

Global Connections Thinking Mission Forum
Post Communism and Neo-Capitalism: Mission and the death of ideologies
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**The effects of the Soviet ideology on mission and co-operation in a post-communist context
(a protestant perspective)**

Introduction

Almost 20 years have passed since the fall of the Soviet Union and most of the countries once belonging to the Communist block are now once again part of the Europe. Still, the experience of soviet ideology, anti- religious propaganda and persecutions directed against the church and Christians in these countries have left a long lasting impression on the society in general and churches in particular. This experience has proven to be a serious obstacle for the equal participation of these countries into the political, economic and cultural life of Europe. Sadly, it also applies to the role that these countries and their churches play in the global Christian setting (and especially mission). The aim of today's presentation is to inquire into the effects of the Communist past on mission work and cooperation between the churches in the former Soviet Union and the West. In order to better understand the context for mission in this region I will start by looking at the soviet ideology and anti-religious propaganda and the effects of these phenomena on the churches in the post- Communist setting. I will continue with identifying what kind of challenges (as well as opportunities) the heritage of Soviet ideology presents for the mission and cooperation between the local and western agencies in the post-communist society.

Soviet ideology and atheism

Before turning to the analysis of church life under Communism, I would like to give a more general insight into what life was like during the Soviet era. For the sake of academic precision, we as theologians sometimes like to make a distinction between Christian and "the secular world". However, such distinction between the society in general and the believers is possible to make only theoretically, because the impact of the Soviet ideology and anti- religious propaganda affected everybody regardless of their attitude towards religion. Moreover, if our main interest lies mainly in the field of mission, it is important to understand what kind of image of the church this ideology promoted in the general society and how that has affected the attitudes towards the church among non-believers. These attitudes, in their turn, will play an important role in shaping the identity of the church during and after the Communism.

There are several aspects of Soviet ideology that are important to mention here. First of all, one of the essential characteristics of Soviet ideology that sets it apart from the Western ideologies was the fact that it was not just a set of ideas or a philosophical system but it was a state ideology, maintained by political forces. (Bercken 1985:cf270) This coincidence of political power and ideological authority is what made the Soviet Union an *ideological dictatorship*. The difference between ideological and military dictatorship is, for example, that in an ideological dictatorship the citizens not only have no democratic rights, but they are obliged to say that they possess them in perfect form (Bercken 1985:270). Moreover, in an ideological dictatorship the citizen is deprived not only of his political rights, but also of his intellectual autonomy. Man has to relate his views of life and system of values to the interest of the state. In order to secure it, a thick net of government control extended over every aspect of the activities of the citizens (Bercken 1985:cf 271).

The second important aspect of Soviet ideology was that an ideological monoculture and as such the Soviet state could not and did not recognize any alternative or competitive ideologies. There were, however, two systems of ideological values that where constantly contesting the leaders of the Soviet state and therefore considered most threatening for its ideology: nationalism and religion (Bercker 1985:271). In its fundamental rejection of religion and in its active fight against it, Soviet ideology was unique among other modern ideologies. Western civilization today can be considered secular but it is not hostile to religion. The culture that is emancipated from religion does not deny its religious past and does not attempt to erase the traces of religion by force. Soviet ideology, however, attempted to do that. The elimination of religion was assimilated into the long-term program of the party and was realized with aid of state politics (Bercker 1985:273).

An important part of this program was the spreading of Soviet Atheism which differs significantly from the atheism as it is known in the West. Let me just mention some main characteristics of the Soviet Atheism:

1. Soviet atheism “proclaimed religion as a cause and not merely the symptom of social problems...” (Pospelovsky 1987:26). According to this argument religious believers were to be blamed for the failure to achieve a perfect social justice (Froese 2004:40).
2. Soviet atheism was a categorical and radical atheism: it did not recognize religion as a private matter.
3. Soviet atheism had a confessional aspect. Ideological atheism was not a private opinion, the result of skepticism or existential doubts, but organized unbelief. It had its own creed and books of doctrine and its own rites and symbols (Bercker 1985:274). Moreover, scientific atheism could not be practiced without being an atheist oneself.

