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The Krishna Movement in Hungary

FREDA ROSS

Introduction

In this paper I address two questions. Is it true that since 1989 large numbers of Hungarian young people have been joining the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)? Why have Hungarian young people chosen to join a new movement rather than one of the established churches? I also analyse the issues raised by those answers which will set them in their wider context.

My research is based on contacts with the ISKCON movement in both Great Britain and Hungary and interviews with its members, supplemented by published material in a range of newspapers and journals.

Is It True that Since 1989 Large Numbers of Hungarian Young People Have Been Joining ISKCON?

The claim that large numbers of Hungarian young people have been joining ISKCON was made to me by visiting Hungarian students and supported by members of ISKCON in Britain. Both sources told me that they had seen thousands of young people attending vast ISKCON roadshows. Their claim appeared to be supported by Hungarians I spoke to on my first day in Békéscaba. People of all ages said that they knew that ISKCON were in the area, although they did not know where they met. The movement apparently had a high profile among the general public, and this fact led me to believe that there must indeed be large numbers of devotees in the area.

The truth turned out to be very different. We were contacted by four members of the local ISKCON group who told me that they had fifteen people coming to their meetings. I confirmed this by attending a meeting. Furthermore, of the fifteen only the four I had originally spoken to had adopted the ISKCON lifestyle completely. Only these wear the robes and hairstyles which popularly identify devotees. I learned through conversations with some of the others present that they had chosen not to commit themselves fully to the movement and lifestyle.

It is not the case that the high profile of the movement in Békéscaba reflects actual membership. The situation appears to be similar in Budapest. Despite the fact that this is the site of a temple the number of members is actually very low in relation to the population of the capital. My initial visit to the temple was on a festival day, and it was extremely busy and full. However, some of the devotees had travelled to Budapest for this special occasion. A devotee estimated that there were some fifty permanent members of the temple, and further contact confirmed that this figure is a reasonable one.

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Why, then, is the movement perceived as having a much larger membership than is actually the case?

The roadshows which toured Hungary in 1990, 1991 and 1992 attracted vast numbers of young people. The novelty of the movement and the distinctive robes and hairstyles of its members will have made a lasting impression. A senior member of the movement in Britain who was instrumental in organising one of the roadshows suggests reasons for the attention it received. It was heavily publicised for a long time before the event. Through the media, especially television, young people in Hungary have developed a love for the music and culture of the West, especially America. ISKCON capitalised on this and attracted vast numbers of young people to the roadshow by using western marketing techniques appropriate to pop concerts. In a country unaccustomed to western-style pop concerts the event drew the attention not only of young people but of the older generation too.

These facts would certainly explain why members of the general public are aware of the movement in their community. However, although they may have seen a great number of devotees in the area during the times of these roadshows and large numbers becoming enthusiastic about the movement, they may be unaware of the real numbers remaining now. There is often a great difference between the number of people who attend meetings, seminars, roadshows or whatever method of recruitment a movement chooses to adopt and the number of those who go on to join. As Eileen Barker says in her study of the Unification Church, 'The fact is that the overall membership seemed to remain remarkably small and it seemed clear that the number of non-joiners, and the drop-out rate amongst the members themselves, could be pretty high.'[1] It is difficult to give membership figures for any movement. In any attempt to give a precise figure for membership of, say, the Church of England there will always be great disparity between the number of people who claim an association and the number of those who regularly practise that particular type of Christianity. Figures are often further distorted by the fact that many individuals who at some time had an association with a movement now no longer do so. In Britain, moreover, anticult activists have often given estimates for cult growth or membership which may have led the general public to believe that larger numbers of people are involved than is actually the case. At the first conference on Cults and Counselling at the University of Hull activist Ian Howarth is quoted as saying that 'up to half a million people are, or have been, involved with a cult, yet it was still perceived as an American phenomenon.'[2] It is virtually impossible to substantiate such claims, yet they are made in a factual manner.

Why Have Hungarian Young People Chosen to Join a New Religious Movement Rather than One of the Established Churches?

Figures given for the main religious communities in Hungary claim that 83 per cent of the population is Christian, and it might be presumed that Christian influence is very strong. I was therefore interested to find out why devotees had chosen to join a new religious movement rather than one of the established churches. I did not want to prejudice their answers or appear to imply that I judged the joining of an established church to be a better option. I simply asked them why they had joined the movement. Interestingly, the responses I received in Békéscaba were different from those I received in Budapest.

