

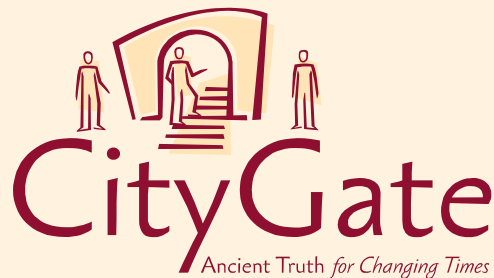
Every Knee Shall Bow:

An Inquiry into What Masters Us

A CityGate field studies paper examining Central European belief about the nature and role of authority - what is believed, why it is believed, what is submitted to and how, the resulting tensions and, where needed, possible steps toward embracing a more Biblically compatible view

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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**

Every Knee Shall Bow: *An Inquiry into What Masters Us*

A CityGate Field Studies Paper

By Marc LiVecche

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. Comments can be sent to marc@citygate.org

I would like to acknowledge Michael C. Sack of Cultural Insights Inc. and the debt I owe him for his help in the preparation and analysis of this field study project. Michael uses a unique method of inquiry to listen to and identify people's deeply held beliefs in a way that leaves them feeling heard and valued as people- no small feat in a field often regarding "the researched" as merely information sources or statistical units. Michael is currently President of Strategic Listening Services, and more about his work can be discovered by going to www.strategiclistening.com. Michael is a fine example of the necessity of integrating theology and Christian work with all aspects of society - including high quality, professional qualitative market research.

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Introduction to Authority: Why we wrote this paper

“I want to know God's thoughts...the rest are details.”

--Albert Einstein

I know next to nothing about astrophysics but, I'm told, everything in the universe is either orbited or orbits something else. The moons orbit the planets, the planets central stars, central stars entire galaxies and the whole of it in orbit around a spot assumed to be the center of the universe. Only this Center orbits nothing else. Possible scientific liberties aside, this offers a useful analogy. All of us have a Center to our own personal universe. At that Center we find authority for what to think, what to believe and how to live. That authority is our god. Whatever we identify as the plumb line in our lives -- whether it is a personal deity, science or philosophy, our lusts or ambitions, our fears or our conquests, our knowledge, personal morality, our mood – whatever it is that we consider the ultimate authority in our lives, that thing is our god. I have never met an atheist.

In addition to the positive, as we've explored the beliefs about authority held by young people in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) we have also identified patterns demonstrating a compromised or all together derelict view of authority and its relations: submission, leadership and personal empowerment. Reasons for this dereliction are visible in the everyday, when traffic cops turn jaundiced eyes from the organized corruption around them and then assess fines for your not having enough bandages in your onboard medical kit; or when a hardworking, capable student doesn't get into the university of their choice but their dull-witted friend with the wealthy father does. The residual effects of this dereliction are visible too, as when a group of seminary students are asked to independently identify three words illustrating the value of church membership only to discover, after grouping them together, that what they've collectively described might as well be a football club or a favorite pub as it lacks any reference to God.

A defective view of authority is not unique to the CEE and it's wrong to ignore the region's long history of oppression that helps make disparagement of authority understandable. Nevertheless the salient point is striking: rightly or wrongly, whether justified or not, CEE young people's growing distrust and cynicism toward any type of authority -- especially of traditional authorities -- is having so deleterious a trickle-down effect that they are losing even the modest confidence of trusting the authority of their own senses – they feel torn between conflicting realities, unable to puzzle together the clues and hints around them; not able to conceive that there may be only one Reality and that the many distractions standing against this are merely the stained and tawdry elements of virtual realities - the saccharine idols we've created to palliate the longing in our hearts and minds.

Obviously, in such a climate evangelism is handicapped from the outset. If one not only no longer believes in a ruling authority but fears and distrusts even the *notion* of one, how might that person ever come to embrace the glory of a God Who is also Lord? We see time and again how the Bible's claims fail to inspire; not so much because there is disagreement with them, but merely because CEE youth no longer believe that something like a book could actually have real, comprehensive authority in so pluralistic a world, where truth is perceived as myth and in which words are no longer trusted. Such inherited or instinctive beliefs are only reinforced by teaching in seminaries and theological faculties that present a liberalized view of

scripture essentially free of the supernatural and miraculous. Compounding the problem further, postmodernism has so saturated the intellectual environment that even if young people believed *in theory* that the Bible could be authoritative, they would not believe we could ever *recognize* that authority – so that one way or the other the endgame is the same: young people are suffering a total collapse of confidence in the structures around them. And here we encounter the crux of the crises: a loss of confidence breeds a loss of hope, lost hope breeds despair and despair...well, despair is incapable of breeding, creating or conceiving anything at all.

It is too little to say that there is only *a* crisis of authority in Central and Eastern Europe because this particular crisis forms the backbone for all other crises. Our belief concerning authority -- particularly any sense of a central authority -- is perhaps the first, most fundamental consideration in our ability to believe anything at all.

It is critical then that we understand how CEE young people understand authority and what has influenced these beliefs. While knowledge is not solution, there is power in identifying the patterns of false belief that exist in a culture. So doing is the first step in identifying the potential means of inculcating and reinforcing right belief. Despair is a darkness that can be brushed aside as the incandescent glory of the God-Who-Is-Lord is recognized in all its goodness and authority. Everything else is detail.

Definitions

Living under the influence

The fact is, we all live under authority. It cannot be avoided. Even if we were to flee the confines of society and its established rulers, governors, police and social obligations, we would find ourselves confronted by the authority of the natural world and the laws of nature the breaking of which are for us so often capital offenses. Think over this past week, every time you've stopped at a red light, fulfilled an obligation at work, spoken a word, paid a bill, tripped and fallen, ate, slept, taken a step, jumped from the path of a car, honored your wife, assaulted your wife, repressed your rage, unleashed your anger, acted on information, respected an opinion or did just about anything else, you had an encounter with authority or submitted to the promptings of something beyond yourself – be it a law, an expert, a superior, your biology, gravity, lust, common sense, mortality, morality, your conscious or whatever. From the daily indignity of discharging our bowels to the divine grace of the Decalogue, authority is all around us and cannot be avoided.

Authority has many forms. It can be the power to create and enforce laws, exact obedience, give a command, determine or judge and it can be one invested with this power. It is an accepted source of information, regulation and advice or the justification and grounds for making certain claims. Authority is a guide, precedence, conclusive statement or decision that has the power to influence or persuade based on force, attraction, veracity, position, experience, expertise or knowledge.¹ Etymologically, the word *authority* can be traced back to its Latin root,

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language; Fourth Edition; Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000

auctor, signifying “author” or creator. This last sense conveys something perennially out of fashion – *ultimate* authority. “Authorities” are those things which – through negotiation or not – ask for, demand or win a central role in guiding how we live our lives.

It is with these definitions in mind that this paper is written.

Biting at the bit

Here is another fact: all of us have a problem with authority. The existence of authority in our lives carries with it the corresponding truth that there exists regions of our lives in which we submit – voluntarily or not – to a power beyond ourselves, which we are not capable of circumventing and against which we often have little or no real room to negotiate. This basic loss of absolute personal sovereignty is an affront to us. In the best of circumstances, in an environment under the rule of law and fair play, people are still hesitant to submit to authorities. Compound the problem by imagining a world ruled by the totalitarian fist or where corruption, the underworld and the residue of the past have ravaged civic and judicial authorities and you’re closer to understanding the local context of Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. The first casualty of abusive authority is trust.

We long for that which we resist

A conundrum sets against us. We were brought into a God-authorized universe of order and form. However much we resist authority, we sense that we have to be submitted to something for our life to have any coherency or purpose. We cannot get out of our own way. In our fallen nature, our genuine desire for guidance wars with our ego. Our anguish begins after we’ve made ourselves the center of the universe only to discover the woeful inadequacy of this – it’s as if we know our lives find meaning only in service of something else and that we are, ourselves, our own worst source of meaning.

We regard a proper understanding of this double-minded tension as a key to understanding the spiritual angst that fills so many postmodern young people with grief, despair and fright. It is also what accounts for a good deal of the hunger they have for a bit of concrete and comprehensive good news ripe with integrity.

The Structure of This Paper

Building upon this foundation, the aim of this paper is to map the contours of this problem with authority as it concerns the young people² of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the Republic of Slovakia.³ Through an evaluation of our experiences and reasoned judgments about what we already know, we have taken as our starting place the assumption that there exist significant gaps between how young people experience and think about authority and how the nature and role of authority is described by scripture and the corresponding declarations of historic,

² Roughly aged 18-36

³ Slovakia – due to its history, culture and geographic location – serves as a good model of the broader Central European condition. Slovakia shares a common history with the Austro-Hungarian nations and the Czechoslovak Federation as well as having been “privy”, along with other countries in the region, to the experience of fascism and communism and the cultural influences of German, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian and Russian communities, among others. In this way, the cultural and spiritual past of Slovakia has much in common with the bulk of her post-communist neighbors.

biblical Christianity. To better understand this gap, the primary questions we are asking are:

- What are those things to which Central and Eastern European young people most resist submitting? What are those things to which they most willingly *choose* to submit? Why?
- How do Central and Eastern European's assumptions about authority affect what they say, believe and do?
- Specifically, what are the deeply held, underlying beliefs and instinctive, gut-level reactions (as sometimes contrasted to their denominational church confession or publicly stated beliefs) that Central and Eastern Europeans have about the authority of God, the Bible, the Church and religion and faith in general?
- How can we strengthen the witness of the Church in light of what we've learned about young people's understanding of authority? In such a context, how can sharing the gospel act as an agent of change throughout Central and Eastern European society?