Anti-religious propaganda

All in all, scientific atheism was omnipresent in the lives of the citizens of the Soviet Union. The doctrine was taught in schools, advocated in the media, and emphatically propagandized in books, posters, the arts, during holidays, and with celebrations (Froese 2004:35). Moreover, the Soviet state was actively engaged in numerous activities to relinquish religious belief and membership.

Propaganda in media

Media was a powerful tool in the hands of the state authorities: the biggest newspapers in the country were meant to educate the masses according to Soviet spirit. Therefore, when it came to the topic of religion, only the articles that supported the official state ideology were published in these newspapers. Religion was among the topics frequently discussed in the newspapers but only those readers' letters that expressed a hateful attitude towards religion were published (Mankusa 2001:17). In the middle of the 1950s the media mainly published articles that insulted priests and believers by portraying their faith in a grotesque way and accusing them of an immoral lifestyle. In the early 1960s atheistic propaganda in the media took another shape: the most important aspect of propaganda was concentrated on disproving the religion with scientific arguments as well as publishing letters of priests who had rejected their “religious delusions” (Mankusa 2001:34).

Atheistic propaganda in education

The Soviet authorities actively sought to prevent religious education and replace it with atheistic propaganda. Thus in 1960s a new subject was introduced into the University programs: “The basis of Scientific Atheism” (Mankusa 2001:22). Anti-religious propaganda was present also in the Elementary and Secondary school programs (Zikmane 2001:123).

Invention of new traditions and replacement of rituals and holidays

Religious rituals and holidays were the most difficult outward expression of religion to suppress. The decree issued by the USSR Council of Ministers concerning Soviet Traditions, Celebrations and Customs was a serious attempt to lessen or completely remove the impact of the church on the social life of the people by creating alternative atheistic holidays to fulfill the need for celebrations (cf. Mankusa 2001:122). State holidays were created that overlapped with major religious festivals and a multitude of rites to mark important events like weddings and funerals.

Outcomes

The most important outcome of Soviet ideology and anti-religious propaganda was the removal of the religion as a system of meaning and replacement of it by the Soviet ideology. Another success of the Soviet ideology was the distorted image of the church that the authorities managed to create in the society. There are two aspects of this image that are important to mention here. *First*, the strict limitations to involve children and young people in the church life, disrupted the generation change in the church and created an impression that the church and religion is an institution for the weak and the old ones; the ones without a future (Zikmane 2001:161). *Second*, by referring to scientific arguments in the atheistic propaganda, the Soviet authorities succeeded in spreading the idea that religion and science (or rationality for that matter) is incompatible and that religion is a remnant of the dark ages.

The Church under Communism

As it was mentioned earlier, Soviet ideology and anti-religious propaganda affected everybody regardless of their religious adherence. The church and the believers, however, received a special attention from the authorities. According to the new Constitution of Socialist Soviet Republic of Latvia adopted on 25th of August, 1940 “the Church was separated from the State and the School from the Church in order to insure freedom of consciousness. All the citizens have freedom of religious beliefs as well as freedom to exercise anti-religious propaganda” (Mankusa 2001:20). In reality however, the State had a very close control over the matters of the church.

The attitude towards religion and the church in the Soviet Union remained unchanged during the whole time of its existence. The methods of the fight against religion and the church, however, changed according to the different policies preferred by the different leaders of the Party. Thus, for

example, the 1940ies could be characterized as the most aggressive time of persecutions: many clergymen were accused of treason to the state or contra-revolutionary propaganda¹ and sentenced for deportation (Gintere 1992:102). In 1954 the church enjoyed a short moment of relief due to the resolution of the Communist Party „Concerning mistakes in propaganda of scientific atheism” in which the aggressive attacks on believers were condemned. It was, however, followed by a more intensive period of persecutions which lasted from 1958 to 1964 (Hruschov’s era). In 1965 new forms of fight against religion were suggested: attention was redirected from the attacks on individual believers towards the fight with the general ideology of religion.(Mankusa 2003:27) Thus in the period between 1965 and 1986 the persecutions of the church took a seemingly more civilized shape, emphasising the ideological work, control of information.