In Békéscaba I recorded the responses of the four who had become full members of the movement and had adopted the ISKCON lifestyle and practices. Only one had

been involved since 1990 when he had attended the roadshow in the locality with a large group of friends, out of which only he had gone on to join the movement. Another told me that he had become involved through being invited to a meeting by a friend. The third told me candidly that he had gone along to a meeting only because he was attracted to a girl who was going at that time; but although the girl later left, he himself went on to join the movement and to take a vow of celibacy. The fourth told me she had become involved because she had already become a vegetarian and was attracted to a movement in which she could feel comfortable amongst like-minded people.

In Budapest I asked a large number of devotees the same question. All their replies included at some point the same underlying reason – one which opened up a range of new issues. They all said that they were disillusioned with the established churches and their leaders. They said that in their formative years under communist rule they had had little involvement with the established churches, but that when the barriers came down in 1989 they found themselves faced with new choices and in the new climate of religious freedom began asking questions about religious matters. They had found church representatives unable to give them satisfactory answers. They claimed that church leaders were themselves unclear about their beliefs and practices and unable to provide them with straight answers on spiritual matters; they also claimed that church leaders were tainted by their past and that they felt unable to respect them. Conversely, they claimed, ISKCON leaders were able to give definite answers to their questons. They told me they believed the teachings of spiritual leader Prabhupada to be perfect and that it was not possible for this teaching to be corrupted.

I will now analyse in more detail the individual replies to my question.

The reasons given for their involvement by the four devotees in Békéscaba are familiar to those who have studied conversion to the ISKCON movement. In taking a vow of celibacy that particular convert was demonstrating a deep commitment. The route through vegetarianism is a common one. Both types of approach are noted by Eileen Barker:

> Many of those who have joined ISKCON, for example, had become vegetarians for some time before they learned about Krishna... Many people admit to having become committed to the way of life of a movement before becoming converted to its beliefs. For others it is the commitment to the way of life that follows the conversion to the beliefs. In trying to understand why a particular individual has joined a movement, it may be helpful to bear this in mind.[3]

As noted above, the responses of the devotees in Budapest raise two important issues for consideration: firstly, that they believe that ISKCON provides them with clear answers to spiritual questions and that the movement's teachings and leadership cannot become tainted; and secondly, that they feel that the established churches in their country have become corrupt and their leaders tainted by their involvement with 'puppet' institutions in the communist state.

The first issue is again addressed by Eileen Barker:

> Children brought up without any religious background may become aware of the sorts of questions that religions have traditionally asked and have only the vaguest ideas about what kinds of answer a religion might give to such questions. Children such as these could, to some extent, have been

> prepared to accept a ready-made set of answers when they are offered by a new religious movement.[4]

Kripamoya, a senior British ISKCON spokesman, acknowledges that the belief that ISKCON teachings and leadership cannot become tainted is somewhat naive. In the years since Prabhupada's death five of his originally appointed gurus have been expelled from the movement. One of those who was involved in taking the ISKCON message to Hungary acknowledges that this part of ISKCON's history has not been talked of in Hungary and that the lack of literature in the Hungarian language means that new devotees will probably not have heard about these past problems. In their youthful enthusiasm and idealism, moreover, the new converts will be inclined to discount the possibility of this kind of problem in the future. 'It is important to recognise,' says Grace Jantzen, 'that the new religious movements which offer the possibility of a life of loving service brought about through union with God are appealing to the best and most idealistic dimension of their hearers.'[5]

> In the eyes of the idealistic young convert a new religion may appear passionate and caring, while a traditional religion can appear apathetic or hypocritical. In short, a new religion is more likely to offer immediacy and certainty than the mainstream religions, which may appear remote and continually indulging in prevarication and equivocation, especially to an impatient youth seeking a clear solution to the complex problems of today's world, or their own personal problems.[6]

These observations accurately reflect much of what was said to me by devotees in Budapest.

Let us now turn to the second issue, the perception that the established churches have become corrupted.