In order to address these questions systematically, we will examine the issue through the following framework:

- Part I: The roots of belief
 - *The shadow of the past*: a survey of how Central and Eastern European history has informed present beliefs about authority
 - *The chaos of the now*: how transition has helped current cultural and institutional trends maintain long-held erroneous beliefs about authority
- Part II: What young people believe about authority and submission
 - *Authority problems*: identifying articulated and unarticulated beliefs about authority in general as well as specifically identified categories of authority; considerations on the transmission of authority, trust, cynicism,⁴ submission and freedom
- Part III: Shattered relationships and the ramifications of these beliefs
 - *Young people's beliefs about themselves and the human soul*: the effects on sense of identity, personhood, emotions and self value
 - *Young people's beliefs about modern times*: how these beliefs effect nationalism and patriotism, the influx of Western cultural materialism and post-modern sensibilities
 - *Young people's beliefs about God and His word*: the effect on perceptions of reality, theological interests and beliefs, the church and Bible

⁴ CityGate is producing two subject papers exploring the ideas of trust and cynicism by plotting them in their Biblical context and through reflecting on their presence in Central and Eastern European life. These forthcoming papers will be available by downloading from our website at www.citygate.org or by visiting our Bratislava office.

- Part IV: Ancient truth for changing times
 - *The Biblical idea:* The book of Genesis and the practice of form as freedom from chaos, the trinity as the Biblical model for authority having an impact on everyday life including objective truth, true freedom, the necessity of submission and the need for discernment and a brief meditation on the cost of utter license
- Appendix:
 - *The Importance of Listening:* research is not a four-letter word.

Part One: The Roots of Belief

We can learn a lot by looking backward before trying to look forward. This section will explore the flow of history in Central and Eastern Europe, looking for ways in which it has molded the character of the region and its people. While countless aspects of the past have informed the present, after some introductory comments we will explore just four critical areas: politics, law, the family and church.

Introduction: The Shadow of the Past

Regarding Central and Eastern Europe, Thomas Sowell wrote, “Few regions of the world have had such fragmented peoples and cultures or such intractable conflicts.”⁵ Here, the history is one of domination, not typically of Eastern Europeans over others, but of a motley mix of others over Eastern Europeans or, later and most destructively, of *some* Eastern Europeans over their own kind.

The very act of trying to refer to this region demonstrates the fragmentation and confusion associated with this part of the world. You have to choose between “Central” or “Eastern” Europe and your choice, if it’s a conscious one, often says a good deal about you and your sense of political history and geographical reality. There is no absolute consensus – some try to compromise by stating that “Eastern Europe” refers to those states sandwiched roughly east of the Germanic countries and west of Russia, to include the Balkans and, sometimes, the Baltic States but only in a *political* sense. In a *cultural* or *geographical* sense, some say, those same nations form “Central Europe”. The fact that there exist only two possible references to the region does not convey the many justifications available for choosing one or the other. There are about as many theories as there are people espousing them.

After having settled the issue of reference, you still have to untangle the geographical knot pulled tight over several millennium of conflict. Borders have expanded and contracted with such frequency, sometime arbitrariness and too-often little regard for people groups that tension and confusion about identity have compounded the region’s other problems. You only have to look at the mess that erupted over Yugoslavia, the significantly less intense though no less real tension involving the Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and Romania, the squabble over language and place names in Ukraine, or the continuing problems surrounding and involving the region’s gypsy minorities to get a good idea of the small and large problems exacerbated by changing borders – problems involving everything from political issues to matters of simply understanding who you are and where you belong. In some regions, the sheer geographic scale makes defining yourself difficult. One Russian participant in our Gospel in Society Sessions observed, “In Russia it is difficult to know who you are – my country is so vast, how can you define yourself when you have never even seen your borders?”

Whether occurring alongside the shifting geographical fixtures or not, another thing in near-constant flux in the region has been the changing political leadership. I’ve a Slovak friend whose grandparents still remember living under the dominion of, first, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to the end of the first great war, then the first

⁵ Sowell, Thomas; *Conquests and Culture: An International History*; New York: Basic Books, 1998. pg. 187

Czechoslovak Republic of the inter-war years, the puppet state of the Slovak Republic during the second world war, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from the end of the war to 1989, and the Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic until the velvet divorce of 1993, when the Slovak Republic finally came into its present existence. This represents six different states governing your life without you ever having moved house. Another pious old woman once joked to me that when offering petitions for her government the only way she knew for whom to pray was to first look over the village square and see which flag happened to be flying there that day! Besides giving her a deep sense of arbitrariness toward the political realities of her country, the constant national change in this woman's life stood in contrast to the only thing of political constancy for her and her fellow Slovaks: no matter the geography or distance to the border, no matter the tribe, the empire, tyrant, dictator, despot or oppressor, regardless of whose flag or whose tank held sway over your town, someone or another was the master of your life and it was not you.

Politics: exiles in the homeland

The experience

From practically their very entry into their respective regions until the events leading up to the changes in 1989, many Central European people groups had rarely been in absolute political control of their own world, and the Slovaks, in particular, had essentially never been.⁶ One of the striking things about Central Europe is the number of castles and fortifications. In Slovakia the castles are useful symbols for the kind of history that has seized Slovak people, representing as they do a series of competing power structures that had little to do with the local Slavic inhabitants. While the majority of castles were built in the midst of the Slovak populations, none of the castles were ever actually occupied by a Slovak ruler. In addition, the Slovaks were generally relegated to the villages and rural areas while the major cities were left for the transients, leaving the locals a people dispossessed in their own land.⁷

In terms of sovereignty and subjugation, particularly for much of the last century, a review of the situation of the Slovaks would demonstrate some rough commonalities to other Central Europeans. As the end of the First World War neared, Czech and Slovak leaders were able to put into action a pledge of support for the creation of a separate and autonomous Czechoslovak Republic free from the dominion of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

While the Slovaks would have autonomy within this structure, they discovered that they had neither the experience nor the resources for absolute self-rule. Under the Magyars, few Slovaks ever shared in the responsibility of the political administration, for neither the local nor national government of Slovak land. The

⁶ While the Slovak town of Nitra was the seat of what's known as the Great Moravian Empire, the depth of the supposed empire is modest and, regardless, Moravians occupied the throne in Nitra and were, themselves, generally over-influenced by Rome. So even here, in one of Slovakia's greatest historical moment, the primary players were outsiders.

⁷ The amazing number of castles within Slovakia is a source of pride for Slovaks and has become a part of the national identity. But it is nevertheless interesting to consider that the castles symbolize a heritage of subjugation in which the Slovaks were held captive to the whim of occupation in their own land. This history of enforced servility has proved a remarkably difficult thing to shuffle off. It too is a part of the Slovak history.

Czechs, on the other hand, had a long history under the Austrians of basically self-administering Bohemia and Moravia. Coupling the Slovak inexperience and the lack of mature leadership with the difficulty of shrugging off more than a thousand years of enforced servility, the Slovaks found themselves depending significantly upon the assistance of their Czech partners. As the Second Great War approached, Slovakia again found herself the puppet of yet another occupying force only to be “liberated” into a final submission – through a series of abuse, bloodshed and subjugation by the Soviet Union.

This is hardly the pedigree for establishing competent self-rule.

Following WWII, this historical lack of local political power was to play an important role in the victories of the communist party throughout Central European countries. While other factors were certainly at play⁸, perhaps the primary cause was simply the political incompetence and naiveté of non-communist politicians and citizens who at the time were so fragmented in their opposition and unable to compromise among themselves that they were not able to mount any serious counter-measures to the communist advance.⁹ Given that such an innocent shortcoming of the population helped lead to the bloody mess of the 1950’s and the mayhem of communist rule, the disregard for political involvement was and remains understandable, however misguided.

Under the communists, political parties, parliaments, municipalities, banks, and all forms of national or regional economic, political, civil, judicial and social authority served not the people or society but the party¹⁰. This wasn’t something done merely happenstance, this was a direct mandate from the party itself: “ The leading...force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organizations and public organizations, is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” This quote, taken from the Soviet constitution of 1977, underlines that the political world, by design, was self-serving, not so much interested in *empowering* people as it was in *overpowering* people.

The party suffered no rebuke, rebuttal or discourse. They did not compromise; they did not broker deals or tolerate dissention. Politics became the “dirty game” avoided by good people. The party fully intended to use the political machine to redirect all public institutions to bring about an absolute world change. Only turning people’s minds – through courtship or coercion – toward the communist party doctrine could accomplish this.

Practical results

The effect of such a political system is clear. It bred chronic suspicion of ideology and fear of manipulation and it helped to keep good people from being involved in the running of civil society. It created obvious animosity as it reduced the value of the individual to a collective and made the value of the collective itself conditional

⁸ Two other factors include the division of influence in Central Europe into an American dominated sphere and a Soviet dominated sphere and the reception of communism, in part, as a reaction against fascism

⁹ For a more complete treatment of these and other issues, see *Shadows of the Past*, a CityGate study paper by Juraj Kušnierik and Milan Čičel. I am indebted to the authors for much of this section.

¹⁰ *Shadows of the Past*, section on “Politics and Public Affairs”

to its usefulness to the State. Having learned that they could not rely on the formal power structures within their society, people learned to rely on themselves and a tight knit circle of friends.