Main forms of persecutions

Spreading fear and threats

After the end of World War II many pastors and active church members were charged with „anti-soviet activity” or „treason against state” and sentenced for deportation to labour camps. Such unpredictable and unlimited sanctions against people who for some reason were disliked by the Soviet authorities created fear among believers. In the 1950s this fear was reinforced by the Soviet media and the public opinion created by it.(Mankusa 2003: 28)

However, the ruling authorities later had to admit, that the intensive persecutions of the church were not justified: believer’s loyalty to the state was destroyed; the closing of the parishes had caused believers to go underground and thus became less controllable. Moreover, the persecutions had invoked “unhealthy sympathies” towards the believers among people who otherwise could have remained indifferent towards the church.(Mankusa 2003:26) Therefore the authorities had to look for other ways of influencing the church and believers.

Economic persecutions

The economic persecutions against the church were a more subtle, but none the less one of the most effective ways of influencing the church. Economic persecutions that were directed towards local parishes were mainly concerned with church property. For example, the tax and insurance policy concerning churches insured that the payments were so high that many parishes were not able to cover them and therefore had to be closed. Some of the buildings were tiered down, some were used for economic purposes and turned into warehouses, workshops, drying- rooms, water towers, etc., while others were used for social purposes, such as sport clubs, pioneer camps, stock houses for school equipment, etc. (Zikmane 2001:185) The closing of the parishes was also closely linked with the attitude of the authorities towards destruction and demolition of church buildings. The destruction of the church building or church inventory were not perceived as a crime and in almost non of the cases criminal charges were filed and the malefactor was not persecuted or punished (Zikmane 2001:195)

Persecutions against individual believers and pastors

In the beginning of the 1960s so called “individual” work with believers became widespread. Komsomol, party and trade unions sent their members to convince the believers about the fallacy of religion. (Mankusa 2001:31). In order to single out the individuals who belonged to local parishes representatives from the local authorities were standing at the church entrance before the service and taking down the names of the ones who attended the services while the pastors were ordered to hand in a list with names and addresses of congregation members and those who have been baptized.(Mankusa 2001:32).

When convincing did not show results, other methods were used, such as putting pressure on believer’s professional and social life. Although the official legislation of Socialist Soviet Republic of Latvia stated that “no one can be dismissed from work, educational institution or social responsibilities on the bases of one’s religious convictions”, the local authorities often ignored it and believers frequently had to face restrictions to work according to their specialty, they were not allowed to undertake any social activities, young people had difficulties entering universities, etc.(Mankusa 2001:16)

The situation was often even more difficult for the priest, who could not hide their religious conviction (such option was available only to lay people), therefore the state anti-church policy affected priests more than other Christians.(Mankusa 2001:11) Threats, extortion, insulting articles published in local newspapers, financial sanctions, as well as other damaging actions were part of the attempts to make the priests reconsider their service in the church.

¹ according to paragraph 58 of the Criminal Code

Outcomes of the persecutions of the church

The outcomes of the persecutions against the church have affected the church and the believers on several levels. The first and most visible level is, of course, the material losses of the churches: dramatic fall of the church membership, lack of educated pastors, shutting down or destruction of church buildings and a diminishing number of church services and religious ceremonies, etc. But there is another level which perhaps is not so obvious (and visible) but nevertheless, has proven to be crucial for the church and its outreach in the society: the devastating consequences that the persecutions had on the teaching of the church, its structures and identity. As Michale Bordeaux, a well known researcher of the churches under Communism put it:

