

**“Experiencing the Closeness of God”: Mediated
Religious Experience and the Role of Authority in the
Faith Church in Budapest**

By
Žofia Pažitná

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Supervisors: Vlad Naumescu and Violetta Zentai

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Abstract

This thesis is an account of the Faith Church in Budapest, an ethnographic study of a manifestation of the global Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. The focus lies on a new type of religious experience that the Pentecostal/Charismatic religions offers with a vivid understanding of the transcendental in the believer's life and the experience of closeness of God, regarded as religious sensations. Considering religious sensation is an innovative approach in understanding religious experience, as it encompasses not only the feelings experienced during sensations but also their induction by the help of mediating forms, regarded as sensational forms. Religious experience and its narrative (accounts on religious experience and conversion) within the Faith Church are analyzed with attention to different forms of knowledge through which they are transmitted, focusing on linguistic and metakinetik processes which constitute a shared understanding of religious experience, contributing to creating religious sensations. Particular attention is given to the forms through which religious sensations are mediated and triggered, such as sensory and auditory stimuli, as well as the charismatic authority of the church's leader Sandor Nemeth as a powerful motivating element within the community. There are many explanations for the booming success of the Faith Church in Hungary, however I argue that attention has to be given to religious sensation, the narratives that accompany it and to the forms through which the religious experience is provoked, enhanced and mediated.

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1. Introduction

Religion has gone public¹ (Casanova, 1994), as religious initiatives are shaping the current socio-political and economic discourses, acquiring a new lease of life in the postmodern era, not only as a response to modernization processes, but also as new attractive forms of faith in the age of technologies often times consistent with modernization (Martin, 2001). One of the manifestations of this paradoxical progression of religiosity with public tendencies, and the subject of my inquiry, is the Pentecostal/Charismatic² religion, which became the fastest growing Christian religion in the world (Anderson, 2004); having a deep impact on the household economy, the gender discourse (Martin, 1998), and society as such by the means of advocating the gospel of prosperity³ (Coleman, 2004), the immediate experience of God and the appropriation of media technologies (Meyer, 2006).

The Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is shaking the world with the emphasis on a vigorous community, missionary work, strong family and individual, personal relationship to God and not in the last place, accent on prosperous health and business. The global characteristics of this movement such as speaking in tongues and divine healing, baptism in the Holy Spirit, the literal reading and understanding of the Bible and the immediate experience of divinity (Anderson, 2004) are falling on a fertile soil throughout the world, contributing to the rapid growth of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches and development of new forms of local religiosity (Martin,

¹Religion has undoubtedly a wide impact in our society; in the question of identity and nationalism, as well as it affects the economic realms of consumer culture and the market. Since 9/11 religion has been an inseparable part of the politics in the United States shaping new attitudes to Muslim women and men with a worldwide effect. And as religion is a part of one's culture, in the global society religious traditions are a point of dubious discussion involving human rights, international law, creation of policies as well as everyday neighborhood conflicts, family quarrels or health issues. Scientology and New Age are very well marketed manifestations of new religious tendencies, which contribute to the creation of religious market places opened for religious shoppers (Kamarás, 2002). Shamanic and healing activities (Kurti, 2001; Humphrey, 2002) are part of the economy as they both create employment opportunities as well as they influence the medical and scientific discourse.

²The name Pentecost refers to the celebration of the day when the Holy Spirit came down in the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus: "Seven weeks had gone by since Jesus' death and resurrection, and the Day of Pentecost had now arrived. As the believers met together that day, suddenly there was a sound like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on their heads. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other tongues, for the Holy Spirit gave them the ability." [Act 2:1-4].

³ Prosperity Gospel is based on the assumption that the members of the church do not have to suffer poverty during their life, rather their businesses and work should be prosperous; as prosperity is not a sin (Coleman, 2004).

2001). Pentecostalism has already mobilized more than one quarter of billion people (Martin,2001), which are activated by the Holy Spirit presenting a strong antithesis to those who promote the progression and inevitability of secularization (Berger, 2001). Paradoxically, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement can not be labeled as fundamentalist (even though the members are politically active advocating core values), as the nature of the Pentecostal/Charismatic philosophy is voluntary and pluralistic with focus on “empowerment through spiritual gifts offered to all” (Martin, 2001, p. 1) representing a means of and to modernization (ibid.).

The growing popularity of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in Central Eastern Europe is a fascinating topic worth attention. Unlike in the USA (Anderson, 2004; Bruce 1990), Latin America (Martin, 1993, 1998, 2001) or Africa (Meyer, 2006; Hackett, 1998), the anthropological attention to this subject in Central Eastern Europe has been fairly small, due to specific history of this region connected to the restrictive socialist system and the late emergence of these movements in this locality. Many significant anthropologists of socialism and post-socialism touched upon the topic of religion in their ethnographies before 1989 (Humphrey, 1983; Hahn, 1988; Kligman, 1988), however devoting only marginal parts of their research to this topic. As Rogers (2005) points out, the focus before 1989 was mostly on religious rituals, or on the relation of the political system and religion, or on the idea of socialism as religion. The situation changed after 1989 due to opened borders (free access), which allowed deeper inquiry as well as due to the fascinating religious boom which exploded after 1989 in most of the post-socialist countries offering a rich source for anthropological research and interest. Opened borders and free movement brought new forms of religiosity, missionaries started to come to post-soviet countries, syncretic forms of religion appeared as a result of merging of local and global religions and also the growth of secularism served as an object of research. The themes after 1989 vary from focusing on rituals, shamanism, Easter Orthodoxy to the connection of religion and economic transformation⁴.

Currently, I believe it is very important to concentrate on Pentecostal/Charismatic initiatives

⁴ Rogers (2005, p. 9) offers a four field approach to ethnographies of religion after 1989 defining the following fields: (a) religion and ethnic identity, (b) religion and economic transformation, (c) analyses of missionaries, conversion and selfhood and (d) ethnography of atheism/secularism and de-secularism

in Central Easter Europe as they are continually growing in members, affecting the political, economic and social spheres of the society. Within the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in Hungary, it is the Faith Church that represents all aspects of a public religion by openly expressing political views, promoting active citizenship and affecting the social sphere by the help of media. The successfully growing Faith Church in Budapest, a manifestation of the Charismatic Faith movement⁵, serves as a an extraordinary strategic research site, specifically due to its influence on the public sphere, size of the community, focus on prosperity and the technological spectacle where auditory and sensorial stimuli enhance the religious experience.

There are several reasons, why has the Faith Church in Budapest been an attractive and successful religious form in Hungary and correspondently there are many research perspectives to this site. The global nature of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement must be considered, as it encompasses the freedom of globalization which is manifested through its successful growth strategy; namely missionization, medialization, mobility and migration⁶ (Csordas, 2007). The form of the church also corresponds with the globally spread megachurch phenomenon (far from the gothic and classicistic churches with golden altars), reflecting the up-to-date Pentecostal/Charismatic message with high tech sound and light system. The Faith Church in Budapest can be thus investigated as an attractive place of commodification of faith, where the prosperity gospel is advocated. Further on the stress on psychological and therapeutical dimensions connected with strong community, liminality and embodiment of faith is another global trait. On the other hand, the local explanatory factors involve the post-socialist framework, by looking at the Faith church as the manifestation of new-religiousness evident in many post-soviet countries and as a coping mechanism in the era of transition. The transition framework is, as I pointed out earlier, explanatory for the growing interest in religiosity, however it does not fully encompass the

⁵The Faith Movement (cf. Coleman, 2004) is a branch of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement stressing the gospel of prosperity: good health (healing is a crucial part of this teaching), prosperous family and personal life as well as financial well being.

⁶ Csordas (2007) outlines a fourfold scheme for the global transportable message of the modern religious movements. Such an example can be the Christian prosperity gospel, which spreads across borders due to the free movement of ideas, capital and persons as well as through media of television, radio and internet.

Pentecostal/Charismatic phenomenon in Central Eastern Europe as well as in Budapest.

It is a complex task to explain why the Faith Church in Budapest is a successful entity as all the above mentioned global and local factors need to be considered. It is not the aim of this thesis to clarify each of these processes, rather to highlight one of the aspects that contribute to the popularity of the Faith Church, and its leader Sandor Nemeth, in Hungary. I argue that in order to better understand the local enduring success of the Faith Church, the attention needs to be given to the new type of religious experience that the Faith Church offers, reflected in the close relation to God, that the members of the church advocate, experience and are convinced of.

During the years of interest I had in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, I have always encountered that believers referred to their relationship with God as personal and close, and to their faith as active, lively and real. Members of the charismatic churches, I interviewed, were sure about the presence of God in their everyday life and in their decisions. They experienced his closeness also during sermons, when they sang in the name of God, spoke in tongues or fell into trance. How is it possible that all these thousands of people believe that God is there in Faith Church, close to them and that they can feel and know his divinity? How do they know that their experience is religious? How is it possible that the members of the Faith Church identify their relationship to God as immediate, vivid and intense? What are the mechanisms they use for justifying this relationship? How do they know that they become converted, what feelings and bodily involvement does conversion entail for them?

