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What is the West? An East European perspective

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Personal note

I grew up in Soviet Estonia, which was a part – as you well know – of the Soviet Union. „West“ for me, as for many other Eastern Europeans, including Eastern European Baptists, was a dreamland, an idealized and unreachable realm. People who by providence of God were lucky to be born and live there were happier, public space and streets were cleaner, information was more truthful and availability of goods almost without limits. Today, when I give this presentation, I realize that I have been disillusioned for many years. Personal happiness and satisfaction with life does not necessarily go together with western culture. Common good and sense of community is not always pursued in an individualistic society. Information can also be manipulated as well as fragmented in the West. And, last not least, consumerism can take greedy forms that limit not only single persons but both moral and economic, as well as financial realities.

A similar thinking existed also regarding church life and church contacts. From the perspective of an atheistic context, Eastern Europeans assumed that churches in the West were somehow in a privileged position. For an „Easterner“, it was easily taken for granted that better financial resources immediately brought along deeper commitment and spirituality, or availability of theological education, Christian publishing and theological systematic reflection automatically would lead to effective evangelism methods and pastoral care. Eastern European believers, at least Baptists in my country, initiated their own „gold rush of evangelism methods“. They copied or at least dreamed about the promising methods – personal evangelism, cell groups, some tried charismatic style worship and prayer ministry. What they did not always realise was the fact that together with looking up to western Christian style and methods they often missed their own task of contextualization. They also did not realise that they bought unnoticed, together with the package, an overemphasised trust in rational arguments, and a fundamentally wrong presumption that there is only one way for effective Christian witness.

Different interpretations of the „West“

In the most straightforward sense „Western Europe“ is a loose term for countries in the westernmost region of the European continent. However, it takes only a little effort to see that the story is not so simple: this term is context dependent and politically tinted.

Indeed, Western Europe can be understood as mainly a geographical region. But historically it was the Cold War that gave to this term political connotations and probably also wider circulation – the West meaning non-Communist countries, an ideology and system that was by Communist propaganda depicted as corrupt and dangerous. These countries and the worldview they represented was seen – at least in the the Soviet Union – as being in alliance with the USA. An oversimplification, as many other ideologically shaped positions, this view had a grain of truth, especially when we come to the third aspect of „the West“ – namely, cultural influences and identity. The so called „West“, representing comparatively free exchange of ideas, goods, and free travel for people, certainly was more apt to absorb the American optimistic culture, emphasising human opportunities, faith in progress and rational knowledge, and individualism. One should certainly remember that the optimism in human ability to make morally right decisions suffered a more serious blow in Europe than in America. Two devastating wars of the 20th century quickly diminished the credit of optimism.

The fourth aspect of the term „West“ can be understood by its religious context: countries with a mainly Orthodoxy or Eastern Christianity context would fall in the category of Eastern Europe, while countries in the context of Western Christianity – both Catholic and Protestant – would be considered primarily Western Europe. Even if there are some notable exceptions and the criteria is not and probably should not be absolutely clear (Poland – *sic!*) cultural and religious criteria seem to be more appropriate in interpreting the term than just geographical or historical-political criteria.

There are some historical events with long-term consequences that have shaped western minds and thought. All this has inevitably had an impact on the Western way of seeing the role of the Church, spirituality and beliefs, and Christian presence in society. The Reformation, both theologically as well as with its ties to Humanism, gave the green light to personal faith-struggles, personal faith – as evangelicals, including Baptists, have later described the phenomenon. The Renaissance – partly based on re-discovery of the classical age – added its share: artists searched for realism in depicting the human body and emotions, interest in science grew significantly, and shifts in education built a bridge from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo inspired the term „the Renaissance Man“. As the 17th century turned into the 18th century another cultural movement emerged – the Enlightenment, with the power of reason, was boldly making efforts to improve society, and fight intolerance, including intolerance in church and society. The logical – at least when evaluated from today’s viewpoint – further development led to the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century with seeds planted for secularism. The Western European story includes also the Counter-Enlightenment – the Era of Romanticism, in the 19th century, with its focus on emotions, back-to-nature-trends and search for an ideal society. One could add more ingredients in this „cultural salad“: the industrial revolution and the new rise to social work and mission in the 19th century, the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, as well as the craziness of violence – including the Northern Ireland and Balkan conflicts, and recent tragic events in Norway.