Too many people in the West, and perhaps especially Christians, who should have known better, simply failed to appreciate the totality with which communism in practice rejected every proven human and religious value, stripping men and women of trust in each other, excising any sense of individual responsibility for the destiny of society, robbing people of their future, just as the rewriting of history had robbed them of their past. It is impossible for anyone who does not know the Soviet system well to appreciate the extent of the deprivation which believers have experienced (Michael Bourdeaux, 1990:3)

Teaching of the church

In the aggressive environment of persecutions and anti-religious propaganda the church had to guard and sustain its identity which led to developing a specific theology and church praxis. Under the Soviet regime, the church could survive only by holding on to tradition as the basis of faith, not by questioning it. Constant pressure from the outside made the church rather conservative (Rubenis 1994:103). Modes of thought, therefore, tended to be dogmatic, and the tendency to hold on to dogmas was reinforced by the ideological thought patterns which were typical of the Soviet regime, and are still partly present (Mankusa 2005:91). Moreover, the leading pastors in the Baltic States were trained during the Soviet regime in church seminaries where conservative theological thinking dominated and at universities where socialist ideology ruled. As a result, this generation has not learned to discuss and argue, and often takes a critical remark as a personal insult. The same inability to discuss and be open to critical remarks apply to lay people: during the Soviet regime, church members became so used to defending their faith and freedom of conscience that, even now, they are suspicious of anyone who speaks critically of church practice. (Mankusa 2005: cf91).

Another important aspect of the theology and praxis of the church was the necessity to keep faith in a private sphere. As far as the church was successfully removed from the public domain, its teaching had to avoid social and political issues. Thus in general the sermons of the Lutheran pastors was politically neutral as far as the central themes were connected to Christian morals emphasizing the personality of the believer, his or her faith life, relations with other people and family members, as well as work ethics. In order to avoid a direct confrontation with the existing ideology, the church had no other choice but to withdraw from it which also meant withdrawal from the public and social life. Such an approach allowed the church to survive the Communist times but at the same time led to the situation of existing in isolation (Zikmane 2001:cf 173).

Divisions in the church

During the Soviet times the church was forced to learn from the events in society and the new attitude of the State towards the church and soon made them realize that in order to survive and work it would have to change and adjust to the new situation (Mankusa 2001:68). The process of adjusting, however, turned out to be a very painful experience. Many of the compromises taken can be questioned but at the time they were based on the principle of choosing the lesser evil. (Mankusa 2001:cf 25)

As the worst examples of adjusting to the new situation can be mentioned those pastors who gave in to the tempting promises of the State officials and became informers for the Secret Police (cf. Mankusa 2001:54). There were also those who aptly informed authorities about their congregation members or colleagues who tried to disobey the legislation and organize confirmation classes or other forbidden events.

As another example of divisions in the Evangelical Lutheran church of Latvia could be mentioned the events that took place in the 1980s. In the end of the 1980ies many young pastors were eager to promote changes in the church and were not fully aware of the outcomes which such a strong reaction against the state authorities might bring. In many ways they did not have the experience and the memories of the older generation which had experienced severe persecution in the 1940ies. This new conflict was partly theological and partly generational and was threatening the church with a split (cf. Zikmane 2001:174).

Congregation structure and life

Due to the anti-religious propaganda and the almost non-existing religious education during the Soviet times the church suffered from the lack of the generation shift: the old congregation members retired but the young people did not take their place thus causing the congregations to shrink (Zikmane 2001:194). The Regulation Concerning Religious Societies included prohibition to involve the underage in the parishes and strictly limited youth work. As a result, the Representative's report to the state authorities 1965 stated that "young people almost do not attend churches at all. They might come only to the Christmas and Easter services and even then they act more like observers than participants. Observations prove that the believers which nowadays attend the church have a very limited knowledge about the theoretical basis of their faith, such as catechesis and the gospels, therefore their participation in the service is rather passive" (Zikmane 2001:166).

Vulnerability, mistrust, and fear were deeply rooted in the minds of the people and therefore often the threats alone would be enough to influence someone's decision to leave the church. People were not ready to risk their possibility to study, work and develop a career as far as membership in the church excluded them from the social life which was strictly controlled by the state. Therefore especially the socially active people left the church, which in turn influenced both the structure and the life of the congregations (Zikmane 2001:188).