Some of these questions had already been a point of inquiry for anthropologists of ritual and religion as Tanja Lührman (2004, 2006), Birgit Meyer (2006) or Saba Mahmood (2001) turning the interest to the experience of transcendental, the encounter with the closeness of God, which are manifested through bodily incorporation and bolstered by the presence of sensory stimuli. The theoretical/ethnographic domain opened up by these anthropologists is expressed succinctly by Birgit Meyer: “Above all, as social scientist we have to come to terms with the *mediated* nature of experiences that are claimed to be *immediate* and *authentic* by their beholders, and authorized as

such by the religious traditions of which they form part (Meyer, 2006, p. 16).

In this thesis I will use the term religious sensations to refer to this immediate and close experience of transcendental by the believer, the human encounter with transcendental (Meyer, 2006). To describe the different mediators used for induction of these feelings of immediate experience, such as auditory and sensory stimuli, I will use the term sensational forms (Meyer, 2006)⁷. I believe that religious sensations mediated by sensational forms are one of the key ways looking at the success of charismatic churches worldwide as well as identifying the success of the Faith Church in Hungary. This thesis offers an alternative framework for analyzing the success of the Faith Church in Budapest by looking at religious sensations; considering the religious experience (a) through its narratives (learned and normative), (b) as mediated through the sensational forms (auditory and sensory stimuli) and (c) as exhorted by the leader of the church Sandor Nemeth.

Firstly, I outline the methodology used in this study, stressing its ethnographic character. Secondly, within the literature review, I consider both local and global factors that are reflected on the success of the Faith Church, justifying the choice of using Birgit Meyer's (2006) theory on religious sensations. Further on, I outline the theoretical background concerning religious narratives (Wanner, 2003; Harding, 1987) as well as embodied religious experience (Luhman, 2004), stressing the role of memory (Mitchell, 1997) and the different modes of knowledge used for transition and creation of religious sensations. I also reconsider Weber's (1978) theory on charismatic authority, by looking at different articulation of spiritual and priestly authority in the Faith Church in Hungary, taking into consideration the role of mediation and sensational forms. Thirdly, in the analyses of my ethnographic site, I examine the relationship to divinity by looking at the narratives and language used by the members of the Faith Church in capturing their encounter with God. I specifically analyze conversion narratives as the most frequent accounts on religious sensations. I also look at the religious experience, religious sensation itself in analyzing the impact

⁷ Prime examples of sensation forms are collective rituals, such as sermons or prayers further on also material religious objects (books, CD's, Cassettes), which create and induce the involvement of participants in religious sensations (Meyer, 2006; Mahmood, 2001, Hirschkind, 2001).

of media and visuals within the church in creating these feelings. I consider the role of the leader of the Faith Church, Sandor Nemeth, who serves as uniting and representative element of crucial importance also entitled with supernatural and healing powers. Fourthly, in conclusion I discuss the position of the Faith Church within the religious sphere in Hungary as well as I compare the Faith Church to my previous studies of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in the Netherlands and Slovakia.

2. Methodology

I have been researching Pentecostal and Charismatic initiatives in Central Europe and in the Netherlands, for the last three years. I have conducted research at the Pentecostal Church in Vlissingen (The Netherlands), where I initially encountered the dynamic character of these religious initiatives, focusing on the aspect of representation and leadership of Jaap Dieleman, a former drug-addict, currently the respected leader of the church. As a follow up and comparison study, I conducted a two month research at the Pentecostal church in Nove Zamky (Slovakia), where my focus shifted to the paradoxical issues of gender and community as well as to the experience of transcendental and liminality by the members of the Apostolic Church (Turner, 2006). Both of these research experiences provided me with fair knowledge and background in understanding of the Pentecostal/Charismatic worldview, the basics of its religious teaching and leadership. These experiences proved extremely valuable in conducting my current fieldwork in Faith Church in Budapest, as this congregation is much greater in size, diverse in terms of class, nationality and gender.

This thesis is foremost based on the longitudinal ethnographic study of the Faith Church in Budapest. Throughout this thesis I use empirical evidence collected during my fieldwork, conducted in the Faith Church from September 2007 till May 2008. I took part in Sunday sermons, where I carried out participant observation and many informal conversations and interviews. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with several members of the church and their family members, focusing on the aspect of religious experience and the perception of the leader of the church, Sandor Nemeth. The conversations primarily concerned accounts on conversion, accounts on change and rapture brought about by joining the Faith Church, family issues and Sandor Nemeth's leadership. The analysis of these conversations, with particular attention to the conversion narrative is presented in the ethnographic chapter of this thesis, with consideration of the effect of mediation on religious experience and on the perception of authority.

Further on, for understanding the public outlook of the Faith Church, I have analyzed the

internet site (www.hit.hu), their magazine *Hetek*, the Faith Radio and the broadcasting of the Sunday sermons on ATV, entitled as *Happy Sunday*. For the theoretical background of this thesis, I reviewed academic literature concerning religious change and the transition processes, global manifestations of Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, literature on religious experience and mediation, as well as theories of authority.

I would like to emphasize that investigating religious experience is a very delicate issue, as the inquiry regards one's intimate spiritual life, one's faith and belief in supernatural. Religious experience, or the experience of transcendental is often times an intimate and private act, consequently my informants are treated with respect and confidentiality (the names of my informants have been changed in this thesis). Another issue that needs to be pointed out relates to my own presence in the Faith Church, as I was not only seen as a researcher but also as an object of conversion. My presence as a non-believer in the Faith Church was constantly used for attempts to conversion. On one hand it represented a complication for my objectivity, on the other it helped me to discover the focus of my research on religious sensations, as through witnessing and conversion rhetoric directed towards me I was able to study the normativity of these narratives and understand the importance of religious experience. My approach to the conducted interviews is interpretative, as the narratives of my interviewees reflect my position as a researcher and as a non-convert.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework of this thesis, I firstly discuss possible explanations for the success of the Faith Church in Hungary, consequently justifying the choice of my focus on religious experience. Therefore, I briefly outline the development of the religiosity in Hungary after 1989, clarifying the position of the Faith Church in the Hungarian society and suggesting that a possible explanation for its successful growth is the religious boom resulting from transition processes. Further on, as Pentecostalism is a global movement, I sketch out different tendencies in researching Pentecostal/Charismatic initiatives in United States, Latin America and Africa, which serve as orientation in understanding the basic mechanisms within Faith Church in Hungary. Different approaches to the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement worldwide are important as it is the transformable global character of the movement reflected in the Faith Church “facilitating transnational and homogenizing cultural flows” (Hackett, 1998, p. 3).

Further on, I outline the concept of religious sensations, which is my preferred framework for the study of the Faith Church. I approach religious sensations from two perspectives, focusing on the narratives about religious experience (mainly conversion) and the embodied religious experience, both mediated through sensational forms. It is important to consider both perspectives as the religious narratives not only describe religious sensations and thus constitute an effective research tool (Stromberg, 1990); they also function as acknowledging and creating mechanism of religious experience. On the other hand I pay attention to the embodiment of the religious experience in order to understand how the religious sensation is experienced, learned and created. In both perspectives the role of sensational forms (Meyer, 2006) is crucial, as they contribute to the creation of the narratives and facilitate the construction of common language as well as they evoke religious sensation by the help of auditory and sensory stimuli. Lastly, I believe, it is the invocation of religious experience by the help of mediation and religious authority of Sandor Nemeth in the Faith Church in Budapest that needs to be considered.

3.1. The Success of Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement Globally and Locally

The economic transformation in 1989, fascination with consumption due to availability of new products and ideological freedom affected the whole Hungarian society as well as the religious sphere, creating a public space for negotiating religiosity⁸. A great number and variety of spiritual movements and initiatives appeared in the early 1990's, due to the overwhelming possibilities for spiritual life⁹ within the emerging capitalist consumer culture creating the Hungarian cultic milieu¹⁰ (Campbell, 1972). Opened borders and globalizing trends paved the way for influx of new religions from outside the country, as for example Buddhism, the growing Mormon Church, the Bahai community and the Krishna believers, creating a rich religious market for Hungarians confused by the political and socio-economic effects of transition.

The freedom of religious expression moreover fueled the growth and revitalization of religious groups already existing in Hungary (Kamarás, 2002). One of the newly discovered religious forms was the shamanic tradition, which was suppressed under communism with healers labeled as charlatans. Interest in *taltos* (Hungarian shamanic tradition) resulted in creation of neo-shamanism in Hungary with a wide support among people (Lázár, 2005). Similarly to Siberian neo-shamanism¹¹ (Humphrey, 2002), Hungarian Shamans were holding séances, publishing books and attracting thousands of enthusiasts. The sphere of healing was also revitalized, where experts such as Father Dombi or Emma Ilona Veres claimed supernatural powers, making a successful career (Kurti, 2001). Further on, acupuncture and yoga were also gaining popularity. The biggest sphere

⁸Before 1989 the church in Hungary had a strategic role in creating and maintaining the civil society (Wittenberg in Kamarás, 2002); where through attendance and membership people could express their disagreement with the system (Kamarás, 2002). The political religious initiatives, however cannot be compared to Poland, where Polish practiced the catholic religion actively even under the communist rule, where catholic groups were in the Polish parliament and there was even a catholic university in Lublin (White et al, 2000).

