a somewhat eccentric group of four or five, and three Jehovah's Witnesses—this last a surprising discovery, since they have no legal status in Hungary.

László Kardos draws some general conclusions from his survey, noting particularly the attitude of the youth of the village to the churches. There is, he declares, a general reluctance to ask for religious instruction, and young folk brought up in the Lutheran and Calvinist communities soon give up church-going and their faith, some developing a strong antipathy to Christianity. The Baptist-Pentecostal church, however, maintains its hold on the young people, and some 40% of the regular congregation are under 25. From a sample of 100 senior pupils in the school, chosen to represent all varieties of Christian backgrounds and non-believers, he concludes that both religious parents and religious instruction produce lasting effects; significantly, the best school work came from the most "religious" pupils.

Summing up, he finds that the historic churches are in decline, but that the newer free churches are lively. Since there are few attractive youth organizations, the Baptist-Pentecostal youth group is popular, in addition this church has a special attraction for the women of the village, since the men attending it do not drink, smoke or swear, earn well and behave themselves with decorum. The lessons to be drawn from all this by the Party, he concludes, are that the decline of religious practice may be assisted by political pressure, though this must not be applied too hastily, since the reaction may set in. While sixty per cent of the villagers can be regarded as indifferent to religion, there are several very strong ties. Neither Marxist teaching nor active atheism has had much effect: at most it has strengthened existing atheists. Radio, television and the rise in the standard of living all have a secularizing effect, but the activity of the free churches, touching some twenty per cent of the community, remains a problem.

This survey has been cited extensively, since it provides an unusually detailed picture of church life, and more particularly of Protestant church life. It also illuminates the problems and opportunities in a State whose official policy, it must be remembered, is to hasten the decay of religion. Yet there is plenty of evidence that this process is now felt to be a slow one. In an address delivered to the Political Academy of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party on 13 June 1979, József Lukács stressed that believers who "work honestly and love their country" are not to be regarded as second-rate citizens, that the views of the churches are not to be cast aside, but that the State regards it as important to be consulted before church leaders are appointed, since "as citizens of the country they should be

persons who keep and assist others to keep the laws and who are not opposed to the constitution in social and political respects." He calls for better atheist training, particularly to counter the widespread belief that Godlessness leads to immorality.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile there is an increasing tendency to regard religious observance as part of folklore. At the end of an article written in 1970, Dániel Fábíán writes:

To understand the moral state of this village, one must consider the present state of the churches. Their life is at the very least stagnant. It is tradition rather than any inner religious need that keeps them alive. I shall not offend my compatriots if I say that the majority of them would not miss either the religious satisfaction or desire for a world beyond reality or the depth and ecstasy of belief. Of course there are believers. Of course there is a God. But so long as there is peaceful co-existence on earth, this is the outward religion of the village folk. This does not offend the Party, which is atheist, nor does it burden the believers in the historical churches with new demands and claims. They go to mass or listen to the sermons of the Calvinist minister, not many of them, but this is no different from earlier times. . . . At one time different beliefs and superstitions played a great part in the life of the agricultural labourer in his struggle with nature. A late remnant of this primitive conditioning can be seen in the Nazarene sect. There are not many of them—a couple of families or so in each village. They regularly meet and interpret the Bible. Whoever feels called to do so preaches. They dissociate themselves from the wicked world, for they are children of God. They are prepared to suffer martyrdom for their faith by refusing to bear arms on military service. With few exceptions they lead model lives. . . .

The villagers do not like them, though they harm nobody. They make fun of them and scorn them, regarding them not as fanatics, but as mentally retarded. Between the wars the village researchers regarded the sects as the 'silent revolution' of the Hungarian people's soul, their escape from poverty and hopelessness. Today it is difficult to say why they still survive. The social situation of the village today does not offer an explanation—indeed, it contradicts their continued survival. Are they a distortion of the soul of the people? Are they an eccentricity, or the last remnants of a dying shamanism?<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, a recently-published account of the folk beliefs of the Hungarian people includes Christianity as a matter of course, with accounts of pilgrimages and a chapter on the sects, in other words the Free Churches, which ends:

The sects do not belong to the same category as folk superstitions. But their function is often similar. In surroundings where scientific ideology has not yet become rooted and religion does not satisfy the people's desire for knowledge, they may occupy the place of folk beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile the Churches continue to function within the prescribed bounds. Both Catholic and Reformed churches have introduced correspondence courses in theology, and the latter Church has modified its constitution to open the way to the ordination of women ministers.<sup>16</sup> Their future path does not appear easy, but the history of Christianity in Hungary has always been full of problems, and the churches have learnt to cope with them. This experience will prove valuable in the years to come.

<sup>1</sup>Collins/Fontana, London, 1974, pp. 227-54.

<sup>2</sup>János Kodolányi, *Keserű ifjúság* (Bitter Youth), Budapest, 1958, pp. 88-91.

<sup>3</sup>Gyula Illyés, *People of the Puszta*, Budapest, 1979, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup>For the translated text, see Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, pp. 236-7.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, their declarations in *Ensemble pour une bonne cause . . .*, ed. József Lukács, Budapest, 1978, p. 119 and p. 151.

<sup>6</sup>Trevor Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup>Trevor Beeson, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-1.

<sup>8</sup>Ed. Miklós Gárdos, Budapest, 1977, p. 204 ff.

<sup>9</sup>Miklós Tomka, "A szekularizáció mérlege" (The Balance-Sheet of Secularization), *Valóság* (Reality), Budapest, 1979/7, pp. 60-70.

<sup>10</sup>Reported in *Nemzetőr* (National Guardian), Munich, March and May 1982.

<sup>11</sup>See Peter Stephens, "The Methodist Church of Eastern Europe", *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 15-18 and note. The split in the Hungarian Methodist Church, resulting in the persecution of twelve preachers and their congregations, was widely reported in 1975 and the following year. Further details were published in *Magyar Füzetek* (Hungarian Pamphlets) 2, Paris, 1978, pp. 109-114. Recognition of the dissenting group appears to have alleviated the situation.

<sup>12</sup>László Kardos, *Egyház és vallásos élet egy mai faluban* (Church and Religious Life in a Village Today), Budapest, 1969.

<sup>13</sup>József Lukács, *Egyházak és vallásosság a szocialista Magyarországon* (Churches and Religion in Socialist Hungary), Budapest, 1979.

<sup>14</sup>Dániel Fábián, "Utazás a Káli-medencében" (Journey in the Kál Valley), *Kortárs* (The Present Generation), Budapest, May 1970, p. 810.

<sup>15</sup>Tekla Dömötör, *A magyar nép hiedelemvilága* (Beliefs and Superstitions of the Hungarian People), Budapest, 1981, p. 215.

<sup>16</sup>Synod of the Reformed Church, Debrecen, 11 November 1981.