

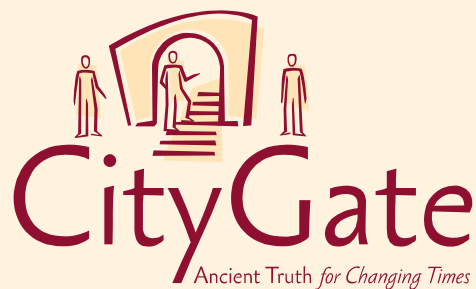
Young People in Postmodern Society

A survey of spirituality of the coming generation in post-communist Europe.

A CityGate Field Study

Written by

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CITYGATE EXISTS TO STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH BY HELPING PEOPLE
TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THE REALITY OF CHRIST AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Young People in Postmodern Society

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Written by

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This is the first edition of this paper. We would like to thank all who shared their experiences and helped us with their insight. We would appreciate all your comments and critique. They might help us to fill the gaps we left out and correct our unintended mistakes.

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Introduction

"Don't believe anybody over thirty." This was a well-known slogan of the beatnik generation in the 1960's. The younger generation was considered to be a source of hope for the future, a source of new power and creativity. Young people were supposed to be untouched by the weaknesses, compromise and lack of ability of their parents. They were supposed to be a clean or "blank" slate on which new and better rules and experiences would be written.

In spite of many disappointments and unfulfilled expectations, young people in Central and Eastern Europe were and still are considered to be guarantors of a new society following the fall of communism. Whether our perception of the generation of teenagers in our time is influenced by naive optimism or realistic skepticism, doesn't alter the fact that these particular people will imprint their own seal on our culture in the next decade.

In the case of the current high school and university generation in central Europe, something more is going on besides the normal so-called generation gap or generation conflict. This is the case because:

1. Current teenagers are the first generation in postcommunist Europe without their own experience of communism.
2. They are also the first generation to form its own attitudes to life in a prevailing postmodern culture.

Who are these young people? What are their dreams, aspirations and desires? What are their fears and what are their joys?

To what extent are the pessimistic fears of the older generation about "the end of the family", "the consumer generation" or about the loss of "traditional moral values" based on reality? Is it possible to communicate the meaning and values of Christianity to these people? Is it possible to communicate in such a way as to have the message be truly understood? How do these people actually perceive Christianity? Are they struggling with atheism and a "scientific worldview"--as their parents did?

Are young people in postcommunist Eastern Europe different from their West European peers?

The goal of CityGate is to demonstrate the values and meaning of historic, biblical Christianity within the culture of Central Europe. That is why we consider it extremely important to understand those who will form and influence this culture in the immediate future. That is also the main goal of this research paper.

The writing of this paper was preceded by several months of research. One major component consisted of a questionnaire to which there were 250 respondents - students of two high schools in Bratislava aged 16 to 18. Additionally, personal interviews with high school and university students in clubs and churches were conducted. The author also used the results of a religiosity survey in universities in Bratislava and drew from his own experiences as a high school teacher and lecturer.

The theme of this research paper, "Young People in Postmodern Society," is not meant to broaden academic knowledge of the cultural and sociological aspects of life of the younger generation. Its goal is to show a little bit of the world as seen by young people who have not experienced the existence of socialism and who live in postmodern society.

Of course, it is clear to us that for a real understanding, it is not enough to read a research paper, no matter how well-written it may be. For a real understanding you need to enter into real relationships with real people. If this paper inspires its readers to do just that, the goals of its authors will thereby be fulfilled.

2. Young People, Their Parents and Older Siblings

2.1. Change in Society

Those who are sixteen now were eight years old during the "Velvet Revolution". They don't have firsthand personal experience with the reality and thinking of the totalitarian regime behind the "iron curtain". On the contrary, they live in a democratic society. The invasion of Soviet troops and "normalization"¹ in the 1970's and 1980's is in the distant past for them. As distant as the Hungarian monarchy or czarist Russia in the 19th century.

They have never encountered communist state uniformity in which experience with foreign culture was limited to occasional shopping in a foreign currency shop and black and white newspaper commentaries from abroad. The world that was "not ours" seemed foreign, secret and unknown to us, such as a locked-up thirteenth chamber. Even neighboring Austria was unreachable. Beyond the barbed wire was another planet.

Since the opening of the borders in 1989, we are beginning to get used to a new reality together with the interconnection of various cultures. Our lifestyle today is very different than before. In an average Slovak home, we can see furniture bought in the Swedish shop IKEA, Italian spaghetti is served for lunch and the television is tuned to MTV or CNN. Young people are growing up in the midst of an information flood and their perception of reality is becoming more and more complex.

*"I turn on the TV and I know what is going on in Korea or in Australia, and in this I am taking on their problems, their language, their way of thinking. Nothing is too far away today and the nearest village could well be somewhere in Korea."*²

Clearly defined borders that used to give us a certain sense of security are gradually being wiped out. What we see is no longer simply "darkness and light," but unfocused dusk. Clear and transparent systems and structures are succeeded by formless shapes.

According to some of our respondents, their parents' youth was monochromatic and boring. According to others, it was almost idyllic. All respondents agreed that today it is much more difficult to find one's "place". Flats are about 20 times more expensive than before 1989, and for most young people, impossible to obtain. Social security from the past is lost - the right to work is now given only to those who are more aggressive and more competitive. The social uncertainty of parents is being felt also by their children who, from early childhood, learn how to settle themselves successfully. They do not believe that someone else could solve their problems. Family, state or God are not guarantors of security anymore.

"It was very different with regards to drugs, prostitution and criminality. Society was like a virgin."

"In the past, everybody got to go to school or to have work. Today, one can simply stay on the streets unemployed. It was much easier for our parents."

¹ "Normalization" was the official label for the twenty year period following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The idea was to bring society back to "normal", i.e. a rigid communist regime. More about the cultural and sociological aspects of "normalization" in Kušnierik, ěřel, *Shadows of the Past*, CityGate Research Paper, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1995. Please contact CityGate to order.

² If not specified otherwise, quotes are from the survey (personal interviews and questionnaires) for this research paper.

"In my opinion, the problem is that people are more sophisticated, but are unable to live with that."

According to our respondents, the main difference between them and their parents (who are now in their forties) is dynamism, sophistication, and bigger expectations. Attitudes and opinions of the older generations are perceived by young people as not belonging to these times. Young people often feel as if their parents cannot understand actual development in society because it is very fast and they do not have enough breath. Many of them do not respect older people as the authority that might show the way out. They perceive the experiences of their predecessors as something not applicable in a dynamically changing world. The past will not teach them anything because times have changed.

The shift in values:

Before	Now
Stability	Dynamism
Safety	Freedom
Forced collective solidarity	Natural tendency towards individualism
To be "like everybody else"	To be unique
Official celebration of work as such	Work seen as a tool to earn money, to develop a career
Time was not of much value	Time is money
Money (especially local currency) was of limited value since there was not much to buy	Money regained its prominent place as the general expression of all values

To really understand the depth of this change one should keep in mind the "atmosphere of life" in the 1970s and 1980s in Eastern European communist countries. We will illustrate this with several examples:

To get a pair of jeans one had to stand in a long queue in front of a "Tuzex"³ shop. They usually had one brand of jeans and for a high price (sometimes up to ten times the price of "normal" trousers available in "normal" shops). So wearing jeans became a sign of a real commitment to follow the "Western fashion".

The only way to get current rock, pop or jazz albums was to bring them from abroad. Austrian TV and Radio Luxemburg were the main ways to keep up-to-date in this field. Having a collection of LPs was a matter of great prestige.

To travel anywhere except Hungary and East Germany one needed about a dozen various permissions and statements from organizations such as the regional police department, school committee of the Socialist Union of Youth, or military district headquarters. Any of these "authorities" could say "no" without giving a specific reason.

Current advertising plays on the attitude that anything from "the West" was better. A clear example are billboards and electric trams painted in bright red and white, boldly challenging the reader to "Test the West". "West", in this case is a cigarette brand.

The new situation in society is understood by some as a challenge to wrestle and fight to get all you can out of life. Others do not feel adequately prepared for this struggle which is the source of their frustration and apathy.

³ Tuzex were special shops with imported Western goods. Only foreign, "hard" currency was accepted there.

"Sometimes I feel like a failure. They are telling me that when they were young, they did not have so many opportunities, so I have to take advantage of every possibility. But I am terrified by the choices and that is when I feel like a coward."

"In the past people were obsessed by the desire to experience the West and they saw life through rose-colored glasses. We are not dreaming anymore. We see reality as it is. We swim with it and our parents are shocked because they don't understand it."

Besides stress and the sense of hurriedness, the responses of our students often point to an awareness of a shift in conventions and ethics of society.

"Morality was let loose. It is as if you can hear a silent command from every side, 'Do what you want!'"

Some welcome this new freedom; others are afraid of it. This impression of fear is strengthened by the threat of growing criminality. These young people see drug dealers selling drugs in front of their homes, or groups of 15- or 16-year old youngsters who express support of the skinhead movement by wearing chains and carrying baseball bats. I see my students, who are otherwise very polite high school students, coming to school in chains so they can defend their right to have longer "anarchistic" hair.

What gives our respondents a feeling of security? What do they perceive as the solid foundation on which they can build? What network of relationships do they live in? How do they perceive reality and what they consider to be true? What gives meaning to their lives?

The paradigm shift in attitudes to public life:

Before	Now
One-Party system	Parliamentary democracy
All-pervasive ideology	All "public truths" are relative
Distrust in public institutions	Contempt for anything institutionalized
Classless society as the official ideal	Financial "upward mobility" as a shared dream
History understood as inevitable progress (towards communism)	History as a source of various incompatible myths used as tools in political power games
Public sphere seen as an area to avoid	Public sphere seen as an area for realizing one's ambitions
Closed borders	Freedom to travel anywhere in the world
Controlled and censored information	Free, unlimited flow of information
The goal of education: proper functioning in the system	Education more and more aimed at development of authentic personality
General fear of police and other coercive institutions	Contempt for coercive institutions
Half empty shops offering mostly basic goods	Consumer-friendly stores with competitive products
No private business	Doing business is normal part of life for the majority of the population
Making money seen as something inevitably connected with political connections and bribery	Making money could sometimes (but not often) be a result of honest work and smart decisions
Collectivism	Individualism
"Economic usefulness" of education was not high	"Economic usefulness" of education is very high

Political patronage (i.e. having close relatives high enough in the Communist Party) was usually necessary for one's professional career	Skills and money are decisive factors in one's career development
--	---

2.2. Family

The traditional Central European Catholic model of the extended family seems to be changing. The center of the family is moving from the kitchen as a symbolic center to work corners where members of the family function with their computers in undisturbed privacy - fathers, in order to solve their business problems, and sons, in order to insulate themselves in the world of computer games. The only communication media is often television, but in front of the set, profound discussions are actually disturbed. Forty cable TV channels in larger Slovak cities are too big a temptation - especially in contrast to boring state television under the communist regime.