⁹Kamaras (2002) identifies three religious identities, (a) the religious shopper; (b) the creator of own religion; and (c) the religious pluralist – participating in two or more religious groups.

¹⁰It is not only a religion revival but also increased fascination with supernatural, medicine, chiropractics or paranormal activities such as UFO.

¹¹For Humphrey (2002), due to transition processes, the shamanism became misplaced from rural to a urban surrounding, where it generates circulation of goods and creates new economic opportunities (for entrepreneurial spirited people), in a place where coping mechanisms with economic psychological hardships is needed. To clarify, Humphrey (2002) does not imply that all the shamans are charlatans rather that they are people who use the opportunities, and often times similarly to their clients, experience economic and social difficulties.

of religious growth consisted of well known Christian organizations, such as the New Babylon movement, which has sectarian character and an environmental message or the well functioning Faith Church, which attracts followers with a strong moral message and technological advancements (other growing religions included the Jehovah Witnesses or Hungary's Church of Scientology) (Kurti, 2001). The Faith Church in Hungary grew significantly after the fall of communism as its neo-liberal character found a fertile soil for the spread of the gospel among the Hungarians.

The success and emergence of these spiritual initiatives is understandable, as the transition was accompanied by strong feelings of despair, loss, crisis of identity (Svašek, 1999) and on the other hand happiness, freedom and hunger for western goods and spirituality. Religion served as a coping mechanism with confusion resulting from social insecurity, unemployment (due to privatization process) as well as from the overwhelming availability of consumption possibilities. Thus the framework of transition together with the globalizing trends serves as an explanation for the success of Faith Church, which after 1989 offered strong community, help, and psychological support in the changing era. The transition process was also beneficial for the growth of the Faith Church owing to the influx of missionaries and ideologies from the western Pentecostal/Charismatic connections. Yet the framework of transition is only partially explanatory as 20 years after the revolution, the Faith Church is still growing in Hungary and the success of Pentecostal/Charismatic religion is also documented worldwide, as this initially grassroots initiative¹² is spreading among the urban middle class as well as businessmen, fulfilling the followers with the notion of pride and validation due to belonging to the global movement of winners (Martin, 1998), where membership is voluntary (Taylor, 2002). It is important to look at the manifestations of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in other geographic and socio-economic situations to understand the more global theoretical tendencies which are helpful in the

¹² Pentecostalism was initially considered the religion of the poor (Martin, 1993), or a shanty town religion, however due to its experiential and all encompassing global character it soon spread within the middle class. During my research in Slovakia and Hungary, I have primarily encountered middleclass as well as quite a number of managers, or higher clerks.

study of this particular locality.

The success of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement worldwide involves some global tendencies reflected in the Faith Church in Budapest, such as a strict moral focus of its teachings with emphasis on the centrality of Holy Spirit, literal understanding of the Bible and strong community stressing the family not only as a moral but also as an economic unit of interpersonal support. This teaching has a great impact in Latin America and Africa on the household economy by fighting machismo, alcoholism, drug addiction and supporting active citizenship as well as reformation in personal life by empowering the individual (Martin, 1993, Martin, 1998). The publicness of the Pentecostal/Charismatic religion also accounts for its popularity, as by raising its own intelligentsia in Universities it creates a space for social critique (Martin, 2001), where the believers intervene in the political sphere with their pro-life and nationalistic, patriotic attitudes. Further on it is also the importance of miracles and healing, which gain new dimension as the Christian initiatives coexist with the indigenous traditions, where the Christian reading of the bible assimilates with local cults and deities, creating syncretic forms of religiosity (Stewart and Shaw, 1994) or categories of devilization (Meyer, 1992). All in all Pentecostalism is a transformative system creating an autonomous spiritual space, nurturing new cultural and personal potentialities, restoring the cult of healing, encouraging praise and whole bodily involvement (Martin, 1993).

The global tendencies of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement are widely documented, however there is little attention given to the new type of immediate religious experience these churches offer, which Birgit Meyer (2006) describes as religious sensations. “Religious sensations are about human encounters with phenomena or events that appear beyond comprehension”, where the transcendental is framed and produced by sensational forms (Meyer, 2006, p. 10). Accordingly, the religious sensations encompass not only the feelings related to religious experience (of the closeness of God, of blessedness by the Holy Spirit), but also the inducement of this excitement within the church through sensational forms which make “the transcendental sense-able” (Meyer, 2006, p. 9). Meyer (2006, p. 14) argues that “transcendental is not a self revealing entity, but, on the

contrary always “affected” or “formed” by mediation processes, in that media and practices of mediation invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms”.

Meyer’s (2006) account on religious sensations makes it possible for me to build a framework with focus on the creation and mediation of religious experience in Faith Church, by looking not only at the religious experience itself but also analyze its narrative. And as sensational forms are “authorized forms of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations” (Meyer, 2006, p. 9), I will pay attention to the mediation of authority in the Faith Church as well as to the inducement of religious sensations by its leader Sandor Nemeth by the help of sensational forms. Further on, religious sensations are crucial in my study as they have significance beyond the church as the members of the church publicly express and intensify their religious feelings, which are due to sensational forms available throughout Hungary.

I believe investigating religious sensations, the excitement of divine proximity mediated through sensational forms, is a key approach when studying contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. I advocate Meyer’s (2006) theoretical approach as it is evident from my research that it is religious sensation that makes the Faith Church special in Hungary, a unique paradise of mediation, a spectacle for eyes and ears. By applying Meyer’s (2006) approach developed in Africa on a church in Hungary, I also demonstrate its applicability and importance outside the context where it was initially introduced¹³.

3.2. Religious Experience: Narratives and Embodiment

One of the most important religious sensations is the act of conversion. As it is not possible to study the act at its happening, the conversion narrative serves for the purpose of analyses as it retells this crucial event in the life of the believer, it follows a shared pattern and it helps to create

¹³ Birgit Meyer has been studying Pentecostal religion and popular culture in Ghana over the last twenty years. It was in this context that she developed the concept of religious sensations (cf. Meyer 1992, 2006)

religious experience. The conversion narrative tells a story, which describes the life changing religious experience in the believer's life. It is the experience, which marks the life before and after the religious experience of divinity and congregational life, signifying the rapture between old and new, by declaring the present to be better. The telling and retelling of the narrative, helps the believer to reorganize and redefine social and cultural categories as well as to reinterpret the past (Wanner, 2003). The conversion rhetoric thus provides a place for coming into terms with the past; justification of new moralities and relationships as well as it provides a space for a new social contract which is morally distinctive from the previous one (ibid.).

The conversion narrative is also shared among the members of the church, it has a similar structure and its production and reproduction creates a common linguistic reference for the members of the church with a shared language (Harding, 1987). Through this common language the individual religious experience acquires a social dimension (Taylor, 2002). The last important trait of the conversion narrative is that it both justifies and creates the religious experience. The religious sensation becomes justified by the narratives as it is due to "the use of language in the conversion narrative that the processes of increased commitment and self transformation take place" (Stromberg, 1993, p. xi). For the believers of the Faith Church, the supernatural reality becomes a fact through the act of conversion and the conversion narrative is affirming this existence of divinity and the possibility of all kinds of religious experience (Harding, 1987). For Harding (1987) it is thus the act of speech and language that makes the closeness of transcendental possible¹⁴.

On the other hand religious sensation can be approached from a more experiential site, focusing on the embodied experience or metakinesis, where experience of divinity is manifested not only in words and narratives but also experienced through bodily involvement, trance or singing (Luhrman, 2004). Luhrman (2004) claims, that even though believers claim to be

¹⁴ "Among conservative Protestants, and specially among fundamentalists, it is the Word, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard, and read that converts the unbeliever. The stresses, transitions, influences, conditioning, and the techniques scrutinized by many social scientists do not in themselves "explain", do not "cause", conversion to Christ. All they do is increase the likelihood that the person might listen to the Gospel; they may open or "prepare a person's hearth". (Harding, 2000, p. 36)

converted by the Word, it is a complex bodily learning process that is involved. The transcendental becomes real and intimate through the learned bodily techniques “that frame that responsiveness into the experience of close relationship” (Luhrman, 2004, p. 519). The techniques are used to engage in absorption, a state of high concentration (can be a prayer, dance or trance) when the participants become absorbed in their own thoughts experiencing the closeness of God (Luhrman, 2006). As Luhrman (2006) points out absorption is an internal state, which can be evoked through learned techniques, based on emotional knowledge and memory where the believers learn to engage in bodily practices that make it possible to enter into trance. Mitchell similarly to Luhrman emphasizes the importance of emotional knowledge; where feelings, and memories of these feelings, are conditioned within the family, church or community and consequently affect the bodily mechanisms when expiring religious sensations. The process of learning is thus related to remembering, the involvement of social memory, as one religious experience is used as a reference point for another experience (Mitchell, 1997).

