

# TRENDS OF PIETY IN THE FREE CHURCHES OF HUNGARY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Jenő SZIGETI

Theological High School of the Adventist Church  
H-1062 Budapest, Székely Bertalan u. 13., Hungary

In Hungary, the name “free churches” is applied to the small Protestant denominations which – on the basis of their Biblical conviction – insist on the voluntary and active membership in the congregation based on a conscious decision of faith. Churches of this type maintain their congregations as well as their national origins by the voluntary contributions of their church members.

Hungarian free churches are the descendants of late Puritan communities. They keep much of the elements in practising their faith that has been considered to be out-of-date according to the liberal Protestant piety that turned back to pietism. These new denominations reached significant success with their mission-work, strict and old-fashioned Puritan morals. They formed a modern piety that originated in ancient times, but responds the challenges of these days. There are communities, however, among them the Nazarens (Apostolic Christian Church) which stick to the stiff traditions and their members are against any changes although the majority wants to accept the newer and newer challenges of the fast-changing life by being accustomed to those. They seem more flexible and successful than the historical churches which can hardly get used to such changes because of their vast number of members and strict adhering to traditions.

In this short survey I intend to follow the challenges which were accepted by the piety-practice of free churches in the complicated Hungarian society that developed from many ways. The Nazarens appeared at the end of the 1830s in the last century, and the first followers of the Baptists in the middle of the 1840s. They were all lower middle-class citizens. Here the claim was laid, that any confession of faith should be based on personal conviction of faith. That can be practiced in democratic, violence-free, little intimate denominations. But only conscious adult members can materialize these facts. The adult baptism is one of the most important fundamental doctrines of these movements.

These denominations are linked to the late Puritan Protestant ecclesiae which were to be closed down by the historical churches. What these churches meant was a more liberal way of thinking, fighting for political grounds, and the weakening of morals. I have examined that in many of my studies. The members of these ecclesiae found shelter among the groups of Nazarens and Baptists where they could follow their faith enriched by new elements. That is the reason why the majority of these free churches spread in the villages during the last century: their piety morals, honouring the other's posses-

sion, the purity of spoken words and the practising of love for each other were the bases of piety.

The era of urbanization was nearing in the 19–20th centuries. The closed, producing denominations in the villages weakened. Young people moved to town. This process that generated tensions went through the free churches, too. The close-knit, small denominations were fixed points concerning the difficulties caused by the changed lifestyle. The old Puritan morals were thought to be important however they were modified as a result of the challenges facing them. There was a basic dilemma drawn up in the free churches. “Shall we keep the ancient lifestyle or just apply and practise the Puritan morals by accepting the changes of modern life?”—the conservative asked at the turn of the century, but they were not split from the society unlike the extreme piety groups (like the amish). The Baptists, however, preferred the second option.

Contrary to a few conservative groups they took on the connection with modern life. New free churches were founded following the appearance of new claims. The teetotal, antialcoholist programme of the 100-year-old Methodist mission, the reformed lifestyle of the same-aged Adventist mission and their prophetic historical view gave answers to the men-in-the-street who set out on the way of becoming criticized. These missions applied Puritan basis in a modern form to people living in crisis. The intellectuals of simple origin wanted to live the life of the close-knit, free and democratic denominations (Church of the Brethren, etc.). Jenő Henrik Schmidt’s followers propagated the ideal of God’s Kingdom on Earth. It had an effect on the marxist and socialist movements at the beginning of the Great World War. These movements carried socially effective plans and their members were zealous and enthusiastic to make these plans real. They published periodicals, books, distributed them and made social services, too.

The movement of free churches became stronger and stronger after the carnage of the World War while helping hands and services based on Christian love were needed in Hungary. The Methodists with the social help programme (Huszár akció) and the Adventists with the work of Tabetha club got high appreciation from the society. The precise programmes of the Salvation Army had just begun at that time, too (free soup acts). But similar efforts of the Baptist Church are also significant. These small churches with a small membership and with an even stronger faith tried to fulfil Jesus’ love-command. That could be managed only by activating the members. The basic principle of the piety of free churches was to do something for the others, to help others, to sell books, to earn money to give food and clothes to people in need.

