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Baptists and Society in Eastern Europe – A Swedish Perspective

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The main focus in this paper is on the countries around the Baltic Sea – the Baltic States. A reason for this is that these countries are geographically close to Sweden, which has opened up exchange on different levels. It means that most of my experiences relate to these countries. It is also important to remember that the reflections I offer emerge from my personal understanding of the Eastern European countries and Baptist life there. I am fully aware of the fact that the picture I have is subjective, and it may include misinterpretations. But what I try to do is to describe how a person who is living in Sweden (and so belonging to Western Europe) interprets historical developments in neighboring countries.

Close and yet so far away!

I remember that I was a small child when I first learned about the countries across the sea, the Baltic countries. My mother told me the story of a friend of hers. This friend had crossed the Baltic Sea together with her family in a tiny boat, fleeing from Latvia to Sweden at the end of the Second World War. She was not an exception. In the same way about 30 000 refugees came from Estonia, and 5000 came from Latvia. Some of them ended up in our churches and I have myself several friends with Baltic roots. This personal detail illustrates how near all through the years were the Baltic states for the Swedes - at least mentally. Even though the iron curtain we felt cultural and sometimes personal links. Paradoxically, during the Communist times, the Baltic countries were yet so far away! Looking at a map one realizes also geographical nearness. Between the Swedish island Gotland and the Baltic shore there is less than 200 kilometers. Tallinn is the closest capital city to Stockholm. In addition, there are important historical links. Since the times when it was easier to travel on the sea than on land, there has been a Swedish population on the coastlines of Finland, Estonia and to some extent also in Latvia. Historically, both Estonia and Latvia have a “Swedish period”. Northern Estonia was a part of Sweden from 1561 and the whole country from 1645 until 1721 – the year when Sweden lost Estonia to Russia. Swedish king Gustav Adolf II founded the University in Tartu in 1632, and in the 17th century also other levels of the education system developed. Latvia has a shorter Swedish period which lasted from 1621, when Riga was taken from Poland, until 1709 when the country was lost to Russia. It is obvious that between Swedish as well as Latvian and Estonian cultures there are links and similarities. But of course there are also differences. The history in Estonia and Latvia is a

story of the domination of strong neighbors. Forty plus years of communism – occupation, deportations, isolation from Western Europe – left marks in people’s minds. Swedish and Baltic historical experiences are different from each other. There are also wounds in our common story. In 1945 the Soviet Union sent a note to the Swedish Government, and demanded that Sweden would send back to the Soviet Union those refugees who had served in German army during the Second World War. At the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946 about 160 Baltic persons were sent back to Russia, even though the Swedish government knew that their treatment in the Soviet Union would be very harsh. Many Swedes look at this as a shameful step in our relationship with the Baltic States. In 1994 the Swedish government officially apologized for this historical episode.

Fellowship in spite of the iron curtain

Looking at Baptist work there are mutual links that go back to the 19th century. There were missionaries who were sent from Scandinavia to the Baltic countries. In some cases, also Baptists from the Baltics came to Sweden and helped in spiritual work. In the church where I used to be a pastor people still remembered a preacher from Latvia who came over for revivals in the 1930s. During the time of communism it was difficult to keep direct links, but some contacts were made through the ECB office in Moscow. I do not think it is an overestimation to say that Swedish Baptist leaders had a crucial role in maintaining the contacts with fellow Baptists in the Soviet Union and in other parts of Eastern Europe during the cold war. It was possible (at least partly), because politically Sweden remained neutral and did not join NATO. There were Swedish Baptist delegations visiting the Soviet Union, and Soviet Baptist delegations visiting Sweden. A key figure for these contacts was Dr Erik Rudén, the general secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden, and later the general secretary of the EBF (1959-1965). His wife Kerstin Rudén, as a leader among Baptist women in EBF and BWA, also played an important role in building bridges over the iron curtain. Later, other Scandinavians, such as Knut Wümpelman, David Lagergren and Birgit Karlsson, continued the same line. They were not naïve, neither were they unaware of political realities. They learned over the years who to trust and who not to trust. They knew some persons they met reported later to Soviet officials. However, their efforts strengthened ties between Baptist of Eastern Europe and the rest of the Baptist world. One should remember, however, that it was not just contacts between leaders that took place during these years. At the end of the sixties, the Baptist Unions of Scandinavia together with the American Baptist Churches (ABC) formed a Lay Conference Committee. The task for this committee was threefold:

- arrange short, intensive courses for lay people, in order to equip them for local church leadership;
- organize conferences of general interest about important issues of contemporary church life;
- create opportunities for Christians of various professions in Northern and Eastern Europe to discuss the challenges they met in church and society.¹

¹ Sven Svensson, ‘Gränslös gemenskap’. A paper of personal notes concerning the work of the Lay Conference Committee in 1970–1996; Bernhard Green, *Crossing the boundaries: A history of the European Baptist Federation* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1999), p. 70.