Judicial: the mockery of law

The experience

A fellow I met in a pub several years ago summarized the way police reacted to his underground activities during socialism, “We’ll pretend to chase you and you pretend to be chased.” He noted that while there were real moments of terror, interrogation and, for friends, imprisonment, disappearance, or death, for the most part, in his case, the police had an unofficial policy of ignoring official policy. “I was a nobody, this helped. My activities weren’t seen as a substantial threat. But, nevertheless, law made no real sense because it carried with it no real obligation. It seemed the only thing that really influenced whether you went to jail or were simply asked questions and let go was sheer whim or the mood of the officer.” Law wasn’t something predictable. “You might be running an underground, small-scale printing outfit publishing illegal material and you would get a phone call saying “We’ll raid you in twenty minutes.” You would then shut everything down, hide it in secure locations and wait for the police to come, make a lot of racket, intentionally find nothing and leave. The next day, you’d hear of somebody else taken away for simply carrying an illegal book – one you might even have printed.”

Practical results

The effect of this ambiguous application of the law was the reduction of civil law to something held captive by arbitrary human beings wielding their power in capricious ways. This reminds me of policy employed by the Gestapo and SS during the early days of WWII. Laws and behavior were applied against Jews in so random a manner that the very unpredictability of law - the lack of pattern for discerning what would be punished and what would be forgiven - became a weapon. When law is replaced by the randomness of mood, security gives way to fear or, in lesser scenarios, mockery and ambivalence. This is one of the causes behind the general lack of value placed in one’s word – and ultimately even the sense of value placed in the God’s Word. We lose faith when we discover the world has been turned upside down and that it is not us who are constrained under the Law but the law under us. We grow cynical when the eyes of Lady Justice are not blind but winking, coquettish and sly.

No place like home: the family

The experience

A concentrated aim of many communist governments was the disintegration of the family. A variety of means was used to pursue this directly and indirectly. Open conversations even at home were sometimes a risky thing. Parents took care not to say anything in front of their children that would inadvertently be repeated at school. Children were also trained in aspects of loyalty toward the party, which would sometimes put them at odds with their parent’s oppositional activities. In other ways as well, this war against the structure of the family took place. In Russia for example, observes writer Orlando Figes,

“The most radical Soviet architects...proposed the complete obliteration of the private sphere by building commune houses (*dom*

kommuny) where all property, including even clothes and underwear, would be shared by the inhabitants, where domestic tasks like cooking and childcare would be assigned to teams on a rotating basis, and where everybody would sleep in one big dormitory, divided by gender, with private rooms set aside for sexual liaisons.”¹¹

That such an idea hardly ever materialized and that it failed is almost beside the point. The sentiment that produced even the mere conception of such a living arrangement had dehumanization as its primary objective. While few houses of this sort were ever built they nevertheless “loomed large in the utopian imagination”¹² of the Soviets. Also, many apartment buildings *were* constructed that, while families had private living areas, several families still had to share kitchen and bathroom facilities. This was a world in which the very architecture of family housing was intended to chip away at the intimacy and privacy of a family in an effort to blend, merge and blur the divisions between one family and another until no division existed whatsoever. I find it deeply satisfying that the Russian family has outlasted the Soviet regime. The ties that bind cannot themselves be bound for long.

Pre-communist history had its impact on the family as well. In Slovakia, around the turn of the last century, tens of thousands of Slovak men traveled abroad – mostly to America – in order to work and earn far greater amounts of money than they could at home. They would send this money back to their wives who were caring for the home and children. The plan was either to wait until they had earned enough money for the wife and children to join the men or simply wait until they earned a substantial enough amount of money for the men to return. While their husbands were abroad working, thousands upon thousands of women became responsible for running the home, raising the children, managing finances, bringing in the crops and every other responsibility association with life and home. When the husbands did return, they often encountered different, far more independent women than the ones they had left. And, whether overtly or otherwise, the majority of the women were in no mood to surrender the power they had been compelled to shoulder.

Practical results

The issues surrounding male emigration and the need of Slovak women to take the dominate role in the family probably partly explains the relative strength of Slavic women in comparison to their men and helps to identify some of the roots of the gender competition apparent in many CEE societies. Later, in the sections dealing with young people’s specific beliefs about authority, we will see how masculine and feminine authority is perceived.

Church: worship in a box

This section deals with four of the areas of Church life – theology, the mentality of Christians, church organizational structures and the church/state relationship - most influenced by Central European communism. The residual effects of communism on these areas still directly affect current attitudes toward authority. Most of my

¹¹ Figes, Orlando; *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*; New York, Metropolitan Books, 2002 pg 446

¹² *ibid*

treatment of these four areas is taken directly from the CityGate study paper, *Shadows of the Past* and this resource should be consulted for a more complete analysis.

Theology

Genuine theological education was almost impossible under communism. Only a few theological seminaries were officially registered in each country (a few Roman Catholic, a few Protestant) and the quality of theological study was heavily controlled by the communists and influenced by German liberalism.

Such poor theological training has assisted in the deterioration of confidence in the rationality of the Christian faith and in Biblical and theological authority. When we speak to students, they describe a lack of belief in the relevance of theology to daily life and see any relationship between reason and faith as cold, non-relational and overly academic. In a skeptical age, this lack of confidence in reason hamstrings any attempt of Christian apologetics or of trying to validate faith claims.

Mentality of Christians

There was strong pressure to keep faith and religion in the private sphere which had nothing, or very little, to do with public life (political or professional). In the minds of many Christians this dichotomy created a deeply dualistic sense of spirituality,

“Protestant Christians under communism...tended to see the physical world as evil and the world of religious ideas as good. This platonic division is described in detail in other places. One of its roots is in 19th century pietism with its narrow view of spirituality as a personal, existential and emotional awareness of relationship with God. Another root lies in the experience of communism, which pushed Christianity, quite successfully into a private, “religious” sphere of life.”¹³

The subcultures generated by denominations had their roots in the Fifties when churches had to struggle for survival under stiff Stalinist oppression. But church traditions have always played an important role, giving many Christians a level of identity. Adherence to certain traditions was sometimes mistakenly perceived as demonstrating a “holy” separation from a sinful world. The results, however familiar or even current, were sometimes on the edge of absurdity - wearing jeans or having a beard was, for example, considered to be a serious sin in some communities.

As it lost its ability to be relevant in the lives of people, Christianity abdicated its ability to serve as a moral compass. Its often-ghettoized mentality ruined the church’s ability to have an authoritative voice in the everyday lives of the average person, especially the young. As the faith became, by the necessity of surviving and not drawing attention, inwardly focused, overt outward expressions of faith waned, including overt types of social activism and charity. The emergence of a faith essentially silent in the face of evil and suffering and having at best a seemingly superficial concern for justice and social morality, found the church losing its

¹³ Trends – Ten Years On, page 29

credibility as a witness and further dissolved the authoritative appeal of Christian belief itself.¹⁴

Structures

It is stating the obvious to say that Communist countries were organized and governed centrally. It is also no surprise to find that the state considered all institutions a mere extension of itself, so that all other registered organizations, including churches, were forced to be structured and organized in the same manner. The centralized structure to the church was soon understood to be quite natural and, after all, the only right (biblical) way a church should function.

One important result of this was that, too often, the church became one more place where the unique individuality of a person was subjugated to the communal will of a collective. This would prove a difficult tendency to overcome.

The Church/State Relationship

Probably the most controversial aspect of Church life under communist rule is its relationship with the State during those difficult years.¹⁵ Most Eastern European Christians understood the problem of the attitude towards the State to be important but very complicated. There were absolute biblical principles on one side and the complicated, controversial, and confusing reality of every day life on the other. It was generally clear that Christians should not lie. They should be honest and live in truth, however high the price. But they were often faced with situations when they had to decide between an uncompromising stand for truth and being responsible and protecting their families and friends. It was not easy, for example, to join the dissident movement (even if it was clear that truth and justice were on its side)

¹⁴ Regarding social concern, "One of the essential ambitions of a Christian church is to reach out of itself into the secular world. It is interesting to see the development in this area during the Communist rule. In the 1980s it began to be possible to meet regularly with a small group of friends in one's home. It was never officially allowed but it was usually tolerated¹⁴. The movement of small home Bible study groups grew. In principle, statistics are impossible to achieve because it was very informal and sometimes conspiratorial. Some young people, especially students, tried to communicate their faith to their non-Christian friends and conversions were no longer so unusual." From *Shadows of the Past*

¹⁵ "It is not easy to describe the church/state relationship for many reasons. Here are four:

- 1) The Church did not have an official, uniform attitude towards its relationship with the State. In each country and each denomination were people who held ideas about it ranging the entire spectrum.
- 2) Very few people held clearly defined attitudes towards this issue and could not openly communicate them if they were critical of the communist establishment.
- 3) The problem of the Church/State relationship under communism is still too sensitive to be dealt with rationally and with historical precision. Many people who were emotionally involved still have memories too fresh to achieve the distance necessary for an objective evaluation.
- 4) The Church/State relationship was understood to be one of the most sensitive and, at the same time, one of the most important issues Christians in Central Europe struggled with." From *Shadows of the Past*

knowing it would lead to persecution of one's children and friends. Ethical compromises were sometimes hard to avoid.¹⁶

Some Christians (even high-ranking Church leaders such as Cardinal Vishinski in Poland, Cardinal Tomášek in the Czech Republic or Cardinal Korec in Slovakia) took part in the political opposition movement during the whole period of communism.