Moreover, when it came to the identity of the believers, many developed an inferiority complex. In the Soviet Union, attitudes towards believers were straightforward: they were said to be either fools or cheats. This viewpoint was widely disseminated in the press and was also taught in school. Scorn and contempt for believers and their children was the "normal" attitude of an atheist (Mankusa 2005:85). For this reason believers often hid their faith and did not experience Christian fellowship and sharing one's faith as a normal part of their life.

Post-communist context

In 1991 the Baltic States broke out of the Soviet Union and declared their independence. These events also marked the end of the period of church oppressions resulting from the official ideology of USSR. However, the newly acquired freedom proved to be ambiguous for several reasons.

First, the churches had to redefine her role in the new free and democratic society. During the communist times the churches had a limited, but nevertheless very clearly defined role as the opposition to the communist regime. The transition from a well- defined and more or less static situation to a new, fuzzy and dynamic one demanded by the new circumstances proved to be a complicated one (Hoppenbrouwers 1999: cf169).

Second, transition from socialism to market capitalism brought a new social order. Society had to face problems which it had not been aware of previously, namely unemployment, homelessness and violence in families. New social groups appeared, such as street children, handicapped people, HIV-positive people, and the churches had to define their standpoint on and approach towards dealing with these issues (Mankusa 2005:89). However, the church was not all together well prepared to deal with these challenges.

Third, the new societal order needed a different approach on the part of the church. The old, introvert attitude needed to be replaced by a new extrovert one. Through 50 years of persecution the churches became rather inward- looking; they started to dry up intellectually as they perforce limited themselves to their core activities: the distribution of sacraments and the preaching of the word of God. As mentioned before, church structures and mentality adapted to life under and against oppression. Now other qualities like cooperation, dialogue, openness, shared responsibility, consensus and the will to make compromises are needed, but the psychological structure of many clergymen and laymen is not yet prepared for it (Hoppenbrouwers 1999:cf169).

Fourth, the new, post-communist situation proved to be even more complex when it became clear that the societal role of the churches is going to be rather limited. In the early 1990s, society in the Baltic States welcomed the involvement of the church: the church was invited to start undertaking spiritual work (pastoral care) in hospitals, homes for the elderly and prisons. But the initial popularity was not translated into lasting moral and political authority, influence and power. Not all aspects of democratization, liberalization and individualization were beneficial for the churches. In the new situation of religious freedom and growing popularity of different kinds of spiritualities the churches found themselves fighting for their place in society. They had been marginalized under communist rule; now they found themselves among the many players in society (Hoppenbrouwers 1999:cf169). This situation also induced feelings of nostalgia for the churches who hoped to regain the status of religious monopoly that they had in the period between World Wars.

Fifth, from 1991 the society in the Baltic States came into contact and confrontation with the Western way of life that would function thereafter as the dominant model. There were many who blamed the western influences for the situation that the churches found themselves in. After all, the evils like liberalism, consumerism, materialism and (Protestant) sects that harmed the native churches all came from the West. This attitude proved to be crucial for the cooperation with the Western partners during the years to come.

These changes in the society presented a number challenges for the churches. On one side the churches had to struggle with the effects of the persecution inside the church and deal with such issues as ignorance, divisions among the pastors and believers, suspicion and mistrust, etc. On the other side, there was the image of the church among the non-believers to take into account. For people who had seen the church as the opposition to the Soviet system and a possible source for meaning and hope both during the communist times and in the post-communist society, encountering a the church suffering from the problems mentioned above created a rather negative attitude towards the church and sometimes Christianity in general. Let us take a closer look at what kind of difficulties for mission work resulted from this situation. I will try to look at this question from two different perspectives: first from the perspective of the local churches and then from the perspective of the Western churches and mission agencies.