Some of these concepts were only partly or in changed form imported Eastward, such as into Russia. I hereby give only one example. Despite the fact that the Russian monarch Cathrine the Great in the 18th century was in correspondence with Voltaire and greatly admired Enlightenment arts, science and education, the Russian Enlightenment was very different from its Western European counterpart. It has been argued by some historians that in Russia the intellectual climate was changed totally, but the „Slavic form of Enlightenment“ focused on an individual enlightened life rather than on radical changes in the society. Very telling is the title „enlightened absolute monarch“ that sometimes is used regarding Catherine the Great of Russia. (Cf. recent arguments for a specific form of democracy in Russia which is called the Russian way of democracy.) This is not to say that the „westernisation“ of Peter the Great and Catherine did not bear fruit. It did. But there was little, in fact, practically no space for changes from below. Pugachov’s Rebellion was crushed violently – Pugachev himself, in 1775, was decapitated and quartered. Westernisation in Russia meant changes in economics, industry and legislation, the nobility’s imitation of western values and tastes including hairstyle, fashion and food, as well as more refinement of bureaucracy. However, it had much less influence on social structures. In addition, westernisation in Russia both in the 18th century and later, always gave fuel to Slavophilic tendencies, emphasising the uniqueness of Slavic culture, heating up national feelings.

Eastern European Baptists and Western European Baptists

Talking about European Baptist challenges, one has to admit that aspects of culture and spirituality between Eastern and Western Baptist traditions are not easily overcome, as might have been the wish some twenty years ago. Also, I would argue that the differences are not only on the conservative-liberal scale, as has been sometimes claimed. „Eastern believers are so conservative,“ say Baptists from the West. „Western Christians are so liberal,“ say Baptists from the East. These types of statements will not lead forward and – though offering a handy explanation – will lead nowhere. What I argue for is a more deliberate and systematic learning from each other’s identities and stories. Meeting „the other tradition“ will gradually lead to a better understanding of one’s own roots, instead of borrowing from an „alien tradition“ without evaluation, or condemning other ways of belief and practice outright. The fact is that while Western Baptists have been able to do more academically sound work in reflecting on their own tradition, however, they often pay little attention to the Eastern Baptist story. For example, „A Global Introduction to Baptist Churches“ (Robert E. Johnson) published by Cambridge University Press in 2010 uses only 4 or 5 pages out of 431 to tell the story of Slavic Baptists.

Eastern European believers – consciously or subconsciously – expect their story to be considered and known by their western partners, not least by those who devote their lives to research. There is much to do to improve the level of mutual awareness and dialogue and partnership. For decades Eastern European Baptists have received financial support from the West – and it was badly needed in the 1990s, and is partly needed even now. But this also involves the possibility that Western brothers and sisters are viewed not as partners but that Eastern congregations get satisfied with the position of always being on receiving end which means both they and their Western co-worshippers do not feel an equal status. Sometimes as a result Western organisations develop a patronizing attitude.

There is also a wider cultural and political aspect that tends to shape the relationships. Russian and Ukrainian countries have gone through an identity-crisis as to their position in the world. The Soviet Union was a superpower, indeed, sometimes though not polished according to western standards, perhaps acting like Russian bear, yet a serious power. According to some experts, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, together with economic collapse, was a humiliating experience for the slavic nations. And hence there is the need to prove that the Third Rome is still a serious „player“. Partly this is reflected also in church relationships between East and West. – The situation is not made better by different cultural concepts of respect and honour. The Western mind usually gives respect which is measured by achievement: you are respected because you have been successful or effective. The Byzantine, Eastern, approach is in many ways different. You are respected because you belong to some place – because you have a certain status or respectable history... And then, based on this „investment of respect“ cooperation may start growing.

This is only one example to illustrate my argument: both Western and Eastern European Baptists need to learn from each other's history and present day situations, both in order to understand each other better, to understand themselves better, to find mutually common grounds and overlapping identity, as well as to live and work in God's Kingdom admitting that some of their differences may be not solved. Differences are not always sinful or threatening.

East-West polarities

One way to follow the East-West dynamics in the Baptist search for identity, is to find some characteristics of identity, shaping and reflecting where Eastern and Western Baptists – if we still want to stick to this broad terminology – put their emphasis. The general cultural and religious background also influences the Baptist way of life in these areas. For Eastern European Baptist identity it is necessary to see the influence of the Orthodox context, and for Western European Baptist identity it is necessary to take into account the Protestant and/or Catholic context.

1. Different approaches to old and new. The attitude to the old, proven and traditional is in the Byzantine cultural sphere much more preferred, at least in religion. The West with its entrepreneurial approach – partly inherited from Protestantism – has been more open to reformations and renewals. There is inner optimism that change brings along with it something positive. In Eastern spirituality it is often in the contrary – there is inner pessimism that change brings along confusion and negative consequences. Patriarch Nikon's reforms in the Orthodox church in the 17th century caused a split: Old Believers refused to change and kept the „old ways“.