Although in 1996 in Slovakia, 7,800 children, that is, 13.3% , were born outside of wedlock, this figure did not indicate a significant shift in the minds of Slovak citizens, according to sociologists. The model of a classic or traditional family, according to a survey of the Research Institute for Social Matters and Family, is still the highest value for more than 80% of Slovak citizens.

What does family mean for current high school students?

2.2.1. Parents and Children

During ethics classes in school, we talked about life roles and values that the students rate of highest importance. They were given five pieces of paper and were asked to write down the roles which they are now filling and roles which are very dear to them. When they filled out the papers, they were supposed to rank them according to importance. They were then supposed to throw these papers away, one after another. The one that they kept the longest, represented their most valued role. At the end, they were to choose between two models of identity: the first proving that they do not subscribe eternal value to the characteristic written on their last piece of paper and that it is not difficult for them to toss away even that last piece of paper, or the second, that they would like to keep the last piece of paper to represent their core identity.

Most of them chose as their model current role son or daughter. I was watching a 16-year old rough skinhead who was wrestling with throwing away or keeping his sonhood. He pondered the issue for about five minutes and was close to crying, but in the end he kept the paper.

When others asked him why, he refused to answer.

The high divorce rate⁴ combined with the weakening of the protective and educational functions of family, the loss of trust in the permanency of family, the fragmentation of family life and the isolation of its members in the privacy of their own worlds all make a deep impression upon children. In spite of the change of traditions with which they are growing up today, the need for motherly and fatherly love and the desire for a solid family background are as strong as ever. Still, as shown by the respondents of our questionnaire, children, either consciously or subconsciously, are following the pattern of their parents, or eventually their older brothers and sisters. Approximately 30% of our respondents agreed with the idea that they are influenced most by their closest relatives:

"I was influenced most by my father. He has always dealt with me as a friend and he does not blame me for my failures. He wants me to be a wise and smart young man and I am thankful to him for that. I hope he gets his wish. He is trying hard!"

"My hero is my mother. We often talk about things such as alcohol, drugs and sex. I think I wouldn't do anything that she would not like."

"My mother is a peacemaker, but also very ambitious. She wants to fulfill her dreams and desires. She doesn't not do anything wrong to anybody, but she is able to benefit from the mistakes. She is very successful; she has many friends and she is not afraid of anyone."

Fathers and mothers are perceived by their children as their personal heroes. They appreciate their honesty and authenticity. They are very quick to find out if they are just playing the role of teachers or educators and their natural, although well-intentioned, attempts to educate them, are perceived as empty moralizing. Insufficient openness or a strict attitude towards their children often create lack of trust, anxiety and even inferiority complexes in them.

"When my parents were young, they attended parties, they drank, they smoked, and even tried smoking marijuana (my grandmother told me so). But they tell me that they always stayed at home and were studying. They probably want to paint an exemplary picture for me."

"My mother never liked discos, so neither should I. When I don't have the best marks in school, my father gets angry, but he himself was far less smart than I."

"My parents underestimate me and do not believe that I would be able to study at the university. But I believe in myself, and I want to be great!"

Nothing has changed in that children appreciate friendly trusting relationships with their parents. They do not like it when they are underestimated and measured only by their school results and their ability to be competitive. They want to be children who are loved and want to feel that they are accepted by their parents.

2.2.2. Attitudes Towards Marriage

Our respondents have their own personal experiences in the role of son, daughter, brother or sister. They understand parenthood and marriage from the pattern or example of their own

⁴ In the divorce rate as well as in the case of other characteristics of modernity there is a great difference between the situation of big cities on one hand and small towns and villages on the other. The divorce rate in Slovakia is, according to Slovak Statistical Yearbook, 1..52 per 1,000 inhabitants, while in Bratislava it is 2.5 per 1,000 inhabitants (which is still bellow the divorce rate in the UK – 2.92 per 1,000). The rural element is - in countries such as Slovakia, Poland or Hungary - much stronger than in most of Western Europe.

parents. Their idea of life in marriage is based mainly on what they observe in their own family.

The responses in our questionnaire show that the traditional understanding of the role of the family as a very important part of life is still very common among high school youth:

"My life has to have sense, and children are the sense of my life."

"I want to have two beautiful children whom I will try to educate as best as I can-- that means I would be a good mother and good friend to them."

The answers we got most often give the impression that our respondents are losing trust in the institution of family. Respondents talk about their fear of marriage. This attitude has several causes.

1. The bad relationships of their parents and their fear that they may end up likewise:

"I am afraid that I will marry one day. I don't want to end up like my parents who say that if they could do it again, they would marry someone else. To live with somebody - yes, but to be bound in official marriage - no."

" My parents are not monsters, but I don't want to be like them."

2. They are afraid of responsibility which they understand as the opposite of freedom and independence - the very values by which they are fascinated. Life is change, and to bind oneself is a thing of the past:

"I don't want to be bound in any case. Neither to children nor to my wife. I would not be able to handle that responsibility. And I am afraid if I were to get married, I would stop loving my wife soon. She would become too familiar to me."

"I don't want to marry and I don't want to have children. Of course I want to live with a man, and if we would really love each other, then it would be all the same whether or not we have papers. I don't want children, because in such a situation, they would not be growing up in a real family. Also I don't want them because of the corrupt world around us."

3. The institution of marriage is connected with a stereotypical and boring life. Our respondents were asked to answer a question about what are they most afraid. Right after their own death, they answered "*stereotype and boredom with family life*".

"I am frightened by stereotype. I get up in the morning at 6:00 and by 7:00 I am at work. In my office I sit and write letters. Then I have lunch. Exactly at 4:00 p.m. I am at home. I spend the evening with my family in front of the television watching Dallas."

"I am afraid a binding relationship with someone for whom I don't feel anything anymore. That would be alienation, evening TV, an apathetic family, fighting with the children, newspapers, knitting, boredom in sex as well as in general... Limitations and only the words, 'You must' and 'You must not'."

Transcending these fears, there is still a strong desire for love, a fear of loneliness and a need for a close person. Young people try to find fulfillment of these dreams and desires in alternative models, among which the most common seems to be the free relationship of two individuals who do not wish to demonstrate their relationship publicly by having an official

wedding in the church or city hall⁵. They understand the act of marriage as a mere formality. They feel that a 'free relationship' gives them more freedom and opens a back door of escape, or that they do not have the social background for setting up a proper family.

Many answers to our questionnaire show a negative attitude towards marriage. Some of our respondents said that they intend to wait for the right time to set up a family, which means when they are about thirty. Before that, they would like to build up their career and taste life.

"I don't want to live as most women in their twenties and thirties. First I would like to graduate from the university, travel a lot, have a career, and then only later, when I have the desire to live a peaceful family life, I would like to marry and have children."

"I don't want to marry at all. I think that I will be glad about this when I am about thirty. I am afraid that I might marry when I am 18 and that I would become a servant to my husband - cook and wash for him and raise his children, but I would not be able to do it."

2.2.3. Love and Sex

Along with families, love is another important value. The ideas of our respondents about love are very broad—from love as an undefined feeling to sex as love's exclusive expression. Similarly, as in the case of family, freedom and independence is highly appreciated. Love must not imprison. These youth need to live with an awareness that they can leave a relationship at anytime, and that there are always several alternatives. They are afraid that a binding relationship would damage real love and they will be in a position of deadlock.

"My greatest dream is to have a house in a quiet district somewhere on a hill and live there with a friend, but not be married. I want to be free and also to have many animals around."

"I don't want to marry the wrong person and have an unhappy marriage. I have a fear that I will remain single, without family and love--that I will be an unsuccessful woman."

Love and sexuality are, of course, a big part of the thought of high school students. Love is often understood as a feeling. "Feeling" was the most common word in the questionnaires, especially in connection with relationships. The respondents expect that their partner will give meaning to their lives, new quality and redemption from their loneliness:

"It is said that it is better to be loved than to love. But I think that is not true. If you love, you feel a certain fulfillment."

"I want to be loved and to love. In order to exist I need somebody who loves me."

"One feels more secure when he knows that somebody loves him, understands him and takes him as he is."

Some young people dream of great love, about emotional fulfillment. Others, though, connect with the "consumer idea", that is, with upward mobility and proximity to beautiful women:

⁵ Up until 1990, official wedding ceremonies took place only in a city hall. This was called a "civil wedding". Christian couples then had a "church wedding" as well.

"I would like to marry a beautiful, brunette, 3 years younger and with a beautiful body. I would be a successful lawyer and owner of a huge villa with a swimming pool, sauna and garage with two Mercedes."

"When I wake up in the morning, my beautiful wife would bring me my breakfast to bed. After eating, I would get up and go to the office. Then I would come home to where my beautiful wife awaits me with lunch. I would rest and in the evening we would go out together. We would have dinner in a restaurant then come home to our perfect home in America, watch some television then go to bed."

The communist ideology, in a sense, conserved the society. The sexual revolution that swept through Western Europe comes to us through external expressions some twenty years later. The new wave finds support, especially from young people who want to rebel against a too narrow understanding of sexuality. Many taboos are being lifted. Young people want to live a full, free and independent life.

Some statistical data also points to the changing climate of society. Those who enter into marriage without any sexual experience feel almost handicapped nowadays. According to a survey in the Czech Republic, less than 3% of the population enter marriage as virgins. Although Slovakia is a much more traditionally religious country, the percentage would probably not be very different.

An accompanying sign of the changing situation is the essential nature of mass culture and the pushiness of advertisements⁶ that use sex to package a product so that it will sell better.

The change in attitudes to family:

Before	Now
Extended family as a protection from politicized world outside	Family as a barrier to a successful business or political carrier
Stronger family ties	Looser family ties
Children became independent from their parents only in their late twenties	Children becoming independent much earlier – sometimes in their late teens
Low geographic mobility between generations, i.e. children living with their parents and grandparents	High geographic mobility, fewer extended families live together
Low upward mobility	Higher upward mobility
Sex was a taboo	Sex is not taboo and almost anything goes

⁶ The advertisement industry did not exist in communist Europe. Colourful, eye-catching advertisements were the most visible symbols of the desired “capitalist” world.