For both approaches, through religious narrative and through embodiment, the role of learning is relevant. The conversion narrative is part of the religious experience (Stromberg, 1990), as well as it creates the experience itself, by the process of linguistic/cognitive learning, as the narratives are passed on within the church community (Luhrman, 2004). The cognitive/linguistic learning is important for community and for the believer, but the experience of transcendental is not only about acquiring a new language, converts also have to learn and be trained emotionally, where it is metakinetik learning that is in process (Luhrman, 2004) as well as the process of remembering (Mitchell, 1997). In the analyses of the Faith Church I will take into consideration both perspectives and modes of knowledge as they allow me to construct and understand the real religious experience as a whole. It is both semiotic and practical knowledge, cognitive/linguistic and metakinetik learning, that helps to cultivate the religious experience in the Faith Church and within the broader perspective of the Pentecostal/Charismatic worldview. It is important to consider both types perspectives, as the aim of the religious experience is to develop a relationship to

divinity in which both modes of knowledge are utilized in (Luhrman, 2004).

Further on, both religious narrative and experience are affected by sensational forms as the charismatic sermon in the Faith Church in Budapest is certainly a display of sound and images appealing to all senses, through which believers are amazed by the divinity and power of the presence of God (Meyer, 2006). The sensational forms affect the way the narratives and embodiment are learned, as it is through mediation that they approach the believer. The sensational forms affect the individual techniques through which the religious sensation is possible, increasing the possibility of trance and transcendental experience. It is mainly the process of absorption (Luhrman, 2004) that is affected by the sensational forms, as it is due to the music, the heard word, the strong feeling of community, as well as due to the strong leadership of Sandor Nemeth that this religious experience is generated.

3.3. Charismatic Leadership in Faith Church and Beyond

In the previous paragraphs I gave attention to religious sensations, where the focus was on the relationship of believers to the transcendental power¹⁵. Let me now address the two other spheres of intersection between power and religion, concretely the power relations within the Faith Church by analyzing the leadership of Sandor Nemeth and the effect of his authority outside the church in the public sphere within Hungary. It is important to address power as the framework of religious sensations, besides emphasizing bodily involvement and sensorial stimuli, also considers mediation process which are shaped and defined by power (Meyer, 2006) inside and outside the Faith Church. I believe charismatic authority of the leader Sandor Nemeth is a crucial aspect in understanding the mediation of religious sensations within Faith Church.

One of the most influential theories on authority is still Max Weber's, defining charismatic

¹⁵ "Droogers states that religion and power intersect: with regard to three dimensions: a, in relation to transcendental power; b, in relation to internal power relations intrinsic to religious organizations; and c, in relation to society" (Meyer, 2006, p. 44)

authority¹⁶ as an individual, which is “treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” not accessible to an ordinary person (Weber, 1978, p.241). This definition of authority and charismatic leadership is important in the study of the Pentecostal/Charismatic groups, as these groups are held together by acknowledging the legitimacy of the leader on the base of his divine power and extraordinary qualities. There are two types of charisma that Weber distinguishes: (a) charisma as a natural gift and (b) charisma as artificially produced (Weber, 1978, p. 400), thus there are people that naturally possess charisma, but this personality trait can also be trained and can be manipulated through sensational forms, as I will demonstrate later on the case of the Faith Church. The recognition of the Pentecostal leader is based on his supernatural and divine accomplishment constituting a legitimate authority, where domination (*Herrschaft*) and order is maintained through obedience and command of the respected charismatic leader. The supernatural powers of the leader, together with ecstatic preaching and healing qualities are thus the proof of his legitimacy and a source of respect from the community. In this sense Weber’s work on authority is useful as it builds a framework of orientation in the concepts regarding leadership and validation of power, yet it is necessary that Weber’s concepts are reconsidered within the context of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches as they represent new types of self-supporting religious institutions¹⁷.

Weber lacks to recognize that the prophetic, divine and magical trait of charismatic authority can be acknowledged also within the Western society (thus it is not only limited to “primitive” religious forms (Weber, 1978)) as demonstrated by the success of such Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders in the United States such as Pat Robertson, Moris Cerullo and Jerry Falwell (Green, 1992; Bruce, 1990) or Chief Ebenezer Obey and Gabriel Oduyemi in Africa (Hackett, 1998). Recognition of authority is not strictly based on ethics or rationale, there are psychological processes involved in its validation, as in the case of the Pentecostal religion where

¹⁶Weber (1978) has a threefold classification of types of domination: traditional authority, legal authority and charismatic authority, couched by his notion of ideal types.

¹⁷ The Faith Church in Budapest, as most of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches worldwide is proclaimed to be a self-supporting entity, where the church functions from donations, gifts and as in the case of Faith Church from a yearly support from each member of approximately 10 percent of the annual salary.

the validation of religious authority happens also through psychological recognition on the individual level (Hervieu-Leger, 2003).

Further on, Weber's differentiation of rational priesthood (the priest) and irrational magic practitioners (the prophet) (Weber, 1978) is problematized, as in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement there is no distinction between the rationality of the priest and the irrationality of the spiritual leader. As I encountered during my fieldwork, for the members of the Faith Church, the works of the Holy Spirit are manifested through the leader serving as a validation of both his priestly as well as prophetic authority¹⁸. The authority is not split. Rather it is cumulated into the head of the church, which then functions as unifying, representative, managerial as well as spiritual authority, where the power of the priest is increased by his healing ability and divinity. The unifying authority is crucial for creating religious sensation in the Faith Church, as all believers look at Sandor Nemeth as the most blessed messenger of God on Earth, he has a united support within the church and his authority is unshakable.

The recognition of authority of Sandor Nemeth as the true mediator of God's words, the single head of the church with divine power as well as resources, is predisposition for understanding the power he has within the church. There are different strategies including "symbolic, narrative, poetic and rhetorical" (Harding, 1987, p. 167), that he uses for rearticulating one's perception of reality and for creating religious experience. During the sermon he is the main focus of the attention, delivering a sermon out of his head without papers or helps. Further Sandor Nemeth uses all rhetorical devices to exhort the believers, he appeals to feelings and concepts (such as devil, money, or prosperity) provoking a reaction. The process I have followed in the Faith church is described by Coleman (2004) in three stages. The process of dramatization is imposed by the preacher in order to involve the members of the church in the Gospel, by applying the psalms to

¹⁸ J.P. Kiernan (1976) takes Weber's ideas on the workings of preacher and prophet and analyzes these relationships in a Zulu Zionist group; where the connection between preaching and healing is mutually dependent in a single framework of ritual action. The authority of the preacher flows to the healer, when the healing process starts and thus these two are sharing the authority, where one of them is in Weberian sense based on tradition (institution of priesthood) and the other on supernatural qualities. The two, event though spatially and task wise separated, form an undividable whole as "the power released in healing is generated through preaching" (Kiernan, 1976, p. 358) and thus bolsters the functioning of and the cohesion within the Zionist group. The authority is thus split, unlike in the Faith Church.

current issues and situation, internalization follows as people assimilate with what they heard, and lastly the process of externalization involves acting back “on the undesired aspect of the self” (Coleman, 2004, p. 133) delivering a reaction (positive or negative depending on the subject). This three stage process is maximized by the mediation technologies involved, which through sensational forms create an even more powerful and striking message.

In mega churches, such as the Faith Church, the authority is mediated by the help of technologies creating an immediate religious sensation. Large screens, which multiply the image of musicians or the leader (Meyer, 2006) are creating a new articulated place, where believers can express their emotions. The miracles and healings Sandor Nemeth performs are shown on screens, presenting the proof and evidence of his authority as they are self-authorizing validations helping to stabilize and naturalize his power (Kirsch, 2006). In my ethnographic account I will thus focus my attention to the analyses of authority in the Faith Church, concretely on how the authority is mediated, created and validated and how Sandor Nemeth can manipulate or invoke religious sensation. It is not to forget that there are also other types of authorities in the Faith Church, appearing through sensational forms such as musicians and converters which are involved in creating religious sensations.