Local churches and mission work

There have been a number of problems that the churches had to encounter while developing mission work. These problems can be divided into two major groups: mainly practical problems appearing on the institutional level of the church and problems appearing on the individual level connected to the way of thinking and understanding of mission.

The first group of problems includes (1) lack of funds for mission work, (2) shortage of people with training in the field of missiology and (3) very little lay activity (Grants 2001: 12). In many ways, these problems are mutually interdependent: the lack of funds has meant that the church has not been able to invest in educating people in missiology. As a result, there have been difficulties in finding people to teach missiology. This, in turn has led to a situation where many pastors do not have any training in missiology and thus are unable to instruct and motivate the laity for mission work.

The other set of problems, appearing on a more individual level, are closely connected with what can be called 'the residue of the Communist past': the heritage of being part of the Soviet Union had a significant impact not only on political and economical life, but also on the way people think and how they approach life. The premises of this world view (in spite of the fact that they are often less visible than the economic and political heritage) have proven to be hard to change. One of the most significant effects of Communism on the life of the church was the fixation on self-preservation. During the period of the Soviet Union, the existence of the church was constantly threatened, and many people who had experienced this were more concerned with survival and self-preservation than with being sent on missions to others (Grants 2001: 13). People were welcomed if they showed an interest in the church, but there was very little actual outreach to those who did not show any initiative to join the church. Hence, many Christians have difficulties in understanding their personal responsibility for undertaking mission work. Moreover, mission was rarely seen as a normal part of Christian existence due to the lack of experience of sharing one's faith freely and without fear (Grants 2001: 13) These attitudes, unfortunately, are often also found among the church leaders who sometimes fail to see mission as an essential aspect of the church and therefore do not see development of mission theology and work as a priority.

But the local churches were not the only ones struggling with the difficulties of overcoming the Communist past. Due to their history, churches in the Baltics have always seen themselves as belonging to a wider European Christian context. Although the Soviet Authorities denied them the possibility to participate in it, they were never completely forgotten by their former friends and partners in the West. Therefore we can talk about the presence of Western churches and mission organizations in the region both during and after the Communist era. And in many ways the relationships developed between the churches during the Communist era have strongly influenced the modes and patterns of co-operation after the fall of Soviet Union.

Co-operation with the Western partners

In spite of the rather limited opportunities to interact with the Western world during the Soviet era, the churches behind the Iron Curtain were successful in establishing quite regular contacts with the churches in the West. These contacts could be divided in two groups: official and non-official. As far as the Soviet Authorities were interested to involve the churches in their propaganda work abroad, some church leaders were allowed to travel abroad, participate in the international church meetings and develop relationships with the representatives of the Western churches. However, the official

contacts between Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War have always been viewed with a certain degree of mistrust. The Western side has always questioned the possibility that a totalitarian and atheistic state would allow their churches to contact those abroad and suspected a close state control over these meetings (Mankusa 2006:cf314).

The non-official contacts between the churches were mainly a result of the work of missionary organizations, the so called Eastern Missions, which saw their task as one of smuggling the Good News behind the Iron Curtain. The mission projects, however, were mainly a one way stream from West to East. Christians in the East generally benefitted from this limited help from the West. The limited and distanced engagement with each other helped to maintain high appreciation for each other. Some strange and unexpected things were neglected because of the overwhelming positive experiences. This changed dramatically after the fall of Soviet Union and a more closer and regular interaction between the parties, with different expectations on both sides. (Penner 2008: cf40).

The events around the 1990s were experienced as shocking, exciting and sensational. Opportunities for freedom of religion and conscience appeared beyond imagination but not always was there an ability to respond to these and to use them for the good (Penner 2008:41). The Western and Eastern evangelicals saw this as an opening for world evangelisation, often interpreting it as the apocalyptic time. None, however, was prepared for the sudden opportunity or had prepared a strategy for action. As a result everyone did as it seemed best fitting from their perspective (Penner 2008:42). Many mistakes were made, issues of contextualization missed or neglected, neo-colonial methods applied. I could mention here some of the stories told at the last IAMS conference in Budapest: mission agencies looking for horror stories, missionaries going to the same churches where someone spoke English, unintentionally starting an unhealthy competition between the pastors and congregations for the financing, etc.