2.3. Summary

1. *The family is still important.* A great majority of young people understand family as an important part of their lives. Relationships in the family are still considered to be a source of security, safety and acceptance. Even if it might sound naive, we have to say that most current teenagers, in spite of strong merciless criticism, "respect their parents" and for many of them parents are the main role models in life.
2. *Experience leads to caution.* In spite of generally positive evaluations of family, the experience of family life is not very convincing. Observing their own family life leads many young people to caution bordering with skepticism concerning family life. Only a minority of our respondents have realistic ideas about family relationships. Realistic evaluations about family relationships are usually colored by the cynicism typical of our time.
3. *Problematic institution of marriage.* "Traditional" marriage (that is officially sanctioned in a church or a city hall) is trusted only by a few young people. They cannot see any meaning or purpose in it. On the contrary, it is seen as a threat to an authentic, deep relationship between a man and a woman. By rejecting the "institutionalization" of marriage, they want to avoid the stereotype they observed in their parents and other families.
4. *Sex is no longer taboo.* That which was shocking several years ago is today, especially for the younger generation, considered to be normal. The boundary of plausibility in the area of sex and erotica in the minds (and hearts) of young people shifted significantly. Homosexuality is also mentioned more often.

3. Relationships and Communication

Let us now look at the types of communities young people in postcommunist Central Europe tend to create and how they communicate within them. There is a difference between their generation and the generation of their parents. They live in a time and culture influenced by the disintegration of the former collective way of life and social ties, which is also connected with the growth of individualism. We will again encounter similarities between youth culture in the East and the West. This should not surprise us in this time of globalization. And we will - again - see shocking differences between the postmodern world of current teenagers and the socialist world that fell apart only few years ago.

Before November 1989, people were organized into various associations⁷, which on the one hand limited them and led them to uniformity. On the other hand, though, they conveyed a sense of security and a sense of belonging together. May Day demonstrations, in spite of their content, created a holiday atmosphere and, in a secular way, were a sort of pilgrimage. After the May Day events, we could go to a park and buy very cheap beer. Some high school students feel that the older generation had better conditions for communal life. They have a tendency even to idealize the past and life under the former regime:

"I think that my parents had a good experience, more fun. There were various associations and organisations. Everything was well organised. For example, with the Socialist Union of Youth, young people went to volunteer work brigades and they had better community in their classes."

"Housing districts were not so monstrous at that time. I am not so interested in sports. I very rarely attend public entertainment. Most of the time I spend with my computer."

The feeling of loneliness and isolation is more intense after the fall of the "all-encompassing" state. Many young people feel a strong need to become a member of a group.

3.1. Community

The need to step out of the loneliness and to become a part of a group of similar people is very typical of the teenage years. Their groups have various characteristics. To illustrate, I will mention two outstanding examples with which I am daily confronted:

- *UFO fans.* This group consists of boys of about fifteen who are joined by common symbols and rituals of common "esoteric initiation" in the high school where I teach. They are strongly influenced by "UFO" television series and conspiratorial stories, such as *The X-Files*. One of the most expressive outside marks of the group is their encoded language which is not understood by others. They write secret messages on the blackboard. Their language system is being perfected continually. During the breaks between classes they talk only in their secret language. Sometimes they use this "UFO language" even in their written assignments, which is a problem since the teachers cannot understand it. Membership in this group is, for them, the most important part of their identity.

⁷ Everything had to be institutionalised in "socialist" society. Any informal group of people - even as banal as a group of boys meeting regularly to play football - was suspicious. Every collective activity had to be under the roof of a registered institution, usually the Socialist Union of Youth, or a trade union. Otherwise it would be "illegal".

- *Hippie legacy.* This group can be recognised by radical dress, hairstyle and unconventional behaviour. It is as exclusive as in the first group, except that here the coded language is replaced by their own understanding of uniqueness. One member of this group, with his red dyed hair, is constantly in conflict with teachers whom he perceives as "guards of morals and order." There is a strong elitist feeling in this group. Some students would like to become members, but they know they have no chance - they lack that type of courage and uniqueness which is necessary for membership. They are not "crazy" enough and so not worthy of the group.

What do these examples signify and what needs do they reflect? Young people desire a community that will accept them as they are and will not try to manipulate them forcefully. They also have a strong resistance against outside authority and a strong desire for equality, which, in a certain manner, they experience in their group.

This stands out in comparison with the previous generation of teenagers, i.e. those, who are about 30 now. Although they did not love the authorities either, they had to suppress expressions of rebellion. Long hair was enough to cause insurmountable problems in school, listening to rock music was sometimes understood to be a political act⁸, and as such very dangerous.

Communities are connected with communication, which is their primary goal. Young people long for open relationships in which they meet as one human being with another human being, and in which they can lay aside the masks of their life roles.

"I am afraid not to have friends. I am afraid of being 'uninteresting' and rejected."

"I was influenced by the hippie movement, especially with idea of freedom, equality and brotherhood since all people are equal in spite of race, creed or opinions."

"My attitudes have recently changed significantly. My friends became independent anarchists and I am to a certain degree afraid of that (alcohol, grass,...). But some of their opinions are right, and that's why it's hard for me to decide."

Belonging to a peer group goes deeper than one's hobbies and interests. It is connected not only with the question *What do I like?*, but primarily with the question *Who am I?*. It is connected with one's identity.

3.2. Identity⁹

The times have changed and people are no longer being ideologically, forcefully organized. Young people nevertheless experience a strange paradox: they want to belong to a larger group, but at the same time they want to leave the group and be unique. One of our respondents expressed it for all of them:

"I don't know who I am when I am similar to others."

As a sign of protest and an expression of uniqueness, they wear weird clothes, but tend to forget that every member of their group makes the very same statement. In an attempt to escape anonymity, they long for glory, for fame, and for power through which they could become "eternal."

⁸ Rock concerts were often places of real political dissent in communist Czechoslovakia and Poland.

⁹ In the Central European region, identity is most often connected with belonging to a nation - "national identity". Personal identity goes much deeper than this.

"I dream that I will be very famous. Everybody will know who I am when my name is mentioned."

"I would like to govern the country and care for it."

"I would like to have at least one more human sense than anybody else - to have something that nobody else in the world has. When I think about what that would mean, for example to see through walls or to walk through them, it would not take long before I would be the ruler of the world."

Young people often think about themselves and try to come to terms with their internal as well as external limitations:

"I think about what I will be in the future.... What do girls think about me? And I think about whether extraterrestrial civilization exists."

"I wonder if other people are satisfied with how they live and why I am not satisfied. Why don't I have more friends? Why don't I have better marks in school? Wouldn't it be better just to ignore everything else and live just for myself? Maybe not. But why, then, is everybody so satisfied and I am not?"

By thinking about their identity, they are often aware of the tension between their self-image and reality. They think about how they are perceived by others; they compare themselves with others. They evaluate themselves according to criteria which they see in their environment. Consciously or subconsciously, based on these criteria, they start to see some other person as a hero, worth imitating.

3.3. Heroes

Results of our questionnaire show something about heroes in society as well as of heroes of the younger generation. Most of our respondents feel they cannot identify with what they see as the prevailing culture in broader society. They want to follow "the alternative":

"I was influenced especially by the philosophy of Hip-Hop¹⁰ - real Hip-Hop, not commercial. It is against drugs, violence and prostitution. I was also influenced by the ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi. My friends led me to these heroes."

"Those whom I see daily in magazines and on television are not heroes, but empty masks. My hero is Jesus Christ."

"My pattern is a person who has succeeded in life, and besides maintaining a career, has a family. I appreciate handicapped people who can live in this world in spite of their handicaps."

"If I knew my idols better, I would probably start to hate them. I admire Joan of Arc and also Jesus Christ Superstar. All these were real people, not supernatural beings made up by the church. I was very influenced by them. I was also influenced by hippies and by a return to a simpler lifestyle."

Each of the respondents wanted to be "different" and looked down on the cheap banality and shallowness of action heroes (Schwarzenegger, Van Damme, etc.). According to their responses, they tend to accept a real, existing person as it is not so difficult to identify with

¹⁰ Hip-Hop is a style of American dance music. It is a fusion of reggae and rap. The most well-known hip-hop band is *Public Enemy*.

them. They prefer normal people who can live normal lives within normal relationships - neither Superman nor God. Their hero should be "...*intelligent but not immortal.*"

They often defend themselves against the idea that something or somebody could influence them. They place their own uniqueness at a high level. Their heroes should be similar:

"I meet with a group of people who are musicians from the underground music scene, or I meet with various enemies of the Christian faith. They are my heroes."

"Vaclav Havel is my hero because of his humanism."

There are two contradictory dreams, expressed in two very different ideal heroes of the younger generation. These could be called "Independent Idealist" and "Smart Pragmatist"¹¹.

- *Independent Idealist.* He is a rebel who lives outside all common conventions. Attitudes of rebellion and independent individuality are his main characteristics. These features are common to otherwise contradictory heroes. The student who defined himself as "anti-Christ" and whose heroes are those who reject the Christian faith, and at the same time admires the movie Jesus Christ Superstar, Martin Luther King and Ghandi. They are the ones who follow their dreams, who "don't look back".

"Everybody should be himself or herself primarily and not follow anybody else."

"My hero is a perfect guitarist who every now and then smokes a joint, who does what he wants, and has unique opinions about life."

- *Smart Pragmatist.* He is characterised by purposefulness, goal orientation and the ability to solve complex problems and complicated situations. He not only dreams his dreams. He is able to make them happen.

"I was probably influenced by the knowledge of the tremendous power of money."

"I admire balanced people who are never stressed and never take problems seriously. I like it when they can completely forget the past. I think in the past all the time, and from that problems arise."

Generally we can say that pragmatism wins over romantic ideas.¹² The tension nevertheless still exists. One can find – especially in bigger cities – teenagers with colorful hair, nose rings and dreadlocks, whose schoolmates have their own businesses and make more money than their parents.

3.4. Technological and Information Boom--A Loss of Personal Communication

The role of tradition in Central European societies is much greater than in the West. Families of several generations very often lived together in the same house. Children were supposed to

¹¹ It is interesting to note that these two types very well reflect the strong tension of life in a postcommunist society. On the one hand there are no limits for idealistic concepts, for developing new and re-discovering old ideas and ideologies (the idea of nationalism is the best example). On the other hand one has to learn to be smart, to rely only on oneself, to outsmart others.

¹² It is not such a big surprise that many of the respondents mentioned Bill Gates among their heroes.

follow in the steps of their parents – i.e. to live in the same town, keep their little garden, develop the same social relations, sometimes the same profession.

Technological development, together with political and social changes¹³ strongly disrupts this traditional way of life. Students live in spheres which are by and large unavailable to their parents, including new technology and programs. This damages to a certain extent the traditional mode of passing experiences from one generation to another, and in this sense, parents are losing their natural authority.