As the religious sphere itself, the Faith Church is not a separate realm within the society as it influences the public discourse precisely due to its high medialization and publicity of its leader Sandor Nemeth. Sandor Nemeth claims that people come to understand the Pentecostal/Charismatic message better and become more opened to this type of religiosity, when the message is available and public. The publicness of the Faith Church also regards the religious sensations, as they constitute a crucial aspect in the validation of religious authority beyond the church (Coleman, 2004), where the television represents a means of controlled access to the spiritual world, which can be enjoyed either individually or as a group (Kirsch, 2006). Also many well known Hungarian personalities claim affiliation with the Faith Church, such as Zoltan Gera a football player in England and face of the campaign for the 1% tax gift, who claims that the Faith Church helped him

to fight drugs and alcohol. Thus religion in Hungary indeed is public, influencing the political situation as well as creating a social critique by nurturing its own people in the Bornemisza Primary School as well as in the Saint Paul Academy, providing private Christian education for the members of the church. The political activity of the Faith Church is also not minor. Previously the church was affiliated with the Alliance of Free Democrats (Kamaras, 2002); currently they are breaking away from this image appealing to a more general, free and democratic political spectrum in Hungary (Czene, 2008). To conclude it is clear that power in all these three outlined forms is crucial in understanding the religious sensation in the Faith Church in Hungary. In the case of religious sensation it is specifically the mediation of feelings and authority that contributes to the power relations in all of these three levels by emphasizing the close and real religious experience.

4. Case Study: Experiencing the Closeness of God in Faith Church

4.1. Introducing the Faith Church

The Faith Church in Budapest was established as a home church in 1979, with Sandor Nemeth as its leader, officially registering in 1989 (Kurti, 2001). In 1985 it had five hundred, in 1991 ten thousand, and in 2000 forty-four thousand members (Kamarás, 2002). Today the Faith Church is growing throughout Hungary with a significant community of almost seventy thousand participants in about 200 local groups, remaining an attractive entity for Hungarians (Czene, 2008). The indication of its success is the first and biggest megachurch in Central Europe located in the Faith Park complex, hosting more than five thousand people every Sunday. The concept of megachurches, well known in the United States, is a rather new phenomenon in Central Europe, changing the “classical” understanding of what religion means in Hungary, opening many questions in the Hungarian public discourse. The Faith Church defines itself as charismatic entity, being a part of the third generation of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Faith Movement worldwide; however they are proud to stress their financial and institutional independency within Hungary. They are following the theocratic model of leadership (Kamarás, 2002) with one great authority in the person of Sandor Nemeth, who is the one and only leader, a unified priest and healer.

Sandor Nemeth, the leader of the church was born in 1950 in a village Gelse close to Nagykanizsa. Coming from a strong Catholic background, he converted to Pentecostalism and started the Faith Church in 1979, as a home group. He represents the bureaucratic authority, being the head of the pastor’s office, deciding on the future of the incoming money, 1% taxes as well as gifts. He is the initiator of the educational institutions that are affiliated with Faith Church; the Bornemisza Primary School and the Saint Paul Academy in Budapest. He is politically active through the Faith Church’s magazine *Hetek*, and the charity initiatives of Faith Church. Together with his wife he wrote several books, which reflect the philosophy of the Faith Movement as well as he is a recognized healer and diviner.

Every Sunday around ten o'clock, the believers mostly of Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak and Roma origin, gather to the Faith Church in Faith Park in Budapest. They approach the main building, surrounded by a highly organized parking lot, where the security team is responsible for the smooth traffic. The building itself is an old factory, transformed to a church about ten years ago for the cost of 1.5 billion Hungarian Forints (Czene, 2008), where half of the expenses were paid by the members of the church, who donate usually one tenth of their annual salary to the congregation. The church building is surrounded by well cut hedges, a fountain and a paved yard, where the songs already resonate from speakers inviting the believers inside. The entrance is separate for women and man, followed by a metal detector and a security check of coats and purses. Subsequently smiling hostesses approach the incoming crowd with questions concerning ones faith, followed by witnessing in case the unconverted participants.

The inside area is similar to a stadium as the space is divided into numbered sections, where hostesses arrange places for the participants. Families have their preferred places, as well as the front rows opposite the stage are meant for those (as my informants describe), who are generous in donations and active in church service. It is very difficult to encompass the variety of members of the Faith Church due to its size. As I could estimate the situation, the participation of women and men is relatively equal, as most of the members are couples or families. Within the Pentecostal/Charismatic philosophy it is understood to attend the church together as a family, thus there are many small children and mothers with prams. The membership is also varied qua occupations; I have encountered shopkeepers, teachers as well as businessman. Importantly, the constructions of the building and its repairs, the parking facilities, the seating arrangement within the church as well as the information and technical support during the sermon are done as a part of one's service and are understood as duty for everybody regardless gender or status in the church. Anna, a 45 year old Hungarian, says:

This is our church, we all worked on it and we are very proud of it. We not only donated money, but as a part of our service actually contributed with our two hands. My brother works in the security, I help out with daycare. There are different types of service, as for example it is music, teaching or care for elderly.

The sermon always begins with high quality music with professional sound support. The music is very up-to-date, varying from rock, pop as well as Latino rhythms and on the base of rhythms it can be easily mistaken for worldly music. The texts are however strongly moral, focusing on the relationship with God, his greatness and divinity. In the songs the relationship to God is described in terms of friendship, love and affection expressing the desire to feel the closeness of Holy Spirit in one's life experiencing its magnitude. There are around ten professional musicians and five singers present praising the Lord (three men and two women, of whom one is Friderika Bayer a well known Hungarian pop artist), which takes approximately two hours engaging the whole crowd in dancing and singing. Nobody sits; everybody stands with their hands lifted up, while some speak in tongues or even fall in trance on the ground.

Around 11.30 Sandor Nemeth begins the sermon by greeting the participants present in the Faith Church as well as the TV viewers, briefly recapping the last week issues and addressing several response emails from the viewers. The letters usually include requests for prayers, requests for blessing of the sick and poor as well as witty questions from the curious public, which Sandor Nemeth answers with sharpness of an orator continually using the Bible in his hands as a source of evidence. Consequently, Sandor Nemeth starts reading the psalms consequently delivering an energetic and engaging sermon without a help of any paper, while engaging the participants by applying the Psalms to everyday life. The whole sermon is being projected on eight big screens in the church where the participants can follow not only the sermon but also lyrics, information about the Psalms being read as well as phone numbers where the Faith Church studio can be reached.

The focus of my research became clear, when I encountered the power of the leader maximized by the sensational forms, as the leader draw me into his sermon and I found myself actually listening and sensing his words. I began to notice the responsiveness of the members of the church to his actions such as: expressing feelings of amazement, falling into trance as well as raging to his words depending on the topic he was elucidating. The excitement and the closeness of God that my informants claimed, struck me and I began to think about the religious sensation they

experience. As I was part of this religious sensation, I decided to focus on both the embodiment of this experience as well as at its narrative, which is not only a story about the religious experience but also represents the way how people can prolong their religious experience, to be a more lasting one (Taylor, 2002).

4.2. Faith Church Language: Narratives, Knowledge and Sensational Forms

4.2.1. Describing the Closeness of God

I have spent a lot of time with born-again Charismatic Christians in the past three years, in the Netherlands, in Slovakia and currently in Hungary, and the way they referred to their religious experience has followed a repetitious narrative pattern. When I asked my informants in Faith Church to describe their relationship to God, the narratives referred to personal relationships; describing the relationship as intimate and individual, putting it in contrast with other churches, where the relationship to divinity is more distant and cold. One of my interviewees says: “In the first place it is **my personal relationship with God, which I found in this Church**. I have not known anything like this before, but it changed my life” (stress by the informant). Frequently occurring narratives on religious experience contained the phrase “close to”. The participants say that they are “being close to God”, “feeling the closeness of God”, or “having a close relationship with God”. This closeness of God is again put in comparison with other churches the believers previously affiliated with, as in this phrase: “I am not saying that it is only in this Faith Church, where people find God, that would not be true, **but we are certainly close to him**. I have never felt like this in the Catholic Church. This Church is filled with light and happiness. **I feel that God talks to my heart here.**” (stress by the informant).

Accordingly, most narratives emphasized the positive and newly gained relationship with God making a distinction between the pre-church and church life, either based on encounters with different churches or referring to the “old” sinful worldly experience. Stress was mainly on

explaining why the charismatic Faith Church is a better alternative to the previous ones; emphasizing the close relationship with God. The language and the expressions that the members of the Faith Church used regarding their relationship to God was based on creating a difference between then and now (before and after conversion), and the capturing of their current transcendental or metaphysical experience, which was unknown to most of my interviewees before entering the church.

Another feature of the narrative is that the members of the Faith Church refer to their experience with divinity in similar terms and expressions creating a shared elementary language (Harding, 1987) which serves as a reference point of their faith. As this language is shared, it ensures group identity and the feeling of belonging. The members of the church acquire this new lexicon and language by entering the charismatic church, where they experience an emotionally intense, triggering a lasting experience creating powerful bonds within a group (Whitehouse, 2004). Apart from the already described narratives, the members account on their experience in terms as “God touched me”, “The Holy Spirit talks through me”, “I feel that God fulfils me from inside” or “The light of God is in me”.