The committee reported of its work regularly to the EBF. The main focus was, as the name shows, lay people. The Lay Conference Committee played a specific and important role in building relations between the two parts of Europe. The conferences that were arranged, gave an opportunity for ordinary people from the East and the West to come together and get to know one another and create better understanding. The first conference of the kind was held in Stockholm in 1970, and it was followed by conferences in Denmark, Norway, East Germany, Poland, Hungary and other locations. This ministry gathered, all together, a large number of people through the years. Regarding the links on the leadership level, one should mention also the peace seminars that were held in Moscow, primarily at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s. These seminars became a forum for Baptists of East and West to meet during the cold war. The official program was on peace issues, but the framework allowed to participate at worship services and to have personal conversations between leaders of East and West.² Some Eastern leaders who participated at these seminars had courage to lift the curtain a little and reveal (at least to some extent) the real the situation. Birgit Karlsson has described this “revealing” as both important and painful. Western leaders did not really know in detail what was happening in the East European countries. Birgit Karlsson exemplifies the situation by telling of her friendship with Ruta in Lithuania. Ruta and Birgit were born the same year, but when they shared their life stories it turned out that the same year, 1951, when Birgit went to the seminary to study and to become a pastor, Ruta was deported to Siberia. It was painful to find out afterwards what our sisters and brothers of the East had gone through – and we did not know!

Renewed fellowship

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of 1990s it was with great joy that the people of Sweden and our churches renewed contacts with the countries around the Baltic Sea, and especially with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Certainly, this was re-establishing historical and cultural ties. But some relations had never been entirely broken. There were already relations, but now they could be taken up in new forms and on a much broader scale. I find it important to emphasize that the fall of the iron curtain affected both East and West – this happened both in politics as well as in church life. It is significant that in an atmosphere of new freedoms for the Baltic countries opportunities were opened for local churches and their members to build relationships with each other over the state borders. Many Swedish churches found a partnership church or a “sister church” in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. Some sister church relationships were also built between Sweden and Poland. It was a joy to meet, to learn more about the experiences of each other on the grassroots level. However, a closer look reveals that it was easier for the churches in Sweden to keep up these contacts from the position of a giver. Truck-loads with second hand clothes and other supplies were shipped over to the Baltics, and several church buildings were built or renovated with the support from churches in Scandinavia. In these projects help and support came also from other countries, beyond Nordic region. But, as Swedish case demonstrates, it was much harder to keep the meaningful contacts when the needs in the East were not so pressing any more. At this point dialogue and sharing of experiences should have come into focus. And in some

² Oral information from Birgit Karlsson, former general secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden and president of the EBF in 1993–1995. Karlsson took part in these seminars from the beginning and had a number of personal contacts with the former Eastern European countries through the years. Conversations with Birgit Karlsson have helped me better to understand background for this paper.