The term that probably best expresses this shift is "complexity" – as opposed to the relative simplicity of life under communism. The world is not as simple as it used to be. The former world, according to the students, is reminiscent of a "...*simple, almost clean virgin*". Those who spent the better part of their lives in that world are perceived as nice people who are "...*outside the picture*". They are flooded with information. The previous one or two television channels are replaced by cable TV¹⁴ and grayness is replaced by the rich colors of advertisements.

This change has its **positive** side. Young people have a much broader overview and, thanks to easy access to information, the differences between cities and smaller towns and rural areas are being diffused.

A **negative** effect of the technological and information boom is reflected in the continual loss of personal communication. Society is being fragmented into very small, private worlds. Public concerts are less well attended because one can listen to high quality music at home. It is similar with public lectures, theaters and cinemas¹⁵. Contemporary youth are bombarded at every step by the influence of advertising which successfully helps erase the distinctions between fiction and reality.

Almost overnight the personal computer became an icon of the contemporary student. Many students spend much of their free time with their PCs and their thoughts are busy with programs and games.

"I dream of the perfect computer with perfect games."

"I put my hope into the development of science and computer graphics. I would like to be involved only in that."

Our respondents have various expectations from computers - from fulfillment of their personal desire for good entertainment and adventure to solving the major problems of mankind.

¹³ The most significant social change is the real possibility of the Western style of "upward mobility", creating a growing group of newly rich. This group obviously consists mostly of dynamic, entrepreneurial young people.

¹⁴ Most of the households in Bratislava and other major Central European cities have about 40 cable channels (including MTV, BBC, CNN, RTL and many other European channels) for a low subscription.

¹⁵ The exception is a massively advertised Hollywood production which is – as everywhere in the world – usually a box office success.

3.5. Summary

1. *The power of exclusive community.* The current younger generation sees great purpose in radically and culturally exclusive communities. Especially in urban areas, these communities (skinheads, anarchists, environmentalists, etc.) are defined by common, often very radical, attitudes, common tastes and lifestyles. The members of these groups are connected by deep personal relationships and a strong feeling of exclusiveness.
2. *The importance of uniqueness and fear of the gray future.* To be different from the monotonous and conformity of other people is one of the common but important characteristics of the generation of our respondents. It is seen not only in their lifestyles, but also in their dreams, goals and desires. It is a certain counterbalance to the group identity. To be considered "crazy" is a compliment while not to be different from others is an expression of weakness.
3. *Pragmatism.* Pragmatism - philosophical as well as practical - is a special though not surprising characteristic of the younger generation. It is not only the opposite of idealism, but is more often an ability to survive in spite of idealism. Life is viewed with a cynical detachment. Ethical principles are considered to be unrealistic. The main value is success, which is easily measured by one's bank account balance.
4. *Technology of impersonal communication.* Until recently, the most popular instrument of media for young people was television. Recently, though television was pushed out by the easily accessible computer with access to the Internet. In larger cities there is an Internet cafe attended mostly by young people. They go there to talk—not with those who sit at the next table, but with anonymous persons in virtual reality. Since it is a new phenomenon it is difficult to access its effect on the quality of communication relationships.

4. Truth and Reality

The collapse of communist ideology as “the only Truth and the only Way to Truth” put a question mark behind any notion of “objective truth”. Young people living in postcommunist societies are especially suspicious, even allergic, to whatever feels like an ideological system. They want to have (and keep) the freedom to choose, to doubt, to create their own “small truths”. They do not want to be told what is the Way and the Truth. What was once perceived as unquestionable, indubitable, “objective” truth, is considered a “language game”, an “oppressive rationalism”.

Truth is no longer about objectivity. The essential role is filled by subjective interpretation. This feature is expressed in the thoughts of high school graduates:

"Look for example at our teacher. She is a simple woman. She asks students a question. He says something and she says that it is wrong. But I ask myself, 'How can she say that it is wrong?' What if it is completely different and mathematics, physic, etc. are just a lottery?"

"I have a theory according to which the whole of life I am experiencing is just a dream. Everything that is happening is only in my dream. One day when I die, I will somehow wake up and a completely new life will begin."

"I would like to live in subconsciousness because consciousness is hiding the unknown from us."

We will now look at several ways of perception of reality as we observed them among high school and university students. We have to start with ways of escaping reality, which is so common in the coming urban generation.

4.1. Virtual Reality and Escape

"I am dreaming a dream in which I am better. I do everything so that everything I desire will be fulfilled. But that is only a dream. Otherwise I am not able to do anything. And that makes me angry!"

Advertising entered our reality. It offers fiction as a lifestyle. The singer Madonna by continual permanent change of her image became a symbol of a time that has lost its center. Reality is more and more often understood as that which a person creates in his own mind. Images tend to have the same value as reality.

A teenager, keeping herself “up” in virtual reality with the help of a very loud walkman, sees life around her as a film.

A boy in love with an unknown person with whom he communicates via the Internet feels no need to meet her (or him?) in person.

These are not exceptions.

What is the reason so many people reject living in the here and now? What are the reasons for isolating themselves in the world of their ideas or images? Why do more and more young people seek self-destructive forms of escape?

4.2. Drug Addiction

In April 1995 a survey was conducted in nine high schools in Bratislava. The results are as follows: marijuana, or hash, had been tried at least one time by 27% of the boys and 15% of the girls. Toluene had been tried by 9% of the boys and 6% of the girls. Sedatives had been tried by 6% of the boys and 8% of the girls. Heroin had been tried by 5% of the boys and 1% of the girls. LSD and hallucinogens had been tried by 3% of the boys and 0.5% of the girls.

A surprisingly high percentage¹⁶ of high school students had experimented with drugs, not only "soft" drugs such as marijuana and hash, but also "hard" drugs such as heroin. There is a prevailing attitude among students that using so-called soft drugs does not lead to addiction. *"An intelligent person will not follow marijuana with harder drugs"* and therefore will not become addicted to it. Expert literature does not support that, however. Regular and frequent drug taking can lead to *"...anxious or depressed state of mind. Dependency, so far as we can define it with these substances, is usually psychological. These drugs are considered to be so-called entry drugs, which lead to taking harder drugs."*¹⁷

The spectrum of those who take drugs is very broad. It starts on one end with emotionally deprived children: their parents are alcoholics, their family situation is bad or they simply do not get emotional support and attachments. On the other end of the scale are children from "good families" whose material needs are provided in every way, yet they are not immune to the temptation of drugs.

In our questionnaire we asked the students how they would explain the current high degree of popularity and attractiveness of drugs and further, whether they had had a personal experience with drugs. According to them, the reason for such great interest in drugs is curiosity, a desire to break through their own personal limitations, to experience adventure or an attempt to be accepted in a group.

"It is really trash, but I would like to try [drugs] at least once."

"I never tried anything, but I would like to some day - to leave this world and myself, even if the cost would be death."

"I had marijuana, but it was too weak. It didn't do anything for me, and probably it was the same for the others, but all of us were running around and pretending we had hallucinations. When I became aware of that, I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Since that time, I have never participated in such 'trips'."

Most of the respondents reject drugs and those who take them. They see such people as unfortunate, pitiable or weak people unable to cope with life. The group of drug rejecters places high value on their health and internal independence, and believe those would be threatened by drugs:

"I haven't taken drugs yet, but I am able to relax without them as well. I think a well-balanced person never takes drugs."

¹⁶ This percentage is "surprisingly high" for a postcommunist Central European country, where drug addiction on such a scale was practically unknown before 1989. During the 1980's drugs were perceived as something belonging to marginal subcultures, now they are a part of mainline urban youth culture.

¹⁷ From a personal interview with Mr. Martin Murár, psychologist with a drug counseling center in Bratislava.

"I am afraid of what would happen if I took drugs. I don't want to be dependent on anybody or anything; I want to run my own life. I have enough problems without drugs."

Respondents with a positive view of drugs appreciate primarily the opportunity of entry into an imaginary world where they can broaden their flat, mechanical reality. According to them, it is impossible to translate these drug experiences into words, and those who have not tried it for themselves have no right or reason to talk about it because they are divided by a gap - they are outsiders.

"I tried marijuana, hash, LSD, heroin... Why? Because one is curious and you can learn only from your own mistakes."

"Drugs divide students into two groups - those who have and those who haven't, and between them there is a gap. Those who have crossed the gap, and those who have not know next to nothing about it."

"I first had marijuana with a friend of mine. I was a little bit afraid. I took hash because of boredom and naivete. I feel that I cannot get farther, although I can see clearly that I am moving my own boundaries. Each deals with existential hopelessness and emptiness in his own way."

Some think that "soft" drugs belong to "normal" entertainment much as a glass of wine or a cigarette. They say that compared with alcohol, drugs are less damaging and less dangerous:

"I smoke grass and I am alive. It is better than alcohol because when I am high I never do anyone any harm."

"I sell marijuana, not on a large scale, but only occasionally, in discos. It is not addictive. I have also smoked heroin about five or six times."

4.2.1. Accessibility of Drugs and Drug Prevention

"If I would like to, I could get drugs in 10 or 15 minutes."

"You can get it anywhere on the streets, in clubs, at concerts. Several times I was offered drugs in front of our house."

These are statements of high school students from the largest city in Slovakia. In the countryside and small towns the availability of drugs is not so great. But this is changing. It is very easy today to get any drug--almost as easy as it is to buy bread in the shop.

All of Slovakia is threatened by the huge expansion of the drug market. Several groups in society from top government officials to small citizens' initiatives try to solve this problem, or at least alleviate it. Their activities, primarily in the area of prevention, are focused mainly on elementary and high school children. And what do our respondents think about the anti-drug campaign?

"There is a lot of prevention, but I have a feeling it doesn't touch those who should be most interested in it."

"Young people know only too well what are the consequences of the lack of purpose in life, and they are not interested in what will happen to them."

"The drug addict is cured only when he wants to be cured, and not when someone beats it into his head that it would be nice if he would stop taking drugs and how damaging drugs are. Every addict knows about this anyway!"

Attitudes to prevention programs are very similar. According to students, they do not address the root of the problem - internal emptiness, loss of values and the meaning of existence. If a former addict returns to the same environment, there is a high probability that he will return to his old habit.

4.2.2. Delusion of Reality--Why Do Young People Take Drugs

The attraction of drugs is primarily caused by the desire to discover and feel that which is unknowable through reason. It is to move the limits of reality to reach an ecstatic state. Those who decide to take drugs are usually led by a very strong desire for an irrational experience. They have a strong urge to step out of the space limited by the narrow rationalism of the western world and would like to leap into the area of "pure experience".

Maybe it is the current prevailing lifestyle that condemns most young people to life in a cement crypt without a sky above their heads and causes even less satisfaction with reality. They do not believe they can find the meaning of their existence. In order to cast out the feeling of grayness and emptiness, they need to experience, to believe in something exceptional.