The descriptions of the relationship to God are not only shared on the base of language, they also have a similar structure and pattern due to the process of learning, which is utilized in reproducing these accounts, as the narrative is heard in the church and consequently it is repeated (Luhrman, 2004). This process of learning can also be explained in terms of conservation and transition of knowledge, where the Faith Church members put a lot of effort and resources into assuring close contact with the new members of the church and creation of dependent links through which the knowledge can accumulate, strengthen and consequently preserve in the form of narratives. It is the process of religious socialization, where rituals are explained and religious knowledge and narratives are transmitted. New members of the church are immediately incorporated in the variety of activities, which involve both church services as well as private encounter with the members of the church. The role of linguistic/cognitive learning in this

development is important as new members of the church are taught the ways how to tell stories in reference to their own life (Luhrman, 2004), which is specifically evident in the creation of the conversion narrative. The repeating of the learned narrative or repeatedly stressing a clause in the narrative is also a rhetorical device for convincing (Stromberg, 1990), both to convince the narrator and the listener (in this case me), who in the ideal case of conversion and acquisition of the narrative becomes the speaker (Harding, 1987)

4.2.2. The Strategy of the Conversion Narrative

The conversion is a crucial event in the life of the believer. Consequently, the most personal of the religious narratives is the conversion narrative accounting on the immediate sensational experience of divinity. While interviewing the church members in Faith Church, in almost all cases what follows the general introductory small talk in which they found out that I am not converted, is a testimony told to me. The testimonies refer to the act of fulfillment with the Holy Spirit, which is also conceptualized as conversion or the event of new born and it is told in order to make a statement of faith, to verbally reassure the bond to God as well as to immediately try to convert the listener into a charismatic Christian. I have interviewed Maria (40 year old, mother of two, 20 years at Faith Church), several times and we have been talking about her conversion experience repeatedly.

I was a party girl. I liked drinking going with boys and having fun. I knew that this life was not good but I did not find strength in myself to quit with it until I came to a home church of the Faith Church charismatic movement 20 years ago. I knew that this is it; I became a new born and started to live my life in God without any fears. I know God takes care of me now and gives me strength to resist devil, I could not resist the devil before. I could not resist alcohol and men. Now, I have a personal relationship with God, he fulfills me with Holy Spirit when I pray and cleans me from inside. I am saved; I am not scared anymore, as I also found support in this community. You also have to come to believe.

As it is evident from Maria's account, the conversion narrative is a powerful rhetorical device; an argument about one's transformation (Harding, 1987, p. 167). During my fieldwork I encountered that it follows a pattern of three stages. Firstly, the setting is introduced, where Maria

introduces who she was and who she is now, emphasizing the difference (which comes also back later in the narrative). Her narrative does not only reflect coming into terms with past (Wanner, 2003) but it also helps Maria to give the events in past new meaning, or bring meaning where there was none before (Stromberg, 1990). Secondly, the difference of then and now, heaven and hell is made, with emphasis on her person. She was a party girl and she did not know how to deal with it; now she can redefine her identity as new, giving the bad periods in her life a new meaning and see them as a sequence of events that led her to God. To give the events before conversions a new meaning or purpose is shared among the other members of the Faith Church, emphasizing that they have taken their chances, which makes them the saved ones. Lastly, in relations to the second narrative pattern, in Maria's narrative the hint is made towards me, as I am the one that needs to be saved. She reaches this effect by constantly distancing herself from myself (Stromberg, 1990) creating a you and me perspective, as the two of us clearly don't share the same reality (Harding, 1987). It is thus not a monologue but a dialogue of conversion, where my presence is worked into the narrative itself (Harding, 1987)

I had been coming to the Faith Church for several weeks, when I encountered a conversion narrative attack, which made me realize that Maria's narrative is shared within the Faith Church. One Sunday, I was entering the church and two women standing at the door approached me. They asked whether this was my first time in Faith Church. After I said no, they continued to investigate whether I was already saved. I knew I had to be careful, so I just said that I am not converted but I am very much interested in religion as such, and I found this church fascinating. As I finished my sentence literally an outburst of witnessing started, following the above outlined pattern. While they were speaking, a third woman joined, also witnessing to me about her conversion. They all ended by telling me that it is the purpose of God that I am here, by telling me that he has a plan for me, that I only have to open my heart. During my research, my presence in the church was often times used by the members as a reason to claim that there is God's hand in my decision investigating the charismatic community, or that God wants me to be in this place this Sunday to hear his word.

The conversion narratives in the Faith Church, share the following patterns. Conversion is referred to as the crucial turning point in the life of a believer marking the rapture (Robbins, 2007) between the old and new life, creating the dichotomy of good and bad, by highlighting all the positives brought about by the new faith and presence of God. Through the act of conversion the whole life of the believer becomes reorganized, redefining social and cultural categories and reinterpreting the past (Wanner, 2003). One set of narratives redefines the past as bad and sinful, stressing the party life style, drinking, smoking, infidelity and emptiness. In contrast to the past, the present is referred to as blessed and sinless, as full of strength in all spheres of life. Women in the Faith Church stress that they're husbands are better husbands since they are converted (well known phenomena from David Martin's work).

The conversion itself provides the members of the church with a clean slate and a place for coming to terms with the past; justification of new moralities and relationships as well as a space for a new social contract (Wanner, 2003). This process is reflected in the acquiring of new language, which refers to this new morality. Some narratives stress their moral superiority, in these cases particularly over mine: "we (as the members of the Faith Church) are not scared, cause we know we are saved", "we know we are going to heaven, but you are unsaved and going to die in hell", "I got a new chance in my life, you still need to give your heart to Jesus". Another set of narratives is used when concretely describing religious sensations, as the Faith Church is put into comparison with other churches: "In those other churches (mostly other mainstream Hungarian churches), there is no light and joy", "The Holy Spirit cannot work there properly as the people's hearth are not open to the personal and real relationship with God". On the other hand in Faith Church Jesus likes to come and the Holy Spirit can work in full capacity as there is need as well as want for its fulfillment.

Lastly, the conversion narrative, as other narratives within Faith Church, is learned through the process of religious socialization in the church as well as in the family. The spiritual capital is cultivated at home, where children are nurtured within the charismatic teaching acquiring the Faith

Church lingo reflected on the narratives. The repetition of the conversion narrative is reflected both on its form (language) and structure as it gets more and more coherent being told repeatedly. Through telling and retelling the story of conversion the religious sensation becomes experienced since speaking becomes believing (Harding, 1987). Consequently, the repetition not only serves as an acknowledging process but also contributes to making the religious experience real by creating religious sensations. Although religious sensations related to conversion are experienced at the individual level, their meaning gets negotiated within the community as they are “socially produced and their repetition depends on the existence of formalized practices that not only frame individual religious sensations, but also enable their reproductivity” (Meyer, 2006, p. 13). The conversion narrative is thus an element of the religious culture within Faith Church and together with prayer, music or clothing style, is an element of the shared religious style within the church induced by sensational forms (Meyer, 2006).

It is the sensational forms, visual and auditory stimuli in the church that contribute to the normativity of the conversion narratives as they facilitate the creation of common language. The presence of the supernatural is induced by the sensational forms within the church and what is seen and heard becomes the part of one’s account about these supernatural or extraordinary encounters. The words of the preacher Sandor Nemeth, which due to the high tech sound system fill the whole megachurch, become a reference point as well as part of one’s own narrative. In the Hungarian context it is especially interesting as the narratives in Hungarian are often times translations from English, which are not typical Hungarian expressions such as “convertalni” or “negativizmus”, however are reproduced by the members of the church. Thus in the conversion narrative the believers use the testimony of their own new born, justifying and giving it credibility by referring to the current words of the preacher himself (they used the narrative heard in the church), or they refer to different material such as books, CD’s or words of famous televangelists such as Pat Robertson.

Through these mediation possibilities members of the Faith Church can explain to the new

converts not only what is one supposed to experience when touched by God, but concretely describe feelings and motions that are in process at religious sensations. As I outlined in the theoretical framework it is here where the linguistic approach becomes insufficient, as emotional as well as metakinetically learning provide a broader perspective in understanding the embodied processes of religious sensations, where the bodily involvement at one religious experience serves as a reference point in recognizing another experience as religious, based on the process of remembering (Mitchell, 1997). Bodily or emotional learning and remembering makes it possible for the members of the Faith Church to negotiate about their transcendental experiences (how something happened, whether somebody really experienced trance), both on individual level (I have felt this before) as well as on the level of community (we agree that this was a religious experience).

4.3. Learning to Experience: Trance, Holy Laughter and Speaking in Tongues

A Sunday sermon in the Faith Church (as well as speaking in tongues or trance) is an example of religious sensations, where the stress is on externalization of inner feelings and states of the believer in an embodied religious experience. There are several parts of the sermon, when bodily activity is peaking. It is during the introductory part when the focus is on praising, during the conversion part when the new participants are asked to take in the Holy Spirit and also during the main part of the sermon when Sandor Nemeth exhorts the audience to a response (I will elaborate on that later). The introductory part is most engaging qua images and sounds. The music plays the crucial role in inducing the encounter with God. It is gradating till a climax, where all the musicians and singers participate, even the singers have their hands lifted; the spiritual activity is at high point. The band is playing, the singers are synchronized encouraging the participants to dance, certain areas of the church are ecstatic, and people are on the ground or turning in circles to the rhythm of the music. Members move with the rhythm and beat, they lift their arms and hands, some of them even start rhythmically turning or moving their bodies. One of the most frequent bodily

manifestations is this mechanic movement of arms around the waist and up to the air, the movement being accompanied with either gradating shouting, or laughter, or mumbling. Some of the participants consequently engage in trance-like states, where they fall on the ground continuing the abduction until exhaustion.