cases it happened. However, Swedish churches have realized that even if we had a sincere willingness to give, we were not fully ready to be really open in dialogue. We were not ready for challenges that came from the Eastern European churches. For example, should we re-evaluate our “Western” way of “doing church”? One must admit that many Scandinavian churches forgot what they had learned from over 100 years of international mission work: local cooperation is vitally important! Some projects in the 1990s were developed without local initiatives, and this situation contradicted a sound view of mission. On many occasions the understanding of what was needed and should be done in the East was actually formed in the local churches in the West, without a real dialogue that would involve the union leadership of both sides. We have several examples of local Swedish churches starting projects without any consultation with the Baptist Union of Sweden, and when it did not work or became too expensive, the local leaders came to the union office and asked the office to take over the responsibility. This process needed some balancing. Swedish Baptists were able to form networks of churches that would partnership with churches in a certain country, for example in Latvia. The aim was to coordinate, to get the churches to start reflecting on what direction they would like the contacts to develop, and to connect the Swedish and East European links on the union level. We have two networks of this kind still working, one with Lithuania and one with Byelorussia. If we turn to the national level it becomes clear that the EBF had an important role to play. The EBF offered opportunities for Baptist leaders of East and West to meet personally, and to some extent EBF functioned also as coordinator between different initiatives. One result of this was that responsibilities for East-West contacts were shared between different western Baptist unions. The main responsibility of West Germany was former East Germany, the Nordic countries were encouraged to focus especially on the Baltic countries (and to some extent also on Poland). Within the Nordic countries this responsibility was divided even further: the Finland and the Swedish Covenant Church related especially to Estonia, the Baptist Union of Sweden built links to Latvia and Lithuania, and Denmark especially to Lithuania. This was roughly how partnership-responsibility was shared. No doubt, there were many contacts beyond this scheme. For the Baptist Union of Sweden, the fall of the iron curtain marked a shift in our methods of mission. For more than 100 years we had sent missionaries to different countries, including Europe. However, our Mission Board decided, in relation to post-communist Eastern Europe, that we will not send missionaries into these countries. Instead, the focus was to help equipping our fellow unions to develop their own work. This meant, for example, that Swedish Baptists would contribute funds for social projects developed by the unions in the East. We also made a decision to support the development of bible schools and theological training in these regions. There was a very conscious strategy to support indigenous pastors and evangelists. We also developed what we called “three-part-mission”: this meant that we supported a missionary from one former socialist country to work in another East European country. In this way we tried to take advantage of cultural and linguistic competence that local Christians had, but it was also a way how to encourage our fellow unions to build up their own international mission strategy. In this way the Baptist Union of Sweden has supported indigenous church workers in Lithuania, Byelorussia, Ukraine and Azerbajdjan, and we still support several workers according to the same pattern. This strategy has also affected the methods how we work in our old mission countries in Africa and Asia, where instead of Swedish missionaries we increasingly support indigenous workers who have been sent by their unions.

Baptists and society in Eastern Europe – reflections from a Swedish perspective

I must emphasize again that my thoughts represent only a subjective way of understanding Scandinavian-Baltic Baptist relations. But this does describe a way of interpreting what we have encountered. I focus on some characteristic elements what catch the eye when the Baltic situation is observed from Swedish side.

1. Materialism

Materialism is present both in the East and in the West. This may cause confusion. In the communistic thinking materialism is a basic concept. It goes hand in hand with a goal to reduce the influence of religion in society. Materialistic and atheistic thinking led in practice to the severe control of the churches by the communist governments; Christian leaders and church members were under pressure; congregations struggled because of atheistic restrictions; and persecution and even deportations of believers was a part of this reality. In spite of all this Christians from the West met a living and vital churches as they visited Eastern European countries. During the same period, after the Second World War, there took place a rapid economic development in the Western countries. The standard of living for ordinary people, at least in Northern Europe, escalated. As a result – the Western society became very materialistic. Western people often have what they need in a materialistic sense, but in this culture the real need of God has diminished! The churches of the West started to decline and gradually lost influence in the wider society. The secularization of the society grew and expanded. In a way, paradoxically, the results in the field of religion were similar to what communist leaders wanted to reach, but had difficulties in achieving. Today the materialistic thinking of the West has grown very rapidly in the East. It is not difficult to understand the mechanism behind it, since the lack of resources was evident for many people in the East as the curtain fell. Living standard models were immediately borrowed from the West. At that time I remember how I was trying to explain the difficulties of the materialistic thinking that Western countries had already encountered. But in the 1990s people in post-communist countries had difficulties to understand that materialistic goods may bring along problems. Today, I believe, the flipside of materialism has not disappeared. Materialism often comes to forefront, it distorts the values. It is not easy for the churches to make themselves heard in the society, even though there is a new openness toward “spiritual questions.” However, the spiritual interest of today’s people is directed toward a variety of thoughts, religions and philosophies. We have a growing segment of our population who has no frame of reference when it comes to a Christian faith. A question coming out of this is: How can we help each other to address this situation? Do we need both Western and Eastern experience in order to give our churches tools for sharing the Christian faith in post-Christian societies?

2. Open society, narrow theology?

Much of the experience of Swedish church leaders, when they maintained contacts with the Eastern European believers during the sixties and seventies, was that they met with courageous, vibrant and committed leadership. These church leaders in Eastern Europe were not afraid to go into discussions concerning a wide range of topics. But soon after religious freedom arrived in the former communist countries Western believers encountered, somewhat surprisingly, a more narrow thinking among Eastern European leadership. One way of describing this phenomenon is to say that a more conservative theology emerged in the East, but I do not think this is a sufficient explanation. However, whatever the reasons, this situation meant that some of our contacts with Eastern leaders became more difficult

and on some occasions the relationships grew more tense than ever before. I would suggest a couple of possible explanations for this, in addition to developments in theological thinking:

- It could be a reaction toward a too strong influence of liberal thinking among the church leaders and in the churches in the West. This is a challenge for Western churches to reflect on what is genuine in our faith and practice, and on the other hand – have we lost something essential? If yes, then what, and where and when?
 - It could also be a quite human reaction to major changes that took place in religious and political context. When the world is opening up, when the society is going through rapid changes, the first reaction could be to take one step back. In these circumstances, a person often guards what he or she already has, in order not to lose what he or she is, and not to lose one's self-understanding and identity.
 - What we certainly did encounter in the 1990s, was a growing influence of conservative evangelical groups from America, but also the Word of Life movement in Sweden. The latter proclaimed a theology of success, now usually referred to as prosperity theology. It is obvious that his type of theology was appealing to a society that eagerly wanted to leave economical hardships behind. The influence of these groups was also – as it seems to a Scandinavian observer – connected to an influx of material resources that sometimes accompanied the import of their ideas.
3. "Shooting too high!"

Scandinavian believers will probably never fully understand what Baltic Christians went through when the Soviet Union fell apart. Re-orientation and re-interpretation marked these changes for churches and for individual believers. Churches gained suddenly a respected position in the society, a position that they were deprived of during communism. But soon questions emerged that made Western partners cautious. For example, we often ran into unrealistic plans and dreams among our Eastern friends. The East European churches tried, as it seemed, to shoot too high! This was especially evident when it came to buildings and social projects. The plans that Slavic or Baltic church leaders described extended our wildest dreams. Some of these projects extended far too high the financial resources available. Leaders of the Nordic countries sat down on several occasions with leaders from the East to discuss the situation. Western message was: "Take one step at the time, build wisely in order to have resources to finish, think how you will maintain these projects in future, make joint efforts with others..." But some things people and organizations have to learn by their own mistakes... and this may be one of these things. No doubt, sometimes Nordic partners were too cautious, but sometimes they found out later that the advice they tried to give was good, perhaps even prophetic. Why did some churches try to shoot too high? It may be that being minority churches it was important for them to build huge worship buildings and seminaries as they wanted to show that they were not a sect. The all-importance of the message they were convinced they had was emphasized by the external elements, such as architecture. But from the groups that supported prosperity theology there also came an encouragement to "think big". One must admit that today the whole shooting-high-issue may seem quite irrelevant. But in those days it did influence our relationship with some of the leaders. Scandinavian Baptist leaders it sometimes felt that for Slavic or Baltic churches it was more interesting to keep contacts with those who encouraged big plans, and those who said "take it easy and think it through" were considered as "having too little faith". There was another risk that Nordic believers tried to point out to their Eastern partners. It was the risk that incoming money often had ties attached to it: sponsors assumed and sometimes openly

demanded that their ideas and influence would be give “green light”. Those who gave considerably also expected power and final word in decision making processes. It took some years, but the reaction came: in several Eastern countries believers took a critical stance towards outside groups that tried to dominate too much. This was a painful process.

4. The challenge of being a leader in a changing society

Being a leader in a changing society was not an easy task. There were challenges: to meet new opportunities; to find a place in wider society; to maintain integrity among political and ethical changes. Also financial and economic temptations posed a challenge. In some East European countries there were leaders who had created contacts with Western leaders and unions already during the Soviet times. As the iron curtain fell, some of them used these contacts to “start their own business”. This caused problems for some of our churches and for our union. In some cases we thought we were cooperating with a sister union but it turned out that it was a project of a single pastor or leader. In this paper this aspect is referred to not in order to dig deep into the problem itself, but to illustrate how difficult task is a good leadership. Some of these leaders who built their own projects instead of working for the benefit of the community of God were persons who had deep knowledge and who had been through rough times. They had acted wisely during the time of the cold war, and had diplomatic skills in relation to the political governments. And yet... there were unexpected temptations that led some of them astray when the society opened up. In further reflections in the light of Eastern and Western Baptist relationships there are areas that could be explored more thoroughly. What are the qualities of good leaders? How can church members and leaders be prepared for encountering rapid changes? Is leading in change similar in both East and West? What can we learn from our experiences from the past?

Conclusion

I have made an attempt to share some reflections on the period in the history of Europe which had a great impact on believers, no matter if they lived in the East or West. What can we learn from it? How can we use our experiences in order to continue to share our Christian faith in a way that is relevant to people of the East and West today? What conclusions we make? This is one of the crucial questions when looking back on the history of Swedish-Baltic Baptist relations, or in a broader sense – Eastern and Western Baptist partnerships, during the last sixty years.