The perception that the established churches in communist Hungary were compromised is of course not confined to devotees of new religious movements. Since the late 1940s a growing number of Catholics led by Father György Bulányi formed themselves into small 'base' or 'basic communities' of about a dozen members. Bulányi accuses the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary of supporting state laws which he says go against Christ's teachings. Specifically, Bulányi and his followers are pacifists and object to the unwavering support given by church leaders to the communist state's assertion in article 20 of the Constitution that 'The defence of the fatherland is the sacred duty of all citizens.' 'Call-up is normally after a male is eighteen but may not come until the age of twenty-three,' explains one commentator on the state of the church in communist Hungary. 'It is expected that military personnel will be available for help in dealing with natural disasters etc. with a view to helping the national economy as a whole.'[7] He goes on to observe that from 1977 the option of non-violent service, such as helping with natural disasters only, was available to some small religious groups whose doctrine forbade them to fight. These groups included Nazarenes, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists. In this contest, Bulányi and an increasing number of followers argued that the Catholic Church should also allow its members to do nonviolent service and cease condemning those of its priests who preached against military service. They held that the reason why the church remained immovable on this question was that it had allowed itself to be a 'puppet' institution of the government. Bulányi is quoted as observing that 'The appointment of high priests to high positions in Hungary was only possible in the form of gracious gestures from the [communist] government. Today these high

priests are not seeking any substantial change.'[8]

The nature of the coexistence achieved between the communist state and the main established churches in Hungary has been well documented. 'Beginning in the mid-1960s, the sharp confrontations between state and church, especially between the state and the Roman Catholic Church, have gradually been supplanted by a modus vivendi based on mutual compromises and concessions, with the active participation of the Vatican.'[9] One commentator describes the Catholic Church in communist Hungary as 'a church which is slow to change and is weighted down by external political problems as well as internal ones.'[10] In the later communist period it was increasingly clear that not just 'dissidents' but also ordinary church members, especially young people, were unhappy with the relationship between church and state. 'They oppose the dutiful – even subservient – attitude towards the state accepted by the man who led the Catholic Church in Hungary until his death, Cardinal Laszlo Lekai... Now some younger Catholics, ''goodies'' as well as Bulányists, are beginning to regret Cardinal Lekai's respectful approach to the government.'[11] An anticult group which has twice been taken to court by ISKCON for the statements it has made about the movement was led (until his death in February 1995) by a Lutheran pastor, Géza Németh, who in his younger days was imprisoned by the government and condemned by his church. In the 1950s Nemeth was instrumental in drawing up a 'Statement of Faith' which includes the following passage.

> If the church is obedient in faith, then it is its prophetic mission to strengthen the government of the state with encouraging words whenever the authorities serve the welfare of citizens under the principle of general righteousness. On the other hand, it is also the duty of the church to point out errors, failures, wrongdoing and sins or injuries which need compensation. We note with anxiety that the government of our church is fulfilling the first part of its prophetic mission but remains silent with regard to the second.[12]

Should the established churches in Hungary be looking for reasons why young people might be turning to new religious movements they must listen to the criticisms levelled at the churches not only by the devotees of the new movements but by church members themselves.

Conclusion

Figures supplied to me by devotees of ISKCON in Hungary and supported by first-hand observation suggest that the claim that since 1989 large numbers of Hungarian young people have joined the movement is not true. I believe that the high profile ISKCON gained during the well-publicised roadshows and the very distinctive clothing worn by committed devotees may have led people to believe that the figures are higher than they are. This is not to say that the movement is not thriving in Hungary. It has established itself with a steady membership, and is beginning to consolidate itself as a long-term concern: members are, for instance, setting up a farm which they hope will make them self-sufficient. As with any new movement it is easy to present statistics which would appear to show substantial growth: if five people join one orginal devotee the growth rate can be described as 500 per cent. Nevertheless, large numbers of young people who have had association with ISKCON do not go on to join the movement, and relative to the total population of Hungary the number of ISKCON members remains small.

The reasons given by new devotees for joining ISKCON rather than one of the established churches in Hungary are as varied as the reasons generally given by people joining any religious or secular group. The reason given more frequently than any other is, however, dissatisfaction with and lack of respect for the established churches and their leaders.

Notes and References

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[4] Ibid., p. 135.
[5] Grace Jantzen, 'Mysticism in new religious movements', *Religion Today*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1985, p. 12.
[6] *Loc. cit.*
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[12] Géza Németh, 'The renewal movement in the Hungarian Reformed Church', *Religion, State and Society,* vol. 21, no. 1, 1993, p. 90.