I feel the Holy Spirit inside, it is a like fire and heat, there is nothing around me I am free and I feel it is not me talking but the Holy Spirit taking over my body, and working and working. God is touching me from inside, and it is the most beautiful to be close to his divinity and grace, to praise him with my whole heart..... Before coming to this church I did not believe in such experience. You know, I though that the people are making it up, you know that they are faking these experiences, and that they are a little bit crazy. Now I know its Holy Spirit working all around us. My family knows it too; my daughter and son like to come here as well. (Zsuzsa, 42)

The bodily movements help people to experience religious sensation, for example to fall into a trance, where the attention shifts to the inside processes (Luhrman, 2004); as Zsuzsa mentions it feels like the reality shots off and Holy Spirit is taking over.

Another aspect of religious sensations in the Faith Church is the experience connected to the healing processes. Healing is a crucial aspect of the philosophy of the Faith movement worldwide as well as strongly emphasized by Sandor Nemeth. Participants regard healing and belief in the power of healing as a vital characteristic of one's faith in the divinity. As a religious sensation, healing is the experience of God's closeness affecting the body of the believer, as in the case of Kadet, who had four unsuccessful spinal surgeries.

I started attending the weekly Bible studies. After three weeks, there was a teaching on healing based on the story in Mark 5 about the woman who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years. There was no prayer, just teaching. Sitting there listening, I saw a vision of Jesus from behind, and myself moving up to touch His garment. At that very instant I felt something like electricity running through me from the top down, and I knew that I was healed. I got out of my wheelchair and started dancing, and I did not stop for three days! (Kadet quoted in Dixon, 2000)

The second major spiritual activity is during the converting part of the sermon, when new members of the church are asked to come forward and make a statement about their faith. The music is softer than usual, the songs are calmer and there is narrator who is asking people to

convert (*megterni*, to come to the right way in Hungarian), using the same strategy as described earlier. For new members it is also the combination of these visual and auditory stimuli that induces the act of conversion as well as the strong feeling of *communitas* (Turner, 2006), as many members of the church are praying in tongues, some of them are crying experiencing the religious sensations.

“Religious sensations are about human encounters with phenomena or events that appear beyond comprehension”, where sensational forms are the tools of framing and producing the transcendental (Meyer, 2006, p. 10) and as in the Faith Church, bolstering the feelings generated at the sermon. Thus the religious feelings are not just there, they are made possible by the help of induction of the experience of transcendental; the bodies of the participants are subjected to a discipline due to the sensational forms and the mediated experience becomes perceived as immediate and authentic linking the participants on a metaphysical level, creating and “sustaining particular modes of being and belonging” (Meyer, 2006, p. 6). It is due to sensational forms that the participants turn in themselves to experience moments in their own subjectivity being absorbed in their own supernatural experience (Luhrman, 2004, 2006) while dancing and laughing as well as rhythmically moving and crying.

The converts describe this experience of absorption extensively; and with the learned and transmitted conversion rhetoric, also the bodily experience (feelings and bodily movements) become part of the transmitted knowledge as well as the religious style. The metakinetic emotional learning becomes important, and it is not only in the narrative but as Luhrman (2004) says also the feeling that is learned, emotionally acknowledged as real and consequently passed on. Several of my interviewees accounted on their striving to speak in tongues. They knew from other members of the church how it is supposed to feel and they could precisely describe the process, so when they experienced the speaking in tongues they could identify it. As Judit accounts on her experience from childhood:

When we were coming to the church as children, I often heard people speaking in tongues. My father has been speaking in tongues regularly. I also very much wanted to speak in tongues and I was praying everyday for it. Once we came home from the Sunday sermon and I started to pray, and then it happened. I said

... **PA** ..., I knew that was it, I was sure. It was you know, like I heard it from my friends, God finally touched me as well and I was so proud even though it was only a PA.

It is not only a learning process but also a memory process involved in embodiment, as powerful religious experience creates deep feelings, which are stored as memories and later recollected at another experience (Mitchell, 1997). However, speaking in tongues is an individual action; particular feelings experienced in this action are collectivized within the Faith Church, being part of the collective memory. This memory is utilized in “the process of establishing a common explanation of what each individual had felt” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 86), where decision is made whether a certain experience has been religious or not.

Finally, the effect of the sensational forms becomes evident not only in the Faith Church but also throughout Hungary by the means of the program *Happy Sunday* on ATV. The images of religious sensations appear in homes of the viewers, where it is possible to see participants in trance or speaking in tongues. It is important to acknowledge that a mediated religious sensation that is accessible through the TV, is regarded differently by the TV viewers than within Faith Church. Some viewers come to believe in the miracle through the TV as they write in their letters to Sandor Nemeth. Others, regard the TV itself with miraculous powers as Maria describes: “Sometimes I do not have time to come to the church on Sunday. Me and my family stay at home and at least watch the two hours on ATV. I know the blessing works through the TV as well; I like to touch the TV when Sandor Nemeth is giving the blessing to sense his power better”. From Maria’s description it is clear that there is a difference between the perception of mediation within Faith Church and outside through the screens. Within Faith Church participants see Sandor Nemeth live plus his multiplied images; thus they can choose whether to observe him or his image on the screens. For TV viewers, it is the work of the cameras as well as the added texts and advertisements that create a different experience as the image is already manipulated. Interestingly, both for the participants as well as viewers, what is shown on the screen represents authority. They regard the singers, musicians or the events that are projected on the screens in the church with power and respect. For

example several of my interviewees referred to the singers as saint and as example of perfect God's children¹⁹, the assumption is that "You have to be very saint and lead a very devoted life to appear on the screen, the singers are the example that we have to follow. They are pure." However, the most idolized and pure image is of Sandor Nemeth.

4. 4. Creating Religious Sensations: The Role of the Leader Sandor Nemeth

Without a biblical worldview our faith is hollow. I always preach two to three hours--and I always did--because I want to accustom the believers to living by the Word.

Sandor Nemeth quoted in Dixon, 2000

Sandor Nemeth is regarded by the members of the church with biggest honors, respect and awe. As my interviewees describe: "God speaks through Sandor", "Mr. Nemeth is a the most blessed man, we owe him a lot"; "He built up the Faith Church out of nothing, he even had to hide under communism, but he believed in God's plan"; "God choose him as his messenger, he has great powers, he sees and senses things, as well as he holds us accountable for our actions"; "He is able to perform miracles, he can help to heal". From these accounts it is evident that Sandor Nemeth is not only the highest bureaucratic power in the church, but is also regarded with highest spiritual and healing powers. It is from this unshakable position he is able to create both embodied religious experience as well as to contribute to the normativity of the narrative within the church by bolstering the use of common religious lingo. His power is enhanced by his appearance on the large screens within the church, where participants not only see him on the stage but also his multiplied image throughout the space.

A Sunday sermon in the Faith Church is a ritualized example of religious sensation, which is also exhorted by Sandor Nemeth's engaging performance. His precise knowledge of biblical

¹⁹ In November 2007 the Faith Church stopped broadcasting *Happy Sunday* for several months. The reason for this was that one of the singers cheated on his wife, which struck the Faith Church members. The broadcasting was stopped; the structure of the sermon was changed as well as the membership was restricted for several months. As Sandor Nemeth claimed, the church needed to be re-born and purified from inside again; the sermons in this period concerned strictly morals and faith.

passages leaves no one to doubt his knowledge, when full of energy he flips through the Bible looking for the right passage. He uses gradation, comparison, rhetoric repetition and plenty of figurative speech where the performer “indirectly instructs the listener about how to interpret messages, and invites, elicits, participation, binding the listener to the performer in a relationship of dependence and keeping the listener caught up in the display” (Harding, 1987, p. 172).

He induces the process of dramatization making the story from the Bible applicable for the self, not only telling how the participants are supposed to act but also what are they supposed to feel. One Sunday in April 2008 Sandor Nemeth had been talking about fighting the devil with the so called spiritual weapons known from the Bible. Sandor Nemeth illustrated this case with one of the members (dressed up like a Roman soldier) in a very interactive manner showing the participants how the spiritual weapons work, relating them one by one to the attire of the soldier. Similarly to this Roman soldier from the Bible, other characters are brought to life in Faith Church where comparisons are drawn between their life and lives of the participants. It is the closeness of the Biblical experience that makes this church different by Sandor Nemeth constantly calling on the parallels between Bible and reality, where fighting evil means fighting it everyday, the same evil that the Biblical characters dealt with. It is in the process of internalization when the participants rework this information and apply to themselves, consequently externalizing in the actions, such as holy laughter or crying where religious sensation comes to exits.