Challenge for the contacts

In the light of these events the cooperation between the locals and the westerners proved to be difficult at times. At the beginning of the 1990s, the evangelical churches in the Baltic States were open to the contacts with the churches in the West and ready to learn from their experience. Yet after a while, differences between Eastern and Western theological thought became increasingly obvious, making dialogue more complicated.

In particular, church leaders in the Baltic States lost their initial enthusiasm for the relationship with their Western partners. A Latvian theologian and pastor, Juris Rubenis, points out several reasons for this:

- (1) In discussions with their partners in the West, churches in the Baltics have always felt that they are regarded as small children who do not understand real life and need to learn from their more experienced neighbours (Rubenis 1989:165). With regard to mission and cooperation this attitude meant that the churches in the Baltics were still perceived as the “receiving” agencies that needed not only material help but also theological (or spiritual) guidance. The experience that the churches had acquired during the years of Communism was in many cases ignored or neglected as far as it did not seem to provide any help for how to engage the new, democratic and rapidly Westernized society. Moreover, church leaders in the Baltic States also feared that their partners in the west were trying to influence them and saw them as a threat to their independence.
- (2) Church life in the west is based on well elaborated theologies, institutions and traditions, but it lacks an existential dimension and cannot meet people’s needs (Rubenis 1989:165). One of the shocking surprises for the Christians emerging from behind the Iron Curtain was the nominal character of Western Christianity. For the believers in the Soviet Union, becoming a Christian was an existential decision that would affect one’s life in very particular ways (possibly losing one’s job, having troubles getting education, etc.). In many ways the active persecutions “purified” the church and taught the believers to see faith as a value that was worth sacrificing your life for. In their encounter with their Western partners Christians from the former Soviet Union struggled to identify the presence of this existential aspect of the faith.
- (3) Churches in the west are too secularised; by trying to remain popular, they have lost their true foundations (Rubenis 1989:165). Evangelical church leaders in the Baltic States accuse their partners in the west of being too liberal, too concerned with social processes at the expense of the real mission of the church – ministry of the Word. Conversely, the West saw the churches in the Baltic States as too conservative: opposing to everything that was not regarded as “normal” (i.e. in line with traditional teaching), reluctant to accept innovation or to reconsider old concepts. To put it another way, in many situations the other party was seen and judged through one’s own lens and

everything that was different got identified as un-spiritual, un-holy and un-pious (Penner 2008:cf48).

The negative experiences resulting from some of these unfortunate encounters have left a lasting mark on the relationships between the churches in the former Soviet Union and the West. The cooperation in the field of mission is often seen as a challenge by both sides. To my opinion, there a number of issues that must be addressed in order to improve this situation and the churches in Western and Eastern Europe should be involved equally in this process. On the one hand, there needs to be a reconsideration of the existing patterns of cooperation developed by the Western churches and mission agencies as far as they still exhibit signs of neo-colonialism, paternalism, lack of understanding of the context, insensitivity to the history and experience of the churches under Communism and sometimes plain ignorance about the current situation. On the other hand, the churches in the former Soviet Union should be more engaged in self reflection and attempt to understand the effects of the Soviet ideology on their theology and practice in order to address such issues as mistrust, intolerance, insecurity, etc. more successfully. Moreover, I believe that it is essential to change the understanding of the Western churches as the “sending” and Eastern European churches as “receiving”. As pointed out by Scott Klingsmith, despite the lack of the knowledge about it, Eastern and Central Europe is a region which has a historical tradition of missions (Klingsmith 2008:cf154) and therefore should be encouraged to see themselves as equal participants in the sending mission of the Western churches, not just as passive onlookers or receivers of missionaries. After all, we, as the rest of Jesus disciples, have been sent out with the words: The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (Matthew 9:37-38).

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