It seems that young people now take drugs because one of the three following reasons:

- An escape from unpleasant, gray, boring, purposeless reality.
- A desire for ecstatic experience uncontrolled by reason or convention.
- A desire for an experience with an unknown, mysterious and mystic world.

4.3. **Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Tradition and History**

Marxism understood history as an inescapable process from "primitive" to a "classless" society. A typical characteristic of our time is "ahistoricity". The old notion of historicism, that history is a continuous series of events with an ever-increasing understanding of truth and the essence of reality, is failing. The awareness of the continuity of history and faith in progress is being lost. "*History has taught us nothing*" was repeated over and over in the statements of young people.

The trust of western man in the general principle of the progress of mankind is being lost. That which was sometimes considered to be progress is now more often considered to be a "crime against humanity"¹⁸. Central Europeans of the end of the 20th century have seen too many contradictory interpretations of history and have become skeptical. History was too often manipulated by "official" communist historians and propagandists. Central Europeans became cynical.

In our times, this lack of trust is related to the failure of ideologies in the Eastern Bloc. Secret archives are being opened and history is demythologized. To what degree do students trust information about the history of their nation and history of human society in general? We can see from the responses of our respondents:

¹⁸The "industrial revolution" is probably the best example.

"I don't trust them. Each time has its own propagandists and many people manipulatively explain everything from their own point of view."

"Each bit of information is at least partly ideologically manipulated."

"It is difficult because new facts are being discovered all the time, often quite contradictory."

Young people seriously doubt the possibility of objective understanding or assessment of historical events. Any attempt to learn something from the past is treated skeptically. Historical research and interpretation could only have one meaning - to interpret the past with a certain ideological purpose in mind.

There is a strong skepticism about anything being taken as "historically true". Since we witness manipulation of what is going on here and now, how can we trust teachers describing what happened centuries ago?

4.3.1. Pragmatism

The postmodern alternative to exclusive religious or political ideologies is pragmatism.

"That which I say is more true than what you say because with what I say, I can do more than with that which you say."

We asked our respondents what they think about truth. Their answers express this "functional" or pragmatic attitude to truth:

"Each sees truth where he wants to see it. It is important, but only where it belongs. It is not needed at all times and it is never binding. One should learn how to lie."

"Truth is what fits in a specific moment. For example, truth about God... For some people, it is true that he lived, and for others it is not true."

"Truth is a certain law which should be kept, but it has a certain level of tolerance. Many who lie have an easier and better life than those who are truthful."

Truth is that which in a specific moment appeals to a specific interest group. This attitude about truth is, it seems, aided by a simplified application of democracy to the area of knowing truth. Just as a parliamentary majority determines generally accepted laws and rules, the attitude or opinion of a certain strong and influential group decides what is generally considered to be true.

Postmodern youth do not lose time searching for objective truth. They accept as true truth which works here and now. So they they often become skeptical of truth:

"Truth? It is a soulless word that in our time has lost its original meaning. Today one cannot believe anything or anybody."

4.3.2. Truth as an "Honest Opinion"

Many students interpret or translate the word "truth" as "honesty". This substitution then then colors their views subjectively. Authentic opinion is equal to truth.

The value of truth has decreased very much in their eyes. If they do not doubt the existence of objective truth as such, then there is no reason to know truth because it might be unpleasant. They do not recognize any good reason to spend time doing something which might cause unpleasant feelings and does not produce an immediate effect of improving their lives.

"Truth is relative because you can see everything from several angles and each is true and untrue at the same time."

"Truth is something which we believe. If I believe something, then I accept it as truth."

Truth is understood as an opinion of the individual. Each person has his own truth, his own small universe and his own rules for life. Very rarely, we see differing views signifying a transcendental basis for truth:

"I think there are two truths - internal and general. Each person might be convinced about his or her own truth, but internal truth might be at odds with general truth."

4.4. Ethical Values

According to responses to our questionnaire, students believe in high moral values. These are built on irrational foundations. The following answers are from those who officially do not subscribe to any religion:

"To be polite is normal. When I am not, I have a stupid feeling about myself."

"It is more advantageous for the 'peace of the soul' to be moral. It brings fewer evil consequences for everyone."

"When I want people to be good, I have to be good as well, because I can expect only as much goodness as I am able to produce myself."

Postmodern philosophy sees human beings as 'mature', having grown up with tutelage of outside authorities and dogmas. Ethics is connected to a right understanding of freedom and personal responsibility as expressed by one of our respondents:

"Dogma cannot be understood as a certain outside rule which is accepted without discussion, or as something with which I can identify internally. A football player who wants to play in a match has to know the rules of the game. That means if I understand dogma as rules or limits, then I cannot live without it. It takes us awhile before we learn to understand freedom and to bear responsibility for our actions."

What should be the correct understanding of freedom and responsibility, as well as the principles of behaviour? Why should a person, who has no clue from where these principles come or who is the originator of them, comply with them? Contemporary youth justify the need for ethical behaviour by a certain inner voice, a conscience. From the statements quoted above, we can see that they take into consideration rules that have a long tradition in our culture in spite of the fact that they do not interpret their adherence to these rules as an attempt live in truth, but as an attempt to feel good about themselves. It is an expression of pragmatic peace keeping and conflict avoidance.

4.5. Summary

1. Relativization of truth. After a long period of modernism where absolute scientific truth was considered to be the greatest achievement of all, trust in this perception of truth is fading. Lack of trust in any idea or opinion that claims generalised validity is typical not only for the coming younger generation: "everything is relative" is a characteristic attitude of our postmodern society.
2. Personal truth. Truth is considered to be a matter of opinion, and not something objective, existing outside of a person. Honesty and authenticity are high in the hierarchy of values of the younger generation. Another important value is tolerance for other opinions.
3. Escape from reality. Modern technology and a skeptical outlook on knowledge and knowing leads many young people to a (largely unsuccessful) attempt to escape from the reality in which they live. The world of dreams and mysterious ideas is much more exciting than the reality which is here and now. These escapes have many forms: starting from living life in a virtual world of computer games through to addictive chaos and techno music to trying the whole spectrum of easily accessible drugs.
4. Drugs as a common part of life. Drugs cease to be, especially in larger cities, an exotic matter for the margin of society. For current high school and university students drugs are a normal part of life. Sweet-smelling marijuana is becoming (in the late evening hours) a typical part of the environment of many clubs and cafes. Anti-drug campaigns and the curing [or drying out] of addicts are usually not very effective. Most "soft" drug users do not consider themselves to be addicted at all.
5. History as a random process. History—universal as well as personal—is usually perceived as a more or less random process which cannot be known. Nothing important can be learned from history. History is retroactively recreated in each new generation. The fact that anything happened in the past, i.e., that a person named Jesus Christ existed as described in historical records, means nothing.
6. Ethics. Simplified judgements which classify the younger generation as "immoral" are not in line with reality. Young people follow many moral ideas, such as tolerance, love, honesty, responsibility for the environment, etc. and are prepared to live according to these values, even if it is not comfortable for them. The ethics of most young people are not based on obedience to a higher authority, but on their own consciences and their own feelings—which further strengthens the afore-mentioned relativism and subjectivism.

5. Success as the Meaning of Life

Current times question the significance of attempting to know objective truth and give priority to an attempt to live a high, or good life, i.e. attaining a certain position or a certain level of wealth in society. Young people are similar to an athlete who, as soon as he realizes he has lost his focus, tries to run twice as fast. The youth of this generation, who differ from the previous generation's at the same age, stand firmly on earth and dream less. They admire goal-oriented and dynamic people who are able to sell themselves. The resulting activity and success should be of such a construction as to give much needed security in these chaotic times.

5.1. Proactivity and Positive Thinking

When students were asked what they mainly rely on, the majority replied in the spirit of a well-known adage, "God helps those who help themselves":

"The biggest hope is probably from myself, because I don't know in what else or in whom else I should trust."

"I put my hope into my knowledge and I dream about a good education, thanks to which I would be able to work abroad."

"My greatest hope is my survival instincts."

The times teach young people not to expect mercy or protection from above. They will get nothing except what they obtain for themselves. They will get somewhere in life only if they try hard. Some of them surprisingly interpret their proactive attitudes in the form of positive thinking as a religious dimension in their lives:

"I believe that, not another person, but your own spirit created the world around you. We are the universe - we are the personification of it; we are the thoughts and dreams of God."

"I am excited by the book I am now reading. It is about the power of the subconscious and its usefulness for our wellbeing. It is enough just to think positively and concentrate on your goals and fantasies. It is very interesting how much you are able to accomplish if you have this. Your subconscious will do it. Maybe I am speaking like a fanatic, but I am filled with internal energy which I need so much right now."

Probably the most popular philosophy of success now is based on the statement that "positive thinking" creates a basic assumption for one's ability to be assertive and to win. Many of our respondents echoed this in their responses. What is behind the term "positive thinking"? Books about this topic sell extremely well. The most famous ones are by Dale Carnegie and his student, Napoleon Hill, and have the following message:

"Whatever the human mind can think and is able to believe, that is possible to achieve."

Many young people greatly admire the mentality of successful salespeople, who have created ideas, are optimistic, are always smiling. This they attribute to "positive thinking". The best possible outcome (measured financially) is striven for. Personal relationships are often

sacrificed. Their relatives and friends are becoming the first potential customers and contact with them is reduced to the question: "Will he/she buy or not?"

By no means can all such people deal with the complex situations of our time by positive thinking. By the same token, not every person who outwardly appears to be a "positive thinker" really thinks positively. During personal discussions with my students, I often find that under the surface of "positive thinking" there is a hidden, frightened and damaged personality.

"Why should a person always be reminded what a cowardly and poor person he is? I would prefer not to know anything, but have a feeling that I am a genius. Some people suggest positive thinking, but I am too lazy to do that."

According to the responses to our questions, a majority of the students see their main purpose in a desire to be useful:

"I put my hope into work that will yield some results—something visible, tangible that will at least stir some positive emotions in me and my environment. I would like to help mankind somehow."

"My life will be of high quality and be worth living only if I am able to help some person, a child, or if I do something that will remain after I leave."

By success, they mean a concrete, clearly useful result from their work or acts. They see the goal of their activities as some sort of "eternalizing" factor which will render them immortal in this world.

There are, of course, exceptional persons who say that no success can give purpose to their life. An example could be the reactions of two 20-year old university students to the question: "How do you understand success and happiness?"

"Success is for me associated with career, and that's a dirty word. Happiness—that is something else. What do I understand as success? To do what I like and also be rewarded so that I would not have problems struggling through life. And happiness for me is connected with the idea of a stable relationship with a family background. Thereby I would know that there is always someone awaiting me."