The participants by the help of mediation, music as well as the exhortation of Sandor Nemeth become to sense God and are amazed by his power. The amazement and the feeling of divinity are generated in the context of the sermon, where the leader serves as the mediator of power using sensational forms, to form religious subjects as well as to create links among them (Meyer,2006), thus experiencing the religious sensation individually as well as in a group. I encountered many cases of Sandor Nemeth creating mass religious sensation; one of the most significant ones regards money. Sandor Nemeth exhorts, gradating his voice: “I want everybody to take out you wallets, yes everybody take your wallets out of your pockets. Yes, hold it up and

repeat after me: God please bless my life also from the material site, fill this wallet with money and assure my family prosperous life and well being!”. Repeat again, God wants you to be happy, he will bless you.” An outburst of speaking in tongues, holy laughter and screaming ran like electricity through the church. Many participants were on the ground, the rest with their hands and wallets lifted up spoke in tongues in the name of the Lord. Participants due to the process of learning and remembering, as well as religious socialization, which I have outlined earlier, reacted to the exhortation by Sandor Nemeth in similar terms. The reactions involves outbursts of bodily movement when Sandor Nemeth talks about the devil, money, or heaven and hell, which reflects the rehearsed spontaneity (Mahmood, 2001), where knowledge of the previous situation is utilized. Further on, such an outburst of similar reactions also shows that the sensational forms invoke and perpetuate shared experiences as they are “literally incorporated and embodied by their beholders” (Meyer, 2006, p. 20).

Lastly, it is important that Sandor Nemeth’s multiplied image does not only appear within the Faith Church but by the help of the ATV it is available in the households throughout Hungary. The Faith Church is seen on the TV for the last ten years breaking the prejudices about their moneymaking sectarian character, showing not only Christian viewers their openness. Significantly, the relationship between the TV viewer at home and the sermon is interactive. The modern broadcasting studio is overwhelmed by thousands of incoming phone calls, sms messages and emails during every Sunday from 11 am to 1 pm. Some of the messages are incorporated into the sermon as they are handed over to Sandor Nemeth. As Sandor Nemeth says: “I have to pay close attention to everything, because I am a preacher, an editor and a presenter at the same time. These should be translated to Christian church meeting roles of course, but I have to go through three or four roles in one-one and a half hours”. Sandor Nemeth is a preacher and a presenter, he represent a religious authority as well as a publicly well known personality who is a media star. The materials he produces involve books, CD’s as well as footages of *Happy Sunday* (accessible in an online archive several year retrospectively), which exist as objectifications, material reflections of his

power (Kirsch, 2006).

The representation of Faith Church on ATV, their public political affiliation, the strive for educational activities as well as the estates and properties belonging to the congregation again lead me to stress that religion is public in Hungary. Sandor Nemeth is leading a group of people in Hungary towards a re-enchanted world undermining the secularization thesis (Berger, 2001), where healing coexists with medicine, investment banking and business with blessing of the wallets and exorcism. Such media use in the church also contributes to the global character of the Pentecostal movement as the knowledge and the message is transmitted through the internet and TV throughout the world constituting the global charismatic culture (Poewe, 1994).

Comparison and Conclusion

Let me now discuss the role of Faith Church in a broader sense within the Hungarian society by applying Roger's (2005) four field approach to the study of religion after 1989, to my research site. Addressing each field allows me to highlight the complexity of the Faith Church phenomena in Hungary as well it justifies my focus on religious experience. The Faith Church in Hungary is one of the few entities which are so successfully growing and marketing their message, which proves to be currently the main engine for the re-enchantment of the Hungarian secular society (Taylor, 2002). As I stressed before the Faith Church penetrates every aspect of the Hungarian society. The Faith Church in Budapest is progressively advocating engagement in business and hard work, as well as encouraging the members to fulfill their church duties with responsibilities and joy. The connection between the Faith Church and being a Hungarian is clear-cut as Sandor Nemeth encourages active voters and fighters for free Hungary without political lies. On the other hand the Hungarian identity is stretched beyond, reflecting the global transportable Pentecostal/Charismatic identity. Further on, by the means of conversion the Faith Church promotes a new type of individual, who is self assured and ready to live by the rules of the modern world affected by the immediate experience of God. Thus the religious sensations, that I have been focusing on throughout this thesis is reflected in and affects the whole life of the believer. It does not only represent several minutes of trance or absorption during a Sunday sermon in the Faith Church rather it creates an experience that is reflected in every aspect of believer's life, justifying his faith towards the society.

Another aspect that I would like to discuss now is authority. Authority, its mediation and perception by the participants has been always one of my main interests when studying Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. Strong leadership within the Faith Church can be regarded as one of the traits of Pentecostalism; however as is evident from my previous research, authority is manifested and authorized differently depending on size and geographical location of the church. In

the congregation I studied in the Netherlands, the leader, Jaap Dieleman was a self assured, slightly arrogant yet a persuasive person. Being a born-again former drug addict, he was spreading the gospel traveling throughout the world, keeping a detailed on-line account about his personal and business life. Having a materialistic approach to Pentecostalism, he argued:

We have the best product on the market, and to sell it we have to meet the needs of the market, that is our challenge. The Pentecostal church is attractive for young people with its music and with his approach to the heart. The church has to be attractive, that people engage in it.

Similarly in Slovakia, Miro Toth, a senior pastor who studied in USA, thought very progressively about his congregation even having a marketing plan for the spread of the Pentecostal/Charismatic gospel. Both of these leaders were regarded with all the honors, respect and divine powers equally to Sandor Nemeth. However it is the role of mediation by the sensational forms that make the leadership of Sandor Nemeth special as the church does not count 100 people, rather religious sensations is created for five thousand participants.

Further on, the Faith Church in Budapest proves that there the separation of politics, economy and social life from religion is shook to its core. Public personalities, such as politicians, musicians, singers as well as sportsmen are openly affiliated with the Faith Church, thanking for their success to religion. Faith Church, formerly regarded as a sect broke down the wall of prejudice by entering the Hungarian public with a nothing to hide attitude. By launching their TV program *Happy Sunday* the Faith Church has not only shown to Hungarians what happens inside Faith Park but opened a plethora for negotiating and questioning of this religion by making it accessible for everybody at home. As a comparison, only in the United States, 15 million Americans watch at least one religious program a week (Green, 1992), religion thus becomes a popular value, reflecting the needs of the evangelical population (Bruce, 1990) as well as creating a new type of religious experience at home with the involvement of television. I suggest that for further research, attention needs to be given to mediation of religious experience not only within the church but also beyond, where television becomes the medium of miracles, divinity and healing as well as a subject of admiration. Asking what is the difference between the perception of religious

sensations within a church as a participant, and the perception of divinity through the screen?

Further on, it is a fact that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is a success not only in Budapest, but also throughout the world creating new forms of religiosity and new spheres of religious life (Taylor, 2002). Pentecostalism is synthesis of elements of a number of sources of which not all are Christian (Nenneman, 1995); thus it is appealing to a wide public of religious participants in different localities. Emphasizing experimental spirituality (Marsdem in Sutton, 2003), strong moral message and prosperous life, Pentecostalism is a continually growing movement, whose only Christian competitor and global alternative might be Charismatic Catholicism (Martin, 2001). I believe it would be interesting to research the means by which these two charismatic streams spread looking at differences and similarities.

In this thesis I have argued that looking at religious sensations, religious experience and its inducement, is crucial for understanding the successful workings of the Faith Church in Budapest. I have outlined the importance of public tendencies within the Faith Church in Budapest which contribute to its popularity as well as to creation of a new type of religious experience through the means of TV. In the theoretical framework I argued that narratives about religious sensations are an effective research tool in studying religious experience. The normativity and structure of the religious narrative also led me to consider the patterns observed in religious embodiment. Consequently, I considered the role of learning and transition of knowledge; linguistic for the narratives and metakinetik or emotional for embodied religious experience. I have also reconsidered Weber's theory on authority by analyzing the leadership and mediating practices of Sandor Nemeth.

In the analyses of my ethnographic site, I have applied the theoretical framework to Faith Church by looking at religious sensations as narrated as well as embodied by the means of analyzing the accounts of my informants. I have outlined the structure of the narrative arguing that it is a part of the religious culture, where the shared language comes to existence, which I demonstrated with quotes from my interviewees. I have also described religious sensations within

Faith Church such as speaking in tongues, trance states or the act of conversion. On the leadership of Sandor Nemeth I demonstrated that sensational forms affect his authority, as well his power to create religious sensations within the church and beyond.

To conclude, I would like to point out that new religious movements such as the Pentecostal/Charismatic ones constitute an incredibly rich research possibility. There are still plenty of questions that have to be answered when looking at the role of healing processes, the resources that these churches live from and generate including real estates, institutions and foremost media. The publicness and openness of these movements is fascinating as it is negotiating the core values of the society by appealing to citizenship, family and the immanent God, advocating not only openly but also ubiquitously that it is the experience of the closeness of God that matters.

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