Other Christians were overtly loyal to Communist authorities, took part in their organizations¹⁷ and encouraged others to do the same.

That the majority of Christians in all denominations belonged to neither of these groups is important; though the difficulty of reconciling Christian faith and pragmatism remained. For many, the close relationship of the Church and state signaled a crisis of belief and many still harbor deep resentment toward any notion of Christian authority, especially as many recall situations in which professed believers informed on their neighbors, professed loyalty to, and in other ways abetted with, the communist rulers.

That a vast number of good Christians risked their lives and security by resisting the party in everyway - including the formation of a "spiritual opposition" that helped hasten the communists to their fall - is beyond question. That many believers did little to resist the atrocities is equally true. It is an enormously complex and perilous issue toward which one must advance with considerable humility, grace and compassion. One must be particularly quick to listen and slow to pass judgment.

Summary

While no one is a slave to their past, it is equally obtuse to say no one is affected by it. The history of Central and Eastern Europe has had an obvious and significant impact on its people. One of the most enduring effects is a feeling of almost total disconnection *from* that past. The various regimes that have rolled through all in their own ways tried to abandon the influence of their predecessors and ignite something entirely new. Juraj Kušnierik quoted a local historian who wrote, "the history of Slovakia is the history of demolitions and new beginnings."

The shadow of the past has made clear-sightedness a difficult thing, creating something of a paradoxical situation – Central Europeans are so affected by the fragmentation of their past that they don't actually see them as affected by it at all. Young people assume that nothing that happened before they were born has any real, lasting affect on them. In reference to the regimes of the past, Kušnierik continued, "Each of them left a mark on our 'collective memory'. All of them together put deep into our minds the feeling that history is a set of unconnected periods, that a "historic continuity" is an illusion, that if there is one thing we can

¹⁶Some pastors were regularly summoned to the secret police and, besides other things, were often asked if there was any foreigner in his Church recently. The answer was usually a resolute "No," although it was (usually) a clear lie.

Another "classical" example was literature smuggling. *Shadows of the Past*

¹⁷A typical example of Communist led religious organization was Pacem In Terris, an association of Roman Catholic priests, that had in its statutes acknowledgement of Communist Party being a leading force in Czechoslovak politics. From *Shadows of the Past*

learn from history, it is that it does not matter --- we do not create it, it is always imposed on us.”¹⁸

The Chaos of the Now

“We have not wings, we cannot soar;
But we have feet to scale and climb
By slow degrees, by more and more,
The cloudy summits of our time”

Birds of passage, Longfellow

“On 1 January 1993, this nation finally conquered its own territory,” wrote Martin Simecka about Slovakia.¹⁹ In doing so, the republic entered a turbulent mixture of euphoria, fear, elation and despair and joined her newly independent neighbors in the advent of the single greatest period of change in the long history of Central and Eastern Europe. It’s been a difficult, complex experience often thought to be too much for Eastern European citizenry to handle. Simecka continued, “For the first time in history, this nation experienced years of real freedom, and for the first time in history, it has to rely on itself in its own country. There is no experience it can lean on.”²⁰

For everyone, it has been a time of dizzying change, bringing with it an amalgamation of fear, joy, expectation and disillusionment. The amount of options available and the new choices that fill daily life to a greater and greater degree are reaching, for some, an almost overwhelming complexity.

The lack of a common experience of self-rule carries with it a lack of common identity. Under communism, “the question of identity was ‘unofficially forbidden.’ National awareness was covered by the official philosophy of ‘proletarian internationalism’, based on an assumption that real differences are not between different nations but between different classes.”²¹ But of course real differences *do* exist and the realization of this was as startling as it was novel, “After 1989 many people began to discover that they really actually *are* Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, Slavs, Central Europeans, Europeans, etc. The positive aspect of this process is discovering one’s own history and culture. The negative one is xenophobia and the tendency to create the image of an enemy to accompany it.”²²

This creation of an “enemy” was played out in more nuanced ways than merely between national groups. The period of transition and the resulting changes was something of a wedge-driver creating minor and major chasms across the

¹⁸ Juraj Kušnierik, *Evangelicals in Central Europe*, CityGate study paper, Bratislava, 1996

¹⁹ Simecka, Martin; “Slovakia’s Lonely Independence”, *Transitions*, Vol. 4, NO. 3, August 1997 pg. 18

²⁰ *Ibid*, pgs 20-21

²¹ *Shadows of the Past*, pg. 9

²² *Ibid*

sociological spectrum and tearing fissures through political parties, vocations, churches and family.

Political and public life

Slovak society found itself once again ill equipped to run its own country. “For a full 50 years, Slovakia had no experience of a free politics,” says journalist Stephan Hrib, “A chance finally emerged in November 1989, when politics began to be spoken of as a service to citizens.”²³ Unfortunately, the hopes of many were dashed when Vladimir Mečiar, the Slovak Prime Minister who pushed Slovakia to split from the Czech Republic, did nothing to strengthen Slovak trust in the political system. Accusations against him ranged from criminal nepotism and underhanded privatization of state resources to state sanctioned blackmail and even kidnapping and political murder. Act after act, Mečiar introduced chaos into the legal system, isolating those in opposition to him and nearly scuttling Slovakia’s political and foreign direct investment opportunities in the eyes of international observers. Mečiar is by no means an anomaly and finds comparable – if more extreme – counterparts in Serbia’s Milosovic, Lukashenka of Belarus and others. Nor is there anything novel about this ilk, they are old clichés cut from the same, tired mold: dictators more interested in satiating megalomania than in serving the country they rule.

All of this served to isolate Slovakia within the European community and to boost expectations that Slovakia would turn its back on the West and seek friendship, or at least alliance, with the East. The political opposition could never look past its own internal squabbles to pose any real challenge to Mečiar’s popularity and their lack of political maturity only exacerbated the skepticism most people already felt regarding the political world’s ability to have any positive effect on their lives. During the first truly free elections in their lives, many people chose *not* to vote as a demonstration against what they perceived to be the ceaseless self-interests of ruling and would-be ruling parties.

A mere few years into it, and politics in the free world had already taken on the stench of politics in the old.

Even now that Slovakia has managed – to her own surprise and almost despite herself – to govern herself into position to enter both NATO and the European Union, the residue of the past sticks to present perceptions about politics. Many Slovaks are still deeply suspicious of politics and assume that there will be corruption and theft under whatever party rules. They feel that the right to vote is at best of dubious value and is reduced most often to choosing between the lesser of many demons. There is no illusion that politicians have entered the arena for the sake of the people but, instead, merely for the sake of themselves. Power corrupts, this is true throughout this cursed world, but, nevertheless, so deep a cynicism about the value of freedom in public life is not without its costs. Not only does it undermine a sense of duty to reason and vote, but, as well, this tendency toward non-participation at any political level leaves many good people feeling deeply ashamed and guilty at their attitude of disregard and powerlessness regarding political life and public service.

²³ Stephan Hrib is senior editor of the excellent *Domino Forum*, a popular Slovak journal. A third party forwarded these comments to me via email and their source is unknown.

The new social (dis)order

At a social level, people were so caught up in the gloom that had replaced the early euphoria that to a perceptive person the tension was palpable. There was an edge to the way people often dealt with each other, harsher than most people from the outside were prepared to expect. On the crowded mass transit system, passengers clamored aboard and remained mostly silent during the extent of their journey. People seemed to have no energy for interaction, casual pleasantries or really for anything more than a fight for a seat into which they slump and bury themselves in a newspaper.²⁴

People were not ready for the new droves of homeless and out-of-work poor; they found themselves floundering to develop a social consciousness and a sense of activism. On the other side, they were knocked off-balance by the advent of the mafia and the extreme racketeering and territory wars that occasionally plagued the historic quarter.

More and more it began to seem that it was not so much that the old regime had corrupted politics but that politics itself was, itself, a corrupt and socially impotent power game.

Big fish, no pond: life and the petty bureaucrat

While most people have no significant involvement in criminal extortion or corruption, everyone in the CEE has enough stories of dealing with petty bureaucracy to fill a book.²⁵ In the past, people were kept so busy with paper work, jumping through hoops, waiting in line and collecting the appropriate rubber stamps that they ended up feeling like a mere cog in a vast, inhuman system. In many areas of public life, very little has changed.

In trying to manage some trivial affair you might wait in line for several hours before a bureaucrat's window only to get to the front of the line and discover the bureaucrat packing up for the day or taking off to lunch. When you do get an interview, you often find yourself staring through a dingy, opaque glass through which you can barely see or hear the person with whom you're dealing. You often need to bend way down to talk through the one opening near the counter. These silly, almost insignificant inconveniencies stack up until they percolate into anger, anxiety and deep resentment. You begin to believe you're an unwilling participant in a silly game in which the only real rule is to make the bureaucrat feel necessary.

I went to a train station information kiosk in which there were three people ahead of me. One by one each person would try to get information about an outgoing train only to be screamed at by the woman in charge. Two out of the three left without the information they wanted. The third got what he wanted but also got an earful of much he did not want. When it was my turn to stand before the now spit-flecked

²⁴ I have recently been impressed by the change in this. More frequently, even during commuting hours, people on public transport go about their trip with a greater sense of levity and joy. Laughter and amiable chatter is becoming the norm now.