"Concerning success, it always has some connection with a career. I see myself in beautiful clothes and shoes as I am getting out of a car. I am presenting new pharmaceuticals which our company recently developed. It is really attractive. But happiness, well, that means it is 4:00 p.m., I am leaving the pharmacy where I work, I will pick up the children from daycare, come home and prepare dinner. Then in the evening I sit down with my husband (but not to watch television), maybe have a glass of wine... We would talk about what has happened during the day and we would feel extremely happy together."

The feverish race of a person who has lost his orientation usually ends up in hopelessness, despair and resignation. Just a few failures are enough. The conception that success gives a person his value, and that it can be measured by wealth, salary or the number of good deeds, usually causes intolerable tension. Someone who relies only on his own strengths and skills, does not believe in grace and refuses to become part of the group of unsuccessful people. Doubting whether he will be able to keep up with the demands placed on him by society in a universe without God puts him in a state of tremendous fear and anxiety.

5.2. Anxiety and Fears

Responses to the questionnaire about anxiety and fear are similar - the students describe their own personal weaknesses, failures and lack of success. Most of them are persuaded that they will not meet the ideal of a successful person in society—to be young, healthy, vital and wealthy.

"I am afraid that some morning I will wake up and find that I am 70 years old."

"I don't want to grow old, to get to the age when I will no longer remember anything. There would always have to be people to care for me and I would spoil their joy of living."

"I am terrified by a dark dream that someday I will have to find my food in garbage bins. Also I am afraid that I will end up in a wheelchair. I would prefer not to live in that case."

"It must be terrible to live without money. Even when people disagree, money is everything. The person who has no money is simply a big zero."

A fear that one day they will not have strength or capability to care for themselves is connected with another fear—that there will not be sufficient tangible results and they will not be able to do everything that would make life meaningful for them.

"Life passes very quickly and I don't want to grow old. I am 16 now, but I am not very happy about it, although it is not such an old age. I am afraid that I will not be able to fulfill all my dreams and decisions."

Constant activity, on which most of the students based their lifelong plans, is the most effective way to avoid addressing the basic existential questions about oneself. It helps to silence the desire for certainty, for objective truth and meaning in life.

Sinking in self-pity and sceptical thoughts is another alternative, for example, in groups of young people for whom hard work and management mentality are not attractive:

"Everything is falling down. There are uncertainties before me and uncertainties behind me. I don't have a place to go and I don't have anything to hope for."

"Look out through the window—how superficial everybody looks. Look at business people, concrete blocks of flats and people who are following their dreams. That's apocalypse!"

Thorough knowledge about themselves has to be very painful for those who put their hope primarily in their own skills and abilities and whose decisions are based on the false criteria of the times. They tend to avoid opportunities to find who they really are so that they can also avoid deep disillusionment:

"I panic that the horoscope is true. It says that I look like a person with ideas, but in reality it is not like that. I fear much, that is true. I don't want to be identified with uncreative people who just work in a factory, sitting on the assembly line and packaging candy."

There were several respondents who possessed an awareness about the broader dimensions of human life - faith in a higher justice transcending the law of society - or who openly declared their fear of God:

"I am afraid of a life of emptiness in which everything would be governed by money. I am afraid of life without faith and love."

"I am afraid that I will die and afterward there will be no life, which I believe to be the case, and I will be eternally (horrible word!) rotting in the grave without power to do anything."

"I fear God."

Most of the young people of our time are afraid that they will not be able fulfil their own special desires about life, and consequently their life will lose all meaning. A confused picture about what has real meaning in one's life leads to deep disillusionment and self-hatred. Many responses to the questions were mindful of a cry for help, and it seems that the young people expect, at least subconsciously, some trustworthy and meaningful explanation—some sort of good news. But they will hardly recognise this explanation in the glittering package of simple answers that we often expect when presenting the gospel.

We have a chance to help them only if we come to them with openness and honesty. Our attitudes in everyday situations should confirm that a meaningful life can be lived only in deep awe and trust before God, trust in his mercy and justice.

5.3. Summary

1. Success and positive thinking. Early capitalism in a postcommunist society brings many opportunities for the aggressive younger generation unblemished by life under socialism. A large group of respondents see life as a competitive struggle in which the successful and smart people win. The “positive thinking” of businessmen and managers who see problems as opportunities is attractive to some students. They tend to apply this way of thinking in every sphere of life (family relationships, education, involvement in society, etc.).
2. Uncertainty and anxiety. Positive thinking is not effective medicine to cure prevalent feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Young people perceive a lack of certainty in life as well as in society at large. They are afraid of failure and a lack of opportunities to survive the competitive struggle, or they are afraid that their dreams and desires will never materialise. Those who have tried drugs often feel existential anxiety, resulting from their experience of "another reality" which is that state where one cannot easily distinguish between dreaming and being awake.

6. Young People and Religion

6.1. Rediscovery of Spirituality.

During my research of the new spirituality I visited - as an observer - a seminar dedicated to "*spiritual development via clearing the subconscious of stress and various psychological and physical diseases*". I will start this chapter with some of my observations.

- Esoteric initiation. The leading lecturer spoke during an introductory session about a mysterious method which was kept secret by Tibetan monks because they were afraid it would be misused. Now, she herself would explain this method to us, the chosen ones. I asked her if she was not afraid that we would misuse it because she did not know us. She said that the full weight of responsibility would lie on us. Some of the attendees were less than 16 years old.
- Exclusivity. The teachers put great emphasis on the fact that they knew the "spiritual background" of the whole exercise. This background was that the lecturers, during a breathing meditation, "*connected with each other in love and common effort to protect the space from the entrance of evil forces*". In practice, there was a spontaneous dance during which they waved their hands. "*It is something spontaneous, something that flows from us, from our inner being. One has to be really relaxed when doing it. It is simply a thing of the heart. If you do not do it through your heart and enjoy it, then it is not valid,*" one lecturer explained to me.
- Suppressing rationality, sweet mystical terminology. The most often used word in their lectures was "*heart*". Feeling through the heart was the panacea for all problems. The relationship between feelings and the mind in their system is similar to the relationship between light and darkness. While the brain analyzes everything, fragments it and leaves it in a chaotic state, the heart and intuition connect everything to an all-encompassing unity.

During the breathing exercise, all the attendees of the seminar were lying down in their sleeping bags and were breathing in and out at a fast rate. Some of them started to cry or laugh. The oxygenizing of the brain resulted in some feelings of *deja vu* about negative experiences from the past which was interpreted as "cleaning". I wanted to know whether the lecturers could guarantee the safety of this method of meditation. In reply, they told me the following:

"If you open your heart and if you feel the all-embracing love, then I guarantee that everything will be all right. It cannot be bad or evil because the law of energetic exclusivity is working there."

I asked several students what they experienced during the breathing meditation:

"I felt some sort of huge amount of energy, so big that I had to sit down and send it away from me."

"I had a very serious problem which I re-experienced, but this time it was from the position of my parents and sister."

"I reflected on my friend Joey who knows how to read cards, even when he sees only the backs. He told me that he has some type of existence, a sort of man with a

briefcase, who he tells him everything. And in that way, it is said that he also speaks with Christ. It works... intuiting things which we really don't know."

This example is not at all exceptional. There is a great and growing interest in spiritual matters among young people. They are fascinated by mysteries and secrets which they can experience at the end of the 20th century. One of their most favorite television series is *The X-Files* in which reality and fiction are intertwined so cunningly. The new hero is not the scientist with great intellect who gives rational answers, but a person with exceptional, often paranormal abilities, solving mysteries by penetrating her intuition. Schematic or mechanical or transparent answers do not attract young people. They are allergic to them.

"Each rational answer is the very one which is farthest from the truth. It is escaping reality to the peace of empty answers."

Young people feel a mysteriousness in the fact that they exist. They try to discern the mystery of common things, as reflected in respondents' answers to our questions:

"Most often I think about time. Sometimes I feel that it flies away from me, and other times I feel that it cannot keep step with me."

"I think about why I live, who am I and who I was in the past? Why does God let me live when, in the past, I almost died twice?"

"Quite often I think about myself. Then I try to imagine nothing. What would it be like if there were neither life nor universe?"

In many of the responses we can also see an interest in new spiritualities, eastern religions or extraterrestrial civilizations:

"I often think about an existence of extraterrestrial life. I hope it exists."

"I like the philosophy of Buddhism, especially self-control which I need so much."

To believe in gods, spirits, karma or the supernatural is becoming more common today. The scale and depth of interest of young people in these things has many levels, from a consumer spirituality of cheap synthesized music and incense to a real search for understanding and truth.

The shift in attitudes to religion:

Before	Now
Officially proclaimed "atheistic society"	Officially proclaimed "Christian society"
Religion and Christianity were generally implausible	Religion is understood to be a part of life
Religion as a private matter	Religion as overlapping with public sphere – as a source of ethical values in society
Churches in "survival mode", i.e. without major ambitions for growth and impact in society	Churches more self-confident
Prevailing materialistic worldview	Prevailing religious (theistic) worldview
Church attendance low	Church attendance high
Christianity as the only religious alternative	Religious pluralism and new age spirituality

6.2. Privatization of the Religious Experience.

One of the most typical features of post-communism in central Europe is the process of individualization and the loss of the collective dimension. Young people in their formative years lament: *"I don't know who I am when I am the same as everybody else"*. They want to be different, no matter the cost and to step out of anonymity. They create "alternative" communities where they feel free and where they can express their own individuality.

This aspect is also expressed in their attitudes towards faith. They prefer their own understanding of religious experience above the binding teaching of some organization:

"I have my own faith and nobody in the world can ask my god for help."

"Religion helps many people. I don't believe in any church that says that if I go to church I will get to heaven. In my opinion, if someone leads a normal life - doesn't kill and doesn't steal - he has a chance to get there anyway."

"I am not a fanatic, but life without God I cannot imagine. I believe and I stand behind my belief. But I do not take some commandments seriously."

"The church doesn't enable a personal, but only an administrative, relationship with God."

Faith is usually understood as a private matter. Young people do not want to talk about it publicly. According to them, it is a deeply intimate issue. For the resolution of existential questions, they set apart a space in the silence of their own privacy. Not everybody asks existential questions of course, because according to some students, they are too complicated and might cause pain.

What comes to their minds in connection with the meaning of their own existence?

"In my opinion, the meaning of life is to leave something behind here. I would rather not think about death because I am afraid that some day I will die and life will go on as if nothing happened."

"We are only animals with the ability to think, so we should use the chance we have and really enjoy our life. We cannot change anything in the universe, but we can create as many valuable moments as possible in this world."

"I have not yet found the meaning of life. Maybe the search for the meaning of life is the meaning of life."