2. Different approaches to the alliance of power and church – and leadership styles. In Western culture and life the concept of separation of church and state is seen as part of present day reality: we have the French Revolution and its aftermath with criticism of church institutions, we have secularism which has led to this direction, we have the recent decision in Sweden to separate the Swedish (Lutheran) Church from the state. Baptists bring this idea even further due to their theology and tradition. In the Eastern world secular power and church have belonged together without question for centuries. Even if Baptists are a

marginalized group in many Eastern European countries and may not always be visible in state events or structures, they often share a more authoritative leadership style, less grassroots level involvement, and less listening to everybody's opinions. Eastern Europeans sometimes see democratic discussions that take a long time and seem to lead nowhere as anemic, powerless, futile. For Western people democratic – sometimes ineffectively democratic methods – mean expanding participation and better ownership of ideas.

3. Different approaches to the mystical and rational. Eastern European people, when compared to the Western Europeans, in general tend to be more religious and accept the mystical element in life in a more traditional Christian sense. For example, according to sociological research in Estonia, the Russian-speaking population in average believes in God more than the Estonian-speaking population. There is repeated evidence that allows one to say that Russian-speaking Estonian citizens are more religious than Estonian-speaking citizens – even if the segment of religious people as a whole is very small in the country. Some recent research by a Russian scholar Constantine Prokhorov focusing on Russian Baptist relations to Orthodox spirituality, shows interesting similarities and bridges of influence – for example, some stories of God's help for Baptist believers, bringing them out from difficult situations, resemble Orthodox legends. Also the way slavic Baptists talk about God resemble the Greek and Russian Orthodox apophatic way of talking about God – *via negativa*. Western rational theology rather talks about who God is – in a positive way. However, in Eastern tradition this is in itself already limiting the unlimited. A less rational, open-ended, mystical approach to God, faith, religious experience is characteristic of the Eastern approach, when compared to the positive or cataphatic approach that Western spirituality usually practices, sometimes with a danger of „explaining away“ the phenomenon it talks about.

4. Different approaches to individual and communal. Eastern European Baptist churches tend to practice a much more communal approach to spirituality and lived-out faith. Belonging to a community, and a sense of being a part of a wider structure which inspires and gives strength, is very much an integral part of Eastern European Baptist life. However, this is often an emotional experience of belonging, while Western believers rely more on agreements and formal decisions to belong to wider structures. Western Baptist spirituality tends to emphasise a personal relationship with God – also partly inherited from Protestantism – and in practice the experience of belonging is left to the individual believer to work out. In Eastern Baptist spirituality the community reaches out more easily to an individual to embrace him or her – through common meals, time spent together, hospitality, family ties and even by physical touch, such as the practice of the kiss of peace. Theologically this means that community tends to shape much more strongly – through primary theology – the faith and practice of a believer in Eastern Europe, while in the West the emphasis is on individual decision and personal solutions to faith issues.

Final comment

Miroslav Volf, speaking about the theological task in Europe, and coming himself from the Balkans (Croatia), is convinced that there is a demand for us „to place identity and otherness at the center of theological reflection on social realities“ (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 17). He says – and it seems to me that he is doing this rather from the Western viewpoint – that certainly also issues of social and economical justice, human rights and ecological well-being are not to be neglected – instead, all four issues should be seen in relation to each

other. The way he defines the problem seems to bear characteristics of Western theological thinking. However, Eastern European Baptists may need to slowly start probing into these issues, as the world becomes „smaller“, and differences between East and West may slowly become erased by the waves of time. Also, in addition, Western discussion partners and believers may need to become more aware of some of the issues that are part of the slavic, or Eastern European experience: for example, the Eastern European experience of Christian witness and difficult choices between discretion and valour (to use Trevor Beeson’s term) in a context hostile to committed Christianity. With secularism and moving towards post-Christian culture in some parts of Europe this experience might prove helpful. Also, Western as well as Eastern Christians may need to look more closely into issues of reconciliation – both reconciliation with past violence and injustices, as well as reconciliation in the sense of present needs in conflict resolution. There is much to learn from different identity-positions: but learning begins with more careful listening to the „other“, as well as with overcoming the inner anxiety that the other“ may disturb my own well established knowledge system. It will – but re-building my own understanding again after meeting an „alien“ – the „other“ – may prove to be an exercise worth undertaking.

Discussion

How has the use of the term „Western Europe“ changed during the last 20 years? To what extent is the language of Eastern and Western justified at all?

In what areas can Eastern and Western Baptists – if we still want to use this dichotomy for methodological reasons – learn from each other in their relations to society?