We can find another free church that represents a new piety between the two World Wars: it is the Pentacostal Church. While the members of early free churches were people ambitioned by their Puritan deligent, the pentacostal people propagated a new charismatic feeling to men having poor emotions and experience. That was another kind of religiousness, different from the faith of old Puritan origin.

The emotional storm, the golossolalia, gave a renewal of people’s feelings and gave the feeling of the “second Bless” to people with no hopes. This kind of piety different from the others produced antipathy on the side of the free churches. In the pentacostal congregations the attention was turned from the serving of communities to the feeling of one’s faith, from the objective act and lifemodel to subjective charismatic gift, in one

word, to the miracle. That is the reason why these communities could become denominations only with great difficulties despite their success.

These trends of free churches can be followed in the practise of piety of historical churches. It is not accidental that the inside mission-work in the last century affected the same strata and emphasized similar ethic principles, and even applied the same methods like free churches. That is the reason why so many times these well-intentioned church-builder movements were condemned to be sectarian, Baptist or Nazaren acts. On the other side, it is interesting that as the historical churches reconciled with the inside mission-work their persecutive power lessened and they became more open towards the free churches, too. It is also interesting that there were groups in the Bethania movements which had some attraction to charismatic manifestation.

So what was the piety of traditional free churches like? Some of its characteristics are the family-atmosphered worships, the singing, the free prayers that were connected to everyday life problems and the sermons based on practical everyday life. The whole life was under the control of faith: job, free time, family; and the sermons were based on practical everyday life. Living the common faith helps to cope with difficulties.

The charismatic service is different. In the centre of it stands the "spiritual controversy", that is the estatic prayer when our words are no longer under the control of conscience. It is associated with intuitive propheting and healing. Furthermore it involves an enthusiastic, emotionally boiled-up state of mind that is followed by relief and free-from-tension feeling, what Christians feel.

The 2nd World War brought new trials in the life of free churches. Most of them were prohibited on 2 December 1939, as they were said to threaten the interest of the national defense. The denominations became closer and more ultimate. At the same time, by getting used to the inner struggle of war events these churches became bigger and stronger. The number of the more active adult members of the Adventist Church tripled in the 1940s but this increase is typical of other denominations, too. The apocalyptic trials of events (wars, holocaust, deportations) produced a new apocalyptic piety of which basic points were to take on trials, to hold on and to be persistent.

But the series of trials did not end after the war. The hard years of personal cult came after a few free years. This kind of dictatorial model of society was based on a strict, central control. That is why the close democratic denominations are thought of as opponents and "agents of imperialism".

Great efforts were made to make these churches visible and controlled. That is the reason why they urged to make the "community" of free churches based on religious liberty become even more closed "councils". Policemen controlled the ministers and employed spies to give information and so they could follow the inside events of the churches. The political power even made an attempt to keep free churches under a more centralized control. Choosing leaders in a democratic way became totally impossible. This fact caused incalculable damage in the denominations that constituted the basis of piety. On the other hand, these outer effects united the denominations of free churches. Being a Christian became a common mark which made members second class citizens within the society. At the same time those churches were appraised by the public. It had many reasons.

The simple vital process and the upright work originated in the Puritan moral became more and more popular after 1956. These persecuted citizens found shelter in human communities. But that balance on the outer pressure began to disintegrate because of the more liberalised ecclesiastical politics in the 1970s.

A strange “vital feeling” strengthened in the members of different free churches as “it used to be better earlier because it was worse. There was much more love in the denominations.” The policy of taking small steps got the church leaders to find constant concession and be restricted. That attitude questioned the identity of leaders within the church. That is the reason why so many schisms weakened these denominations. The question was the same: What does it mean to live in the world and apply the Puritan heritage to everyday life?

The partly illegal existence of schismatic groups and the tolerance of the state weakened, consciously or semi-consciously, the traditional free churches.

A new issue of the life of free churches started by the change of the regime. A new charismatic wave developed that searched answers for questions concerning people living estranged in the capitalized World.

Syncretic half Christian faith, representative of a new age, and missions of eastern religion appeared. Examining the strength of these new movements is the task of another study.

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