Whether they are believers or not, young people have a desire for eternity. They see the key to it in their own usefulness and in their ability to create something which will stay here after they have died. Their lives should leave a trace in the memories of their relatives.

They need to come to terms with the existential questions that touch them, that is, questions about life and death, value orientation, self-discipline and living in the surrounding chaos. And they are asking how to manage it.

The results of the surveys in the high schools as well as my own observations in club meetings indicate that the current younger generation does not think that problems will be solved by traditional church thinking. Their religion generally does not need any institution. Membership in church, according to them, is useless and too binding. Such membership produces identical people with identical clothing, identical vocabulary and identical thinking. And that is a threat to their own identity.

6.3. Non-binding Intuitive Emotional Inclination Towards Faith.

In the past a farmer might decide, "Tomorrow morning I will get up and will farm the land". The next morning he would get up and actually farm the land. Our contemporary farmer would formulate it thus: "I have a feeling that tomorrow morning I will get up and farm the land." The next morning he gets up and finds that he has already lost that feeling. That is why he sits in his armchair and waits for the feeling to come back.

This illustration aptly captures a general spirit of our time in which there is a significant shift from commitment to feeling. We can see the same tendency in the area of religion. Young people tend to believe in law, energy or some sort of "higher power". Religion is supposed to bring peace and harmony:

"I don't agree with weekly church attendance where I would pray to God for his forgiveness so that I will not be punished. Religion should bring spiritual peace and I think that in this area, Buddhism is much better."

"I believe in reincarnation. That's why I am not afraid of death. I don't believe in God, but in power— in certain power which is stronger than man."

Religion is usually understood as emotional support, as fulfilling a clearly defined psychological need. It is taken as a feeling, as a certain self-suggestion, or as one of several possible worldviews.

"Christianity can offer me the certainty that everything will be forgiven."

"I believe in God in such a way that when I need something, I pray. Religion offers me a world without problems and worries."

"Religion is something like a talisman. A person feels better and more secure when he has it with him."

The focus, as we can see in the above mentioned quotations, has shifted from the object of faith to faith itself. It seems that in their way of thinking God is not very different from a coffee maker; if someone simply follows the instructions, it will satisfy his demands.

6.4. The Mixing of Religious Systems

From the results of the questionnaire and from personal interviews with students, we can observe that the younger generation has a very strong interest in spirituality, but it is not getting satisfactory answers to their questions from the traditional Christian church. Christianity is usually understood as a collection of rules and dogma and commandments which are often the target of criticism from these young people.

"You should live in such a way that you will not regret anything, and not so that you have to go to confession every week!"

"The church threatens people and then it becomes a heavy burden for them."

Our times have made all religious teachings accessible. Young people take advantage of the opportunities to learn about them. Eastern religions, or rather, some ideas from eastern philosophies in various combinations with other religious systems, are the most appealing to the young people. To illustrate, here is a portion of an interview with an 18-year old high school student:

Student: *"Buddhism is attractive to me in the sense that Buddha introduced very interesting thoughts: man does not inherit his guilt, but there is a certain model of the human soul, a certain psychological reality, and this is the cause of man's failures. Now today, we find out that because of consumerism we cannot make time for ourselves; we cannot be free. We need to find time to think about ourselves. And the solution of this situation is different from Christianity which expects the end of the world and reflects the inability of man to resolve a specific situation. We cannot wait forever for something that should come, but is not coming."*

Interviewer: *"But you said that Buddhism does not include the concept of original sin and that means that it does not mix the past into the present. However, the teaching of Buddhism is in a sense fatalistic, because it promulgates the idea that acts from a previous life predetermine your current state in your current life...."*

Student: *"Maybe, but it doesn't put the burden of guilt on man. You make mistakes that are based on your lack of knowledge. But, of course, in this [Buddhist] system, some things are not perfected in detail as they should be."*

Current trends dictate tolerance and support subjective experiences. Postmodern young people believe in the equality of all religions and accept those that are the least confrontational. This demand is very difficult for Christianity. To connect religions by suppressing their distinctions, or even direct contradictions, means to reject the validity of truth as such.

Nowadays, many young people think that if philosophical and theological systems divide religions, then a mystical experience serves to unite them again. For inter-religious dialogue, they would use a bicycle wheel as an example. The spokes in the wheel would represent religions, their theologies, rituals and structures. The spokes meet in two places: in the center of the wheel (symbolizing a mystical experience, a common source) and around the rim which is connected by religious ethics and common responsibility for society and global issues. Thus mystical experience and ethics are perceived as common to all.

6.5. Summary.

1. Great interest in spirituality. It seems that scientific atheism remains in the past. In the coming generation, a convinced atheist is a unique phenomenon. Without exaggeration, we can say that the younger generation hungers for spirituality. Faith in God or in supernatural power is a common characteristic for almost all subcultures of young people.
2. Lack of trust in religious institutions. Along with a great interest in the spiritual dimension of life, young people express a chronic lack of trust in any religious institution. These are represented in our culture primarily by Christian churches. Organised and institutionalised religion reminds young people of ideology and manipulation. The very idea of 'membership in the church' is for a great majority of young people an unsurmountable problem.
3. Feeling is more important than truth. Religion in the minds of our respondents is rarely connected with the quest for truth. Feelings, however difficult to define, are much more important. Religion, including Christianity, is usually identified with the discovery of the spiritual dimension in one's own inner being. Questions about truth, of course, do not belong to this category.
4. Invent your own religion! Religion and thinking about God are highly subjective, private and intimate matters. Since there is probably not a single one true faith, it is a personal decision of every man and woman to create his or her own spiritual world. These worlds often consist of a mixture of Christianity, eastern religions, modern humanism and neo-pagan occultism.

7. Young Christians in the Postmodern Era.

The first two parts of this paper are based on observations of high school students and visits to youth clubs without consideration of the faith, confession or church membership of the respondents. As we can see from their responses, there were very few Christians among them.

We were interested to know to what extent the general community of young people is different from a specific community of young Christians. We asked some young active Christians from an evangelical church in Bratislava to respond to the same questions that were given to the general group of respondents. The comparison of these two surveys cannot be considered representative, because in the second case, there was a group of only about twenty students aged 16 to 25. Since they were older than the respondents from the high school survey, we can expect a higher degree of maturity. In the following paragraphs about young Christians, I used not only the survey responses, but also my own observations from involvement with Christian youth.

7.1. In Search of Identity.

Several years ago I took part in a summer camp with a group of high school students. A core group of them were students from the church who invited their non-Christian fellow students. The evening programs were designed to help develop new relationships and friendships as well as to communicate values of Christianity. One evening we started to talk in a friendly and informal way about personal experiences and about private issues which are usually hidden from other people. Some youngsters from church-going families discussed how their parents were on the verge of divorce, how some of them had spent time in a psychiatric hospital or how they had problems with drugs. They opened many taboo issues about which people normally do not speak in good society. So I started to think about what they actually are supposed to offer to their friends. We spoke about problems, but also about family life and emotional stability in peaceful and relatively stable families.

Christian family background and church participation as such do not always guarantee the healthy personal development of teenage children. During adolescence a young person from a Christian environment has to deal with the same problems as his peers from non-Christian families. Christian teenagers have to “swim against the stream” quite often. The social pressure to conform to the prevailing values and life style of their peer group is very difficult to resist.

The pressure the church community creates during adolescence is often very close to manipulation, exhibiting no respect for individuality. A teenager is at an age when he begins no longer to see his parents and the older generation within the church as those who make no mistakes or as natural authority figures. He begins to develop his own point of view. A teenager growing up in a church environment, along with his peers outside the church, is sensitive to whether adults accept him as an individual, or whether they try to mould him according to their own views. Each day he meets not only his family and friends from church, but friends from a non-Christian environment. So how will he gain orientation for these divergent influences? What he chooses as his personal philosophy is influenced by the older generations in the church. The depth of relationships in his peer group in the church is also a key factor.

7.2. Truth

Most of our Christian respondents see truth as something objective, unchanging and knowable - something like an inner law. The world has a relatively clear and transparent structure:

"Truth is objective. If I 'make' truth, then it is no longer truth."

"The truth makes one free. If truth is not absolute truth, then it is worthless. It is often very harsh, but in combination with grace, it gives another chance."

"I know the truth which was given to me, and I know when I am acting against it and when I am not."

Some young Christians are aware of the changed perception of what is considered to be "true" in secular culture. They feel the easy and simple solutions of their pastors or youth leaders are "not enough". They are not enough to meaningfully answer their own doubts and disquieting questions.

"I have problems with the notion of truth."

"There is only one truth, and that is that there is no truth."

"Truth is something very complex in my opinion. The more I think about it, the more confused I am about what it is."

We see two attitudes towards truth in the group of believers. The smaller portion doubts the existence of truth, or have the feeling that real truth is unknowable. We could call them "postmoderns in the church". They are influenced by other religions and cultures which are quite accessible in our society.

Most young Christians, though, think that truth is stable, unchanging and objective. Often they present it too dogmatically, as a fact not open to any discussion: *"I have the truth that was given to me..."*. This argument might limit the room for more profound dialogue with non-believers. It might also pose a barrier in the process of their own search for God and in knowing themselves. It puts Christianity into the category of religious experiences which cannot be discussed, questioned or doubted.

7.3. Values and Role Models

The two groups have very different value orientation. While success is the highest value in general society, Christian youth do not accept ideas of consumerism. Instead they want to build their lives on faith in God which gives them a firm foundation and security. Some of them have a pietistic understanding of spiritual life as completely separate from the worldly, material realm.

"Everything earthly will end, and it's not worth believing in. There are only a few things which will survive - love and God, and even these two words are synonyms."

"I put my hope into overcoming evil in me."

"I believe that when I will not be able to continue, the One I put my hope in will help me."

Some of them mentioned a need to bring religious ideas into the reality of the world. They also mentioned the meaning of sacrifice and good deeds towards others.

"I would like to find, and bring into reality the meaning of life."

"I would like to be able to give myself to others, but honestly—from the heart and with love."

"A quality of life can be guaranteed only by the combination of my convictions and work, as well as the fact that I will not compromise my conscience."

Family and marriage are highly valued. The word "relationship" is the most frequently used in their responses¹⁹. Relationships seem to be among the most valued things in their lives:

"I am afraid that my relationships will be superficial, dishonest, not open and troubled."

"I think about healthy relationships."

"I was very touched by Exupery's thought that life is worth living because of relationships, since everything else will cease to be."

Strong relationships within the group create an impression of belonging, acceptance and security. The downside of this is a growing protective wall around a small fellowship. It is next to impossible to become a new member of such a closed group. There is a threat that it will become a subculture focused on the relationships inside the group, a subculture that has lost common links with other people.

7.4. Anxiety and Fear

What are young Christians most afraid of? The following answer expresses the opinion of many of the respondents:

"I am afraid of life without light."

Besides fearing the loss of a strong faith, or a shift in their religious ideas, several confided their fears of self, their bad habits and their inability to understand the meaning of their own life.

"I am afraid of backsliding from my faith and living in sin. I am afraid of God's judgment."

"I am afraid of myself and my fleshly side."

"I am afraid of my freedom... At any time it could end up in some other way than it should from the perspective of what is good. I am also afraid that I am not able to see my own orientation."

"I have a strong fear of meaninglessness and failure, but I want to overcome that through faith."

In their anxiety Christian youth have something in common with their non-Christian peers: the subject of their anxiety and fear is related to their highest values. While non-Christian

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that a high view of personal relationships is typical not only by Christians. It is shared by much of society.

youth are afraid primarily of their own failures and inability to fulfill their ideal of success in postmodern times, young Christians are most afraid that they will lose their deep trust in God.

7.5. Attitude to Faith

The question of religion and its validity in our world is understood by our two groups in quite different ways. Let us look more closely at the opinions of the young Christians.

Some of them communicate their answers in a form of religious dogma. Others do not consider Christianity to be a religion, but a revelation:

"Religion is the only thing that can offer freedom through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Religion cannot offer a person more than, for example, atheism."

The validity of the existence of religion is usually argued pragmatically. It gives a value orientation and purpose, offers a life pattern and answers questions:

"It can provide life with a reasonable goal."

"Religion doesn't impact how a man decides, but it is good that it helps him decide by providing good examples."

"Religion tries to bring people to the meaning of their existence."

The attitude towards religion typical of respondents in the high school group could be summed up by the phrase *"tolerant lack of interest"*: *"Let everybody believe whatever he wants, but don't let him bother me with it"*. Religion is confined to the subjective realm of life. It is understood to be a feeling. Anyone who presents religion as objective truth is seen as a potential aggressor, or in the spirit of postmodern plurality, their words are understood to be only one of many possibilities.

This is in strong contrast to the Christian understanding of faith which knows only one objective truth which is personified in the biblical God; it does not tolerate anything that does not agree with it. The quotes from the responses of young people from the church seem to show that they see faith in the one true God as the basis of their identity.

7.6. Summary.

1. Sensitive perception of the tension between Christianity and culture. Young Christians are very sensitive to the tension between their Christianity and the prevailing culture, of which they are a part. This tension is often part of their own inner world which leads to uncertainty and anxiety. While their opinions and tastes are further formed by the environment of which they are a part, they feel that "truth is in the church". They often ask themselves questions which their non-Christian friends do not consider—questions about truth, obedience to God, trust in the values and principles of Christianity.
2. Desire for relationships. Similar to their non-believing peers, young Christians long for deep relationships. They often perceive relationships in church to be manipulative. Their elders in the church express care and concern for them, but in reality they want to change the youth into their own image.
3. Desire for authenticity. Authenticity, sincerity, and openness are probably the most often cited characteristics that young Christians want to see in themselves as well as in others. The younger generation, including those in the church, is critical of hypocritical piety and all forms of hypocrisy seen within the church setting. They often have the feeling that an environment bound by prejudices is quite common in small churches. In such an environment they cannot be themselves. If they want to be accepted, they would have to live with a religious mask on their faces.
4. "Right Distinction." Criticism by older members of the church that young people "want to look like the world..." is not completely true. Church culture and traditional piety is often understood as not radical enough by young Christians. Even the current generation of young Christians try to find a way to live in the world, yet not be of the world. They strive to experience and demonstrate the radical message of the good news without building cultural barriers between themselves and the world to which they want to communicate the gospel.

8. Communicating the Gospel in the Postmodern Culture.

"I understand faith as a personal matter for all. Declarations of faith, which I see every now and then, I don't like. If somebody talks about himself or his beliefs, that has no meaning for me, neither positive nor negative. It is his own business, his own personal matter, his own decision and sometimes, it is just a matter of accidents and chance occurrences in his life. Just to say, "I am a believer" doesn't say anything at all, in my eyes, that makes the person more respectable."²⁰

To communicate the meaning of the gospel one needs a deep understanding of the cultural and social environment of those he wants to reach. Good news as such does not change with time. It does not lose its truthfulness and is always the most important message of the omnipotent, just and merciful God to his creation. Society, means of communication, knowledge, prevailing opinions and expectations change very significantly. The changes in culture and society taking place in the 1990's are faster and deeper than ever before. The need to understand our times is necessary, although not easy.

We will list the most important observations described in detail in previous chapters. This might give us an atmosphere of the postmodern culture of the coming generation. We will start with a profile of a postmodern person.

8.1. Who is the Young Postmodern Person?

- He grows up in a free, democratic society.
- He is open to the influences of cultures from all over the world.
- He gets up-to-date information from the whole world through media and the Internet. He can communicate about anything whatsoever with people from various parts of the world.
- He is losing trust in the institution of the family.
- He is lonely and isolated and wants to be part of a group.
- He wants to be different from others.
- He admires goal-oriented and successful people.
- He wants to be successful. He is afraid of his own weaknesses and failures.
- He doubts the existence of objective truth. Truth, according to him, is that which has the power to survive. Truth is relative. The meaning of this word overlaps with the meaning of the words "opinion" and "honesty."
- He explains the need for ethical behavior by his conscience.
- He emphasizes the subjective interpretation of any information.

²⁰ Šimon Pánek, (young Czech journalist, one of the young leaders of the Velvet Revolution in 1989) in AD 97/6, p. 18

- He likes to escape from reality and to discover what is beyond its boundaries.
- He does not believe in the possibility of the objective assessment of history, or in the possibility to learn from history.

8.2. Simplified Understanding of Evangelization.

I once witnessed an attempt by a Christian group from abroad to evangelize soldiers in barracks in Slovakia. At the very beginning a young man on stage asked his audience a question, "Who among you wants to be saved?". Most of them had never heard this term before. They understood it to mean something far different from what the speaker meant. Then the young man asked whether they would like to go to heaven. Some said they would prefer to remain in the army. After that, he asked them to stand up and then he prayed for them. At the end he shared a ten-point plan of salvation. I asked my friend, an atheist, for his impression:

"Well, they tried to create an ecstatic atmosphere. They were positive in an American way, and we were expected to identify with them. They created an impression of concern and care with their songs and rituals. It was a sort of manipulation."

There seem to be two main barriers in communication of the gospel:

1. Lack of deep understanding of the message itself. Evangelists often do not go beyond cliché slogans in their understanding of the core meaning of the gospel. The message of the Kingdom of God is often reduced to a religious experience meant to relieve pain and bring instant relaxation.
2. Lack of understanding of the culture in society outside of the church. Since this paper is primarily about youth culture, we list some of the typical mistakes people trying to communicate the message of Christianity tend to make. This list is based mostly on the observations of young non-Christians—those whom most youth evangelists want to reach:
 - Little willingness to listen to or create space for the authentic questions of non-Christian young people.
 - The main emphasis of evangelism is on an emotional appeal to "accept Christ"—often without explaining the context of Christian message.
 - The use of religious vocabulary which the young people outside the church cannot understand.
 - Very low artistic and intellectual quality of public evangelistic presentation.
 - Underestimation of the authentic personal relationships with non-Christians.
 - Underestimation of authentic community.
 - A lack of a coherent Christian worldview—as opposed to unconnected bits of spiritual ideas.

- Avoidance of difficult, but very real, questions.²¹
- Underestimation of social and psychological factors of one's negative attitude towards religion.²²
- The process of "becoming Christian" is reduced to one specific "moment of conversion" – forgetting that the way to God is often long.

One can understand the message only when one knows its context. Otherwise, even an extremely important message can be misunderstood. The first important part of the good news is its author. Who is that eternal person in whom we can have eternal life? Can he be discerned in our earthly life? How can I see him in my life? Where can we find more information about him? Is this information trustworthy? Has anybody ever seen him? These and similar questions are in the minds of people who want to learn something more of Christianity. Conversion and the process of getting to know God is a long process in which we are getting to know the object of our faith, the triune God.

What is the essence of the gospel? This question must be answered by everyone who wants to communicate it to young people. He should know that the good news is a clearly defined and its exclusiveness does not easily fit the mindset of the postmodern generation, growing up in a culture which doubts the existence of objective truth.

The gospel clearly says that only he who believes in Jesus has eternal life. The gospel has always been very confrontational, and even now, it cannot be presented in any other way, even to make it more attractive to our young people. The good news does not need to be made more acceptable because it is perfect in itself. Our task is merely to learn to interpret God's word in its fullness, and not select from it only what we consider to be more important than the rest. Let us not be afraid to talk about the big issues. Let us not avoid the mysterious side of it. The gospel has the answers to everyday problems that will be considered by contemporary young people only when they believe in its author. Only then will the young person have a reason to choose from all kinds of philosophies, religions and their compounds which he encounters daily. For young people, getting to know the truth about God takes time. Anyone who really wants to pass on that truth has to open his life to new relationships with the people he wants to evangelize.

We should treat young people as equal partners in dialogue, not as objects to be manipulated into a peaceful harbor. During discussions with them we need to listen carefully to their questions and try to answer them as directly as possible.

8.3. Communication of the Gospel--Several Suggestions.

Based on the observation of the character of our times and our younger generation as well as various evangelistic activities and reactions of evangelized, non-believing youths, we can summarize key issues the communicator should keep in mind:

- Carefully listen to the questions of non-believers and respond to them directly.
- Do not be afraid to accept that you do not know all the answers.

²¹ Such as: "Why is the God of the Old Testament so cruel?", "How can you be sure it is God and not your own psychological projection you put your trust in?", "What is the place of Christianity among other religions?", "Why is Jesus so exclusive?"

²² According to our observations many people tend to project their own feelings of guilt, shame and loneliness to their reservations about Christianity.

- Do not be afraid of the process of trying to find answers, for example, through common Bible study or lengthy discussions.
- Do not strive to make the good news attractive to the listener at any cost.
- Do not be afraid of offense that might be created by your message if it does not follow the current fashion. But do not try to make offense by activities and behaviour which are labeled "Christian", yet only serve to alienate through a lack of understanding of the current times.
- Convey a desire to know the character of God and how to make the triune God evident in our lives.
- Speak of a personal relationship with God that is for each and every single one of us. He sees me as an individual, as his own creation, to whom he gave the right and responsibility to freely choose.
- Do not forget the importance of the Christian community.
- Without prejudice, be familiar with the culture and speech of the young people.
- Do not deviate towards cheap moralization.
- Live in deep awe and respect before God.
- Be authentic and real.