

True Religion: To love they neighbor - Part 1

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November 23, 2013

A Time of Great Transition

In the summer of 1991, the European nation of Hungary was in the early stages of a massive transition from a communist state to something refreshingly new. People who had been longing for change found themselves empowered with new freedoms and opportunities. A vitality and optimism filled the air when you walked through the historic center of Budapest populated by groups of tourists, artists and visitors from Europe and elsewhere.

The newly claimed freedom of expression was visible in Budapest's public square. Daily, a flurry of witnessing and promotional activity was participated in by a wide diversity of religious, political and social activists. Spectators could observe the motivated efforts of individuals and small groups offering new perspectives.

Standing on intermittent street corners were Jehovah Witnesses handing out magazines. Strolling towards pedestrians were both young Evangelicals and civic activists attempting to catch the interest of anyone walking by. On occasion, brightly robed adherents chanting praises to Hara Krishna added color and sound to the panorama.

Pedestrians freely choose to ignore or brush off appeals but often those that were curious, or looking for something different paused to enter into an exchange. In a newcomers eyes this was a benign scene of the amiable interaction of religious and political views, but a short two years before it would have been viewed with fear by the former communist government. Police in uniform and agents in plain clothes would have swarmed out on the street to harass, intimidate and possibly arrest anyone freely expressing their beliefs.

The old government worked on various levels to create a culture of intimidation and subversion. Communist government's feared religion for they knew that in some it created a loyalty grander than a political party. Leaders saw danger in the unfettered free exchange of political ideas for they could undermine loyalty to communist doctrines, challenge authority and upset the status quo. The recent peaceful revolution was a reaction to that restrictive way of life.

The situation in Hungary resembled that of many nations in Eastern and Central Europe where the 'Iron Curtain' had recently come down. The rapid and largely non-violent collapse of communist governments opened up the doors to the world and the years 1989-1996 marked a time of great transition. Streams of international volunteers and non-government agencies poured people and resources into the region.

One program on the cutting edge of cross-cultural and multi-religious cooperation was the Religious Youth Service or simply RYS. During this time, RYS contributed over 500 volunteers from every religion and over 40 nations in programs offering service to needy communities in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Slovenia and Croatia during this transition. The following is a short story of how some of those volunteers impacted attitudes of those young people they met.

Something We Felt Attracted Us

Sandra, Suzzana and Maria were friends who had spent their twenty years growing up in the industrial city of Pecs in Southwest Hungary. Like others their age they were in a search to discover interesting people and have fun. While working to repair housing for local Gypsy families members of our international service team noticed the 3 girls coming by and observing. We wondered if it was our diversity or our playful interactions or simply the clear focus we had in doing our work that caught their curiosity. Sandra would later explain that their imagination was captured by us and they had to observe what seemed to be the world visiting their community.

In time, Sandra and the girls began approaching our volunteers and striking up conversations. A little nervous at first they eventually approached Father Nithiya, a young Catholic Priest from India, and John Eagleday, a Native American group leader. Gaining confidence the ladies struck up conversations with a small team comprised of a lady from Israel, a Hindu girl, and Mitch, a young Australian photographer. Soon they felt at ease with our community.

True religion creates friends not enemies

The Hungarian girls learned that our group had come from over twenty nations and each volunteer came with a unique religious background. Sandra was surprised about how well we all harmonized as this was

very different from the way she imagined. She quizzed us asking "Aren't you supposed to be enemies?" It was clear that we broke her concepts as we laughed and joked while working together. Coming from different religions wasn't going to keep us from enjoying each other or constructing the housing for homeless Gypsy (Roma) families.

Our three friends considered themselves Agnostics, they did not believe in God but they did not close their minds to the possibility. This exposure to religious people was a new experience as they grew up in an environment where religious freedom and cultural exchange were limited. The schools they had attended promoted atheism as a more scientific approach to life and often put down religion as a form of superstition.

It was not long before Maria asked if the three could join our work team. Since we all shared a desire to help the local Gypsy families the decision was easy. Our new Hungarian friends would become the first Agnostics on the Religious Youth Service.

Religions are meant to connect us to the Source of Life. On our RYS project in Hungary we were beginning to sense that beyond the religious labels that we self-identified is something much more essential. We are meant to be harbingers to the fullness of life. How we act, care and love those in our midst carries a much greater importance than our religious label.

Sandra shared with us one evening about herself and her friends:

"We were not interested in religion when we were growing up. It didn't mean anything to us. We weren't against those people that believed but we were not inspired by them either. When things started to change those church groups just focused on taking care of themselves, they didn't really try to help those outside the group.

Your group is so different; it's like a universal family. You have people coming from each country and religion and they are all reaching out to help people that need help. You are doing something very good and yet you will go back home not asking anything from us. This is a very different spirit than anything we have experienced. This unbelievable attitude makes us want to know why you are doing this. We want to know what it is that inspires you. Is it God?"

"It is because of what we see in your example that we are now interested in religion."

Sandra's heart was moved and she was now a Seeker.