²⁵ In fact, we have. *Bureaucracy: How to Live with the System and Sometimes Beat It* is a semi-humorous paper written by CityGate director Marsh Moyle sharing the strategies and principles necessary when dealing with Central European bureaucratic hassles.

window, my plan was to be as pleasant as possible, fawning even, and to throw myself at the woman's mercy. Things began well enough and I decided to really slather on the chumminess, asking her about her day. She threw up her hands in frustration and addressed me like a confidant, "You know what?" she asked, leaning forward and whispering, "It's terrible; no one will leave me alone. I've been trying to read but everybody wants to bother me with questions!" I chuckled and foolishly joked that it is an odd thing for people to come to an information window with questions. By the time she was finished yelling at me, it was clear that I had just made the failure ration three out of four.

The fact that people have to placate and devise strategies just to get information from someone's whose job it is to dispense is harmfully demeaning. When dealing with bureaucrats, people know to intentionally belittle themselves and to make the authority feel very distinguished and terribly important, convincing the authority that only he has the power to help so poor a petitioner out of their trouble. Bribery is rampant, if not with money, alcohol or other goods than surely with praise, accolades and other utterly insincere forms of flattery. Over time, people respond to this by simply avoiding the available public services and, instead, learning to do as much as they can on their own. This leaves them feeling like the civil authorities have little interest in their needs and that they can only rely on themselves.

However people deal with the bureaucrat two things are for certain: the bureaucrat - and the system he represents - is taken for a hopeless buffoon, whatever his power and, two, most people feel very strongly that it is very much a matter of "us against them" when it comes to citizens and local authorities.

Atomization and the formless self

The rigid, hyper-structure of totalitarianism has given way to the seemingly endless horizon of mass-market²⁶ consumerism – economically and otherwise. Beyond simply replacing a lack of material choice with an overwhelming flood of consumption, the new freedoms have also brought "liberation" from the old structures of religious and civic life. Robert Pittman, founder of the popular MTV music-video station, unwittingly provides a succinct description of this phenomenon, "MTV has liberated television itself from . . .the meaning of time, or narrative or paradox or necessity or cause and effect. [It has] eliminated the sacred and the profane . . . and authority as represented by school teachers, policemen, clergy and parents."

I put the word "liberation" above in quotation marks because I doubt whether liberty so described is really freedom. The problem begins with an indiscriminating, absolutely carte-blanch approach to liberation. There is no careful analysis of what types of authority worked and what didn't work; instead, the assumption is that the thing to be achieved at all costs is liberation from all constraints. The problem only festers when no real alternative to traditional authorities is offered. MTV caters to a specified target audience made up of young adolescent males feasting their emergence into pubescence with a standard bill-of-fare too often involving rutting like rabbits, misogyny, anti-institutionalism, satiation of appetite and power defined as the accumulation of wealth, power, sexual

²⁶ I was tempted to call it "free-market" but we are not quite there yet; the transition from crony-capitalism is not yet complete and is certainly not entirely free.

conquests and violence. Of course, hypocrisy abounds. MTV – however liberated it wants to believe it is – is actually tied to several authorities, to name but two: it is utterly shackled to market forces and the bottom line as any other commercial endeavor; and it echoes an enslavement to time as it consistently insists that desire is to be gratified *at once* and at all costs.²⁷

The tragedy lies in the misconception of where our liberation is really leading. We assume that liberation means true freedom. But young people are finding that when they've disintegrated the ties that bind them to authorities beyond themselves they cannot then replace that authority with their own ego. This only makes sense; they are not the center of the universe and nothing will orbit them. They are finding that they do not generate their own drive; and that their only real choice is to be either in orbit or cast adrift. Isolated and without the connections linking them to anything around them, CEE young people are feeling powerless in their ability to navigate. They are discovering the difference in being free and merely being afloat. In their quest for emancipation, many are finding themselves merely so many individual particles without a nucleus around which to bind, relate and establish form. They are becoming atomized.²⁸ The road to atomization is not liberty, it is license. That the two are so often confused tells us much about our contemporary mindset.

Atomization of relationships

Atomized individuals by definition can no longer share any real commitment with each other, as there's nothing substantive on which to hold. We can no longer regard one another in terms of duties and moral responsibilities but can only approach relationship with mercantile self-interest. Several sexually-active teenagers (Christians and non-Christians) tell me with frank frustration that their erotic hook-ups are so void of connection with their "partner" that the activity feels merely like masturbation in the presence of another person. They complain that relationships carry no inherent value anymore. Relational components like respect, sacrifice or mutuality are no longer safe-assumptions but must be brokered through negotiation and contract.

Surely the most devastating impact of this new contractual approach to relationship is in the home, where the trauma of shattered families and broken homes has reached epidemic proportions. One social worker commented to me in 1996 that drug use had become so rampant among teenagers living along one major road in the Petržalka quarter of Bratislava that she estimated more than 60% of the kids

²⁷ I'm not trying to engage in MTV bashing here. While MTV certainly has a role as cultural former, I believe it is more a "mere" cultural reflector. In this sense, it has enormous value as a tool to understand a bit about the culture at hand. Nevertheless, I do think MTV and programs like it are tinder and can be quite dangerous when consumed with after-school ambivalence. MTV, to continue and enjoy its ratings, gives young people what they want – not necessarily what they need. It caters to, fosters and exploits teenage longings, anxieties and expectations in a style characteristic of the quotation above.

²⁸ French writer Michel Houellebecq explores the reality of this in his profoundly disturbing novel *Atomized*. While the novel's graphic (and perhaps finally gratuitous) sexual description renders it not for everyone, the novel sheds light on the limits of fulfillment, immediate gratification and individualism and on the catastrophe of life void of relationships offering reciprocity, unconditional love, acceptance and a deep sense of connectedness.

would be burned out inside of five years. She attributed this surge in drug use to parents with enough income, opportunity and emancipation from traditional values to allow the possibility of divorce to destroy families.

The Church: recovering from the trauma

Like just about everything else, the church in Central Europe is still trying to recover from the past. It is in a period of travail and rediscovery: of her theological beliefs, civic and social responsibilities, history, scholarship, and contemporary relevance. The following excerpt provides a good overview of the present religious scene:

“It is fair to say that people are generally much more religious now than they seemed to be at any time during the rule of the communist party. Most of the ‘practical religiosity’ is of a very informal, non-institutional, non-systematic kind. It is mostly a ‘religious feeling’, a non-verbalized belief that ‘there is something between heaven and earth’, a sense of transcendence. Maybe people in every period of history have had beliefs like that. In atheistic communist societies however, it was suppressed, it was not possible to talk about it without being ridiculed. Among some urban intellectuals there is a fascination with eastern religions, especially Buddhism. What attracts and fascinates people are radicalism and an experience of depth in meditation. [For instance] there are very people who would consider themselves to be Buddhists [but] there are people who try to broaden their ‘Christianity’ by some aspects of Buddhist spirituality.”²⁹

There is a lot to say about the church in transition but much has already been written and this paper is not the place to get into an exhaustive analysis of the many issues.³⁰ Instead, we will look at a few of the consequences of the past most directly affecting CEE young people’s regard for the church as a positive or significant authority and that affects how the church *as* an authority tends to color people’s perceptions about other forms of authority as well. As this is a paper attempting to identify belief structures most in need of change, I am not attempting a balanced view of the Church but rather one that focuses on areas having the greatest negative influence.

Theology

The emerging church found itself without a systematic framework for understanding key concepts of Biblical theology and little awareness of the everyday value of theological knowledge. Many Christians felt that all that was necessary for a deeply Christian life was to be silent and simply walk with God, doing his will throughout life. This rather “naïve openness” left the church susceptible to being influenced by the unexpected charisma of a pluralistic world. With no consistent system of belief, the Church found herself often trying to confront challenges and threats alike on a purely ad hoc basis.³¹

²⁹ Trends – Ten Years On page 20

³⁰ CityGate has written several research papers on the transitioning church in CEE, among them, *Evangelicals in Central Europe; Trends in Central and Eastern Europe*, and *Trends – Ten Years On*

³¹ *Shadows of the Past*, pg 22

With no resonant voice to speak informingly to a society saturated in new thought, the Church found herself without the confidence and vigor to present a winsome challenge to the alternatives facing traditional faith and belief. The Church's lack of response led directly to a great deal of skepticism and disillusionment and indirectly to her fresh and vibrant rivals receiving a greater amount of interest from young people looking for relief from traditional and tired structures.³²

Christian mentality

The latent fragmentation of post-modern society cannot provide the necessary foundations for bridging the gaps inherent in the platonic spirituality exacerbated by communist society. Many good Christians still live in highly dualistic worlds; divided in public and private spheres of life that are, themselves, further depressed by a division of the world into spiritual and the physical components.

A glance through the various Christian magazines available yields few articles dealing with important issues outside the immediate church, such as nationalism, crime, privatization, unemployment or any of the other numerous economic, social or political problems that are in serious need of focused and informed Christian engagement.

Today's young people are not content with this arrangement and are reacting against this duality with a strong push for an integrated life. The upside of this is an honest reassessment of the nature of reality and the intersection of faith and society. The downside is that with little solid theological foundation, young people are ill prepared to carefully handle the negotiation of their faith into the rapacious pluralism around them. The pace of modern life provides little time for careful reflection.

We need solid examples, living testimonies to how the reality Christ can blend seamlessly with everyday life. The models exist, both today and from the past, "There were a few people for whom identification with Christianity and Church service attendance was a manifestation of personal freedom and integrity. They were living examples of a holistic approach to life lived in truth and dignity even in the gray reality of "existing socialism". Perhaps the lives of these people helped more than was ever acknowledged to bring an early end to communism."³³

³² There is change. Many local Christians and pastors have begun dealing seriously with the challenges facing the Church. Local changes have begun appearing as well, "There are several dozen newly established theological schools in Central and Eastern Europe. They provide much needed theological education to hundreds (maybe thousands) of young Christians. What influence has theological education had? Is preaching deeper and more profound? Are the graduates of these school men and women of character and knowledge? Are they able to deal with complex issues of post-communist societies from the perspective of historic biblical Christianity? The curriculum and structure of theological schools in Central and Eastern Europe are based on the experience of the church in the West. To what extent is it adapted to the local culture? These schools might easily become islands of Western culture, with little or no contact with real life in the host country. It is possibly too early to answer these questions." from *Shadows of the Past*, page 23

³³ Ibid

Part Two: What Young People Think

Explanatory Notes

Through our conversations with Central and Eastern European young people we've gathered a wide body of information regarding their beliefs about authority, tackling the issue through a variety of different angles each prompting new avenues of response and inquiry. As we begin to hear the same ideas repeated time and again, we've mined those particular ideas to see how much deeper we can go, all the while looking for more patterns and root causes. Our conversations have tackled the issue directly; employed metaphor and indirect descriptions, induced highly reasoned responses and provoked more abstract, creative exchanges. Throughout, we've sifted and scaled, deconstructed and reconstructed in an effort to gain as complete and clear a picture as we can.

In trying to deal with so much information in a systematic way, I've attempted to identify seemingly large-scale patterns and have suggested seven "macro-categories"³⁴ which try to isolate the patterns that seem most dominate, they are:

- Progressive and Antiquated Authority
- Actual and Ideal Authority
- Internal and External Authority
- Individual and Collective Authority
- Prescriptive and Indifferent Authority
- Formal and Informal Authority
- Institutional and Relational Authority

Some of these macro-categories comprise several sub-categories,³⁵ which are related but which generally have shades of nuance warranting at least minor delineation. Other of these macro-categories simply stand-alone.

Many of the categories are arranged in pairs, usually antagonistic, reflecting related but generally opposite ideas. These are not necessarily intended to demonstrate diametrically opposed thematic patterns but ones that, when set in comparison to each other, illuminate important differences of varying degree.

You may find that these categories overlap or seem to include or exclude arbitrarily. Certainly, many of the categories could be rearranged, expanded or contracted. My goal is simply to provide as nuanced a reflection as possible to consider the interlocking matrix of Central European belief in a helpful way. While clear patterns *have* emerged and while there is power in the patterns, I do not imagine this to be an exhaustive analysis. Nor do I intend to oversimplify a good deal of complexity. We are dealing with human beings; this means we must to some degree

³⁴ Macro-categories in this section are underlined and set in bold

³⁵ The Sub-categories are only underlined and set in italics

be comfortable with complexity. There are no neat lines, no carefully structured boxes that succinctly describe complex, human beliefs. If this were pasta, we would not be dealing with a pan of orderly and logical lasagna; we would be dealing with the tangled elegance of spaghetti. Still, however tangled, spaghetti – if cooked right - is never truly knotted, individual strands *can* be identified and, in very nature, it was made to be digested.

Progressive and Antiquated Authority

A student once accused me of being a fish. He said it with a smile so though I knew he didn't want to be malicious I was still perplexed.

“A fish?” I asked.

“You know; a salmon.” He said, meaning it in reference to my move to Slovakia. “Everyone here is trying to get to America and here you are, swimming against the flow and coming here.”

He simply did not understand why I would do such a thing, saying he would give his arm to leave his homeland. America for him was a land of progress and movement forward. Slovakia, on the other hand, was a culture in decay, in need of a good deal of beating to rid it of its dust. I've met many like-minded people here.

Two Worlds

There is a notion in the Slavic world that there exist two worlds – that which we are trying to leave and that to which we are trying to go. The border of these two worlds lies along the division of the old and the new. The new is almost indiscriminately considered good while the old is simply seen as out.

The old encompasses village life, the traditional church and religion, traditional families, ordinary appearance, living in moderation and certain working habits – such as being content with a modest income and an unremarkable career or profession. These things have generally lost their ability to influence, are not necessarily seen as desirable and, when negotiable, have little authoritative impact.

What *does* motivate is the “new” and includes things like city life, fashion, giving a great deal of attention to appearance, fast-paced and exciting lifestyles, modern gadgets, acquisition and large disposable incomes.

Out with the old, need for the new

Many of my students who aren't native to Bratislava are embarrassed to say where they are from, especially if it's a particularly small village or in an unfashionable region of the country. I've often traveled to old village celebrations or festivals and am sometimes surprised at the reaction of young people who show open disdain for their village traditions. They are often surprised to realize that a foreigner would find such things interesting. Sometimes, however, this interest only seems to confirm for them the belief that their practices are quaint, old world and backward. In conversations about authority with young Central Europeans, I've asked them to either select pictorial images or to describe verbal pictures that they associate with insignificant authority. Very often, pictures of old villages, traditional dress, and religious or folk customs are chosen.

In many areas, the strengthening relationship with the West has seemed to produce an uncritical desire for the glittery newness of material and economic innovations. I have a friend who obsessively upgrades his cell phone whenever he can because he

feels a need to have the latest and the best. He cannot afford this, but he feels his identity is tied to having a piece of technology worthy of comment.³⁶ A great deal of energy and expense goes into building an appearance that is progressive. Young people identify strong and beautiful people and the drive to replicate such an image as a significant source of authority, influencing their behavior, expenditures, and value system.

Ironically, this desire for the new produces the same deep yearning and appreciation for tradition – exactly the kind of yearning that compels a foreigner to seek out village festivals. The new lifestyle produces little contentment but, rather, a great deal of stress. Too often, the reaction against this stress and discontentment is either an irrationally critical disregard of the new, deep anxiety over a feeling of entrapment or an over-romanticized vision of a nostalgic past.

Deeply frustrated with the inadequacy of their ambition, many either live in the past – which tends to create an almost immobilizing nostalgia or shame for what’s been lost – or they tend to live in the future – which builds ever-increasing levels of anxiety as the future remains something distant and perpetually unachievable. Others try to straddle worlds, looking toward the new for direction and belief and all the while looking back for the easy-paced sanctuary of less anxious times.³⁷

Many good people - and not a few otherwise good relationships - are being pulled apart by the tension.

Actual and Ideal Authority

Almost as an extension of the idea of two worlds, many young people identify two sources of influence: the way things are and the way things “ought” to be. The way things *are* – the real world – is often described as something not chosen but rather imposed. The “actual” is made up of a series of restrictions – time-based limitations, other people’s agendas, impending deadlines, duties and other requirements of profession, relationships, religion, or civil or judicial responsibilities. In a word, the “actual” is seen as one large system of constraint. Young people chose to use images of watches, day-timers, law books, fences, shackles and even clothing as descriptions of things that trap them.

The idealized world is just the opposite and is perceived as a sense of freedom, removal from the world of constraints, a strong feeling of remote, unhindered living, a world that allows the expression and achievement of one’s own agenda versus that of another - it is a world uninhibited by even time so that unscheduled spontaneity is the order of the day. Images of the Tuscan countryside, great expanses of blue sky

³⁶ Western advertising has grown so savvy and sophisticated that young people in developing economies stand little chance of withstanding the sales pitch. In a world losing its hold on transcendental values, the material world with all its accessories is a temptation against which Central Europeans have cultivated few skills for discernment, evaluation or resistance. Many young people here know this and are therefore deeply suspicious of what they see as Western salesmanship – this often includes religious groups, evangelists and missionaries.

³⁷ Slovaks are by character an agricultural and rural people deeply connected to their land. City life and urban sensibilities are new to them – it’s just in the last century that Slovaks populated their own major cities to any significant degree. The heartland of Slovakia is its mountainous regions and it’s here that major cultural or political events began – such as the writing of the first known declaration by the Slovak people of their nationhood, the *Demands of the Slovak Nation*.

and open space and roads that disappear into the horizon commonly represented this desire.

Two seeming extremes: constraint and freedom. No one likes to feel the former. Normal human beings relish freedom. In a world in which choice is limited by circumstances – financial, experience or skills, opportunity, etc – of which there so often seems no way out, the greatest source of freedom is often a fantasy of unrestrained personal liberty.³⁸

There seems no reconciliation of these extremes; and, without one, the resulting frustration can never fully resolved and we end up with an almost unbearable tension as CEE young people live divided between a world they cannot endure and another they cannot achieve.

Urban and Natural Authority

Another expression of the actual and the ideal involves the tension between young people's regard for the world of nature and the world of the city, referred to here as the "natural" and the "urban" respectively.

On the one hand, the city is seen as an urban mess – too fast-paced, too impersonal, too dirty, soulless and gray. The city is associated with smog, gloom and the stench of exhaust fumes, old beer and urine. Danger is everywhere; images abound of shadowed alleyways, pimps, and hypodermic needles lying around playgrounds.

Contrast this with the highly positive Central and Eastern European disposition toward the natural world – a world at once relaxing and refreshing, pure, clean, colorful, vibrant and full of life and healthy activity. There is a strong Slavic regard for the earth. If Slovaks are patriotic at all, it most often has to do with their homeland as a physical thing. Young people are often active in hiking and orienteering and have an extremely high degree of pride in their national wilderness areas and mountain ranges – such as the Slovak zeal for their *vysoké tatry* (High Tatras).³⁹

On the other hand, the natural or rural world is also seen as a place of back-wood naivety. It is associated with the primitive, the unsophisticated, and the quaint, as a place where professional ambition dead-ends and where foolish people vote for socialist politicians with a penchant for restraining personal empowerment.

The urban, in light of this, is esteemed as modern, highly sophisticated, cosmopolitan and, in a word, well, urbane. The city is current and progressive, things are moving forward and carry with them those with the drive, the energy and will to succeed. Remembering that the cultivation of image motivates young people

³⁸ This fantasy helps to dull any imagination for a balance between proper constraint and appropriate freedom. Also, the fantasy seems to be enough to (temporarily) satisfy. Instead of being a motivational tool – something goading one to improve their circumstances so as to achieve a greater degree of authentic personal freedom – fantasy tends to allow the indulgence of complacency.

³⁹ However much Slovaks regard nature, it is an important thing to remember that for the most part, nature is relegated to a place for vacations or weekend outings. And while nature might be revered, the group of people who actually go out and enjoy it is relatively small. Being from Alaska, I may have a particular fondness for natural areas but, nevertheless, I've been to more of Slovakia's natural areas, hiking regions and wilderness than most Slovaks that I know.

and understanding that image counts for relatively little in a village, the city is the place to be.

There is tension here and it is multiplied when you remember that nearly every city dweller has very close family members living in villages and small towns. Very often, city residents themselves are newcomers, having “emigrated” from the villages they both scorn and cherish; and these roots and sense of connectedness to a world at once both unsophisticated and boring – and sometimes even boorish - on the one hand and revered and longed-for on the other presents dilemmas of identity for those caught between.⁴⁰

Technological and Rustic Authority

While it may seem inconsistent with the ideas above about progress and newness, there is an aversion nevertheless to certain technologies that have emerged from the West. The young people in the CEE disdain many of the gadgets that Westerners employ to make work and life more efficient. I think the key to understanding the seeming inconsistency lies in realizing that when disparaging technologies CEE young people are, perhaps, doing two things at once. First, they are again demonstrating an appreciation for simpler times – referred to here as “rustic” - free of the bells and whistles of modern life; and, second, they are identifying the sometimes-dehumanizing element of the modern and “technological.”

By way of clarity, when I say technology I’m not talking only about lasers and microprocessors. I’m referring to any of a wide range of tools developed to change for the better the way we do life.⁴¹

Some technologies are received with outright apprehension: particularly those associated with cloning, genetic engineering and warfare. CEE young people easily imagine technology being used for all sorts of illicit purposes from high-tech crime, to germ warfare and terrorism, to invasion of privacy, Internet pornography and spying.

Even technologies that are intended to have a life-enhancing purpose are seen as suspicious.

A case in point involves a local organization I know that is trying to restructure the way it manages itself and the authority and accountability structure it is trying to build to match the growth the organization has enjoyed over the last several years. Where before, it was enough to have a few highly informal policies regarding planning and strategies, now that the organization is several times larger, more formal system strategies need to be employed in order to allow everyone to stay in the communication loop, to have the support and resources necessary for their

⁴⁰ A Hungarian friend who had moved to Budapest once summarized this tension when he was reflecting on his home-village, saying, “You’ve got to remember, we are all peasants really. We may be peasants of good stock, but we’re peasants nonetheless. We long for a developed world but still remember – with another kind of longing – our organic heritage.”

⁴¹ I’m indebted here to Allan Bussard of Integra for a paper entitled, “Tension in Mission: *The Dilemma of Western Energy*” in which he wrote, “Technology describes a pervasive worldview, the juice with which the western mind is marinated. Jacques Ellul speaks of a way of viewing the world and its problems that is characterized by precision, rapidity, certainty, continuity and universality. It is the way of seeing things that believes that any problem can be overcome by the efficient application of appropriate resources.”

projects, to review and plan appropriate strategies and to provide necessary oversight and project management.

For the average westerner, this is a non-threatening, rational and expected way to do things. For many of the Central Europeans in the office, it is a tremendously perilous time. They feel they are about to be lost in a vast bureaucratic system of memos, project outlines, proposals, business plans, committees and panels that will slow down, dehumanize, devalue, and in all other ways take the passion and fun out of what they do. Allan Bussard argues, “While this technological way of viewing the world gives great impetus to the western way of life, it often renders those captured by it unable to relate to the deep seated frustrations and injustices in which most of the world’s people live.”⁴²

Tensions abound: I think of an encounter I had with a group of young students. One cited the World Wide Web as his number one source of authority for his life. Noting the numbers of hours he spends surfing the Internet, he remarked that nowhere else does he learn more about the world and the belief system he employs to cope with it. Later, in a conversation about community, the same student lamented the strong relationships he used to enjoy with friends, relationships that have since been weakened by the amount of time he spends on the computer. He sees technology as devaluing the things he finds valuable, yet regards it as the key authority in his life.⁴³

Internal and External Authority

History has not given Central and Eastern Europe any good reason to believe in the benevolence of powerful, local authority. In this century alone, the region has been ravaged by the rule and demise of three despotic forms of regime: monarchy, fascism and communism.

Self-reliance as practical necessity

It’s not surprising then that a strong sense of the need for self-reliance has prevailed. Time and again, students have learned the lesson of their historic forbearers, realizing that because they cannot expect favors from outsiders they must rely on themselves and the resources and character emerging from within them.

These internal influences include intuition and faith, conscience, need, passion, dreams, inner-voices, wisdom, experience and self-control. There is a strong belief that if young people listen to what’s inside them, the results will be greater harmony, a sense of being authenticated and a sense of having been loyal to a sense of being one’s “own.”

⁴² Bussard, Allan, “Tension in Mission: The Dilemma of Western Energy;” Vancouver; Regent College, 1990

⁴³ Owing perhaps to the abuse that has been carried out under the cover of modernity, there is a weariness here of accepting what might seem to be a rational solution to a human problem – information and system solutions seems to be seen as too hyper-modernistic and anti-person to be of any real use. This reveals another tension – that of believing that the opposite of the rational is the emotional or relational. There is a resistance to accepting that these two faculties are *not* opposite. The true opposite of the rational is simply the irrational. Rational and emotional are not antithetical they are merely different.

These attitudes are true both in terms of an individual acting alone and at a small-community level in which a rather closed-group forms boundaries against intrusion and external interference. Slovak villages are tight-knit communities in which everyone knows everybody else.⁴⁴ In the village, neighbors rely on one another for everything from digging wells to slaughtering a pig; while in the city, friends rely on close contacts to secure anything from building permits to trading discounts on goods and services. Most of this is done quietly and is not entirely legal, resulting in a rather highly developed black economy. This helps to partially illustrate the Slavic community's zeal for coming together to undermine outside authorities, not usually by direct resistance – as that was historically impossible and has not become a part of the typical Slavic character – but by highly subtle, passive forms of subterfuge and avoidance of official processes.⁴⁵

The self-emasculatation of ruling authorities

It's not simply their history that has scuttled people's faith in the ability of external leadership. Current events tend to confirm young people's sense of cynicism. Local governments haven't brought about the promised changes, or, at least, have taken far too long in bringing them about.⁴⁶ World politics seems an ugly mixture of war and economic heavy-handedness with little regard for regular people. Bureaucracy has made personal initiative such a time-consuming, labyrinthine activity that many have taken matters into their own hands.⁴⁷ Several of the young people with whom I've spoken state that church authorities either became too political under the old regime or, now, seem more interested in maintaining their position of respect and power than in freeing their congregants to have more personal responsibility for their spiritual lives. These young people have grown frustrated over having their questions regarding God ignored, squashed or altogether rebuked by priests and pastors who insist they should simply "have faith" or "pray more" and their questions will be resolved. Instead, young people are growing deeply suspicious

⁴⁴ Bratislava, while the largest Slovak city, is nevertheless known as the *velka dedina* (big village) and one can easily discern the multiple enclaves and tight-knit communities functioning even here. This presents all kinds of challenges to a group or person wanting to penetrate the city's sub-cultures to any significant depth.

⁴⁵ This forming of tight-knit alliances can be seen at all levels: in a village coming together to outwit common enemies, in local workers coming together in an international office to passively resist foreign bosses and even in Eastern Europe's approach to upcoming EU entry in which several CEE leaders have begun to form alliances with one another to help ensure a tight-knit group able to lobby against the EU for their own special interests. However common this approach may be, it is also highly indicative of the Central and Eastern European love of banding together against more powerful opponents.

⁴⁶ In fact, however self-reliant CEE young people claim to feel, the catch is that most don't desire to be self-reliant because of any inherent inner-strength - in fact most said they have neither the talent nor personal power to provide any truly adequate self-guidance – instead they've merely identify the *need* to be self-reliance because of the utter lack of faith in any currently available authority beyond themselves.

⁴⁷ This is evidenced by the numerous organizations that employ two accountants – one to keep the official books for government inspection and the other to keep the in-house books that reflect the way business is really getting done.

whether the governing authorities actually have any real answers at all. Young people are beginning to realize they've little to lose by going it alone.⁴⁸

Dealing with demons

Instead of liberating young people, this realization ferments anger and growing anxiety as they recognize that the apparatus of power and access to resources lie not with themselves but with the very authorities they no longer want nor respect. This anger expresses itself both outwardly to the authorities and inwardly, as they disparage themselves for not being strong enough, not having enough talent or, worse, for turning out to be like everyone else – unable to stand up for yourself and to bring about the revolution you so desire.

In fact, many young people here are suspicious of just what it would mean to follow what's inside them. Indeed, many describe a life lived by following a set of internally derived authorities in quite negative terms. Images of demons goading corrupted ambitions and ignoble dreams and passions are described alongside such word associations as: "limited," "indecision," "worry," "godlessness," "darkness," "unrest," "aggression," and "moodiness." Young people at once desire utter authenticity but are instinctively afraid of what that might bring.

Perhaps an old adage plays well here. If the average young Central European were the hungry man to whom you gave a fish, he would take the fish out of a need to eat but would resent both his need for external assistance *and* your ability to provide it. He would rather be taught *how* to fish, so that his eating no longer would depend on you. However, this may betray either naivety or an unwillingness to honestly evaluate circumstances as most young people say they simply do not have the access to the waterhole, fishing gear or bait that are required in making any use of their new-found skills. Central and Eastern European young people insist on their belief in their own self-reliance, but, beneath the surface, they reveal crippling doubts about any notion of personal power or the means to acquire it.

Individual and Collective Authority

The search for authenticity

Part of an emphasis on self-reliance finds expression in striving to be unique. In a drive to divorce themselves from old standards, many young people are finding outlets for personal expression from Western fashion – not merely in terms of clothing but also in musical taste, ambitions, values and even such oddities as the Western appropriation of Near-Eastern or Native American practices such as drum-circles.

Some of this is done far too uncritically, adopting certain standards simply to rebel against others; some is done in such a way that it both borrows from Western fashion *and* imbues it with a Central European flavor, thereby making it something truly unique and personally expressive. In either case however, young people are

⁴⁸ It is important to remind the reader that we are focusing on problem areas and are not attempting a full and balanced view. In reality, there are of course many pastors of remarkable integrity who are leading lives of exceptional sacrifice, leadership and service.

growing frustrated as they come to realize the inability of mere “personal expression” to bring any of the satisfaction they had hoped it would.⁴⁹

One cause of their frustration is the inherent inability to escape the very thing they are trying to avoid. In adopting a particular style of dress or mannerism in the name of non-conformity, young people find themselves very much conforming to the simple notion of non-conformity, which has its own rules, standards and expectations. But I see reason for optimism. While one element among the more extreme non-conformists (say those involved in Goth expressionism) tends to be practical nihilists - believing there is absolutely nothing of meaning or value in the world - there is another element that actually believes quite deeply in a sense of coherence. The same eyes stuck within smears of jet-black makeup are very intent on peering into and understanding the mystery of things. During the CityGate “Open Ear Weekends”⁵⁰ this type of participant nearly always turned out to be among our favorites. They asked real, penetrating questions clearly borne of having grappled with the world. They listened intently and fully expected to someday comprehend the puzzles with which they are wrestling.

Many hope that their own non-conformity will serve as a rebuke to a world that they, fairly and charitably or not, believe no longer cares about shrugging off its own ambivalence.

No more boxes, please

Though they tend to generalize as much as anybody else, my students in Slovakia find it particularly offensive when someone wants to generalize about them. Students here hesitate to admit the possibility of a set of repeated patterns having anything to say about a group of people, let alone an individual from that group. Rightly so, they do not like being forced – even suggested – to fit in any particular mould. There is resistance therefore to ideas and solutions that seem too general as well as to supposed universal principles that are somehow expected to serve a variety of situations even though they have not been tailor-made to a given one.

⁴⁹ This drive toward self-expression can, of course, be quite healthy. The tension lies in whether the older generations are willing to respond gracefully to youthful expressions of personality that are different than what they are comfortable with – such as hair-coloring, tattoos, multiple body-piercing, etc. The generation drift, which often accompanies differences in what’s thought to be acceptable in terms of fashion, can further exacerbate the already frustrated relationship between youth culture and its older authority figures. It should be a source of sorrow that many young new-believers are often ridiculed and unaccepted by churches simply because of style choices. Many young believers are perfectly happy to have church content determined by mature believers in submission to scripture but resist the notion that the same people (most often significantly older) also determine the form in which the content is expressed – to say nothing of the manner of dress in which they receive it. This is a complicated matter dealing with many complex issues: values, the transitory nature of cultural norms, the psychological impact of fashion, assumptions based on dress and manner, etc.

⁵⁰ “Apologetics with Open Ears” is a retreat-style weekend CityGate has pioneered involving the bringing together of an equal number of professed Christian believers and professed non-believers. Over a series of three weekends, participants engage one another in open dialogue aimed at abandoning the assumptions and speculations held by one group about the other and to instead cultivate real understanding based on honesty and listening. In the course of the weekends, cultural, theological and social issues are addressed in an effort to bring both groups to an understanding of the Gospel and the Gospel’s role in everyday society. CityGate has produced a paper detailing the weekend’s theory, content, logistics and activities.

Those of us operating cross-culturally have to be particularly careful. Writing about his experiences in Africa, Duane Elmer said,

“Generalizations came so easily. So did stereotypes...and I began to notice only the “facts” that confirmed my emerging convictions. Before long I was failing to distinguish between the facts and my interpretation of the facts. They conveniently became one and the same. Yet what I saw was radically affected by the cultural lenses I wore. Unfortunately, at a certain point, the process becomes self-perpetuating, on automatic pilot as it were. A measure of security comes when I know which “box” a person fits into, because then I know how to treat him or her. At that point I have begun to treat people like objects and no longer see each one as a unique, esteemed human being designed by God and worthy of my individualized and respectful attention.”⁵¹

Socialism tried to murder the individual. In trying to get away from a decades long system in which the worth of any *one* depended on their ability to serve the *whole*, it is reasonable that an emphasis, even an over-emphasis, on personal uniqueness would now dominate the present scene.

But it has been anything but a clean transition.

Stepping from the herd and the dilemma of freedom

Central Europeans struggle with the new liberties of personal expression, enterprise and the diverging ways in which different people pursue their own happiness. The freedom is desired, but *too* much freedom is hard to handle. A CityGate team went to the Ukraine recently and met several young leaders frustrated at the reactions to their personal initiatives. Anyone stepping out into a position of leadership brings fulfillment to the Slavic notion that, “the tall grass gets the sickle.” Personal strength threatens to disturb a community’s sense of balance and the status quo. The changes are frightening. It brings out feelings of jealousy as those without the initiative begin to fear a loss of loyalty in the emerging leader and it brings out feelings of shame and guilt from those who lack the same initiative – almost as if the growing brilliance of someone around them inevitably diminishes their own, pushing them further into the shadows of their own lack of drive, courage or opportunity. It is not just the present leadership that is threatened by emerging ones; the whole community can be thrown into turmoil. Even if the new leader is presenting positive solutions, the threats and fear they breed are the same.⁵²

Central and Eastern Europeans are struggling with the complexities of seemingly similar notions like “individualism” and “individuality”; “conformity” versus “community”; and “uniformity” versus “unity.” They sense the differences but are at odds in finding ways to avoid the vices and still champion the virtues. A robust

⁵¹ Elmer, Duane; *Cross-Cultural Conflict*; Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1993, pg. 19

⁵² This isn’t something unique to the Ukraine or even the region. Even in the West, an emerging leader is put under intense scrutiny and can find their efforts disparaged. But there is a palpable difference in the two situations. In the West, the resistance might be based on the *particular* emerging leader and the resistance maybe more a matter of party politics or disagreement with platform and therefore the attempt to undermine the leader can be seen as a pursuit of a personal sense of justice or special interest. In the Ukraine, it was the *act* of emerging leadership itself that was resisted. The umbrage of stepping out to leadership is often seen as something that must be put down and smothered before it gets too carried away.

and intimate theology of the characteristics of the Trinity – the three-in-oneness, the unity in diversity - would be extremely valuable here.

Prescriptive and Indifferent Authority

No sense of consequence

During a senior-level literature course I taught in Bratislava's Komenius University, a student turned in a paper on renaissance England as part of a background project. Her paper was flawless: the English impeccable, the grammatical structure and syntax surprisingly sophisticated and utterly without error. Hating to be skeptical, I nevertheless knew it could not possibly be her work - despite her having an advanced level of English and a high-B average. I googled the title of her paper and within the requisite .372 seconds or so I had the name, volume and page numbers of the magazine from which she had stolen her paper.

Following our next class together I called her into my office and asked if the paper was hers. She emphatically insisted that it was. I reminded her of my simple policy (written at the top of my syllabus, which every student received at the beginning of the semester) of giving a semester-grade of zero to anyone caught intentionally plagiarizing. I reminded her that with the way the school's system was set up, that a zero would force her to repeat my class the following semester before she could advance to her next academic year, essentially postponing her graduation a half-year. So, I asked her again, encouraging her to be honest so that we might find a way to negotiate the outcome. Nothing doing. She tried indignant rage to see if I'd back down. Instead, I gave her yet another chance. She stood firm.

I then asked her to repeat from memory any two of the several major points of her paper. She could not. Kicking myself as I offered I nevertheless assured her I would help her cut her losses by allowing her to redo the paper (and do some extra work) with a mere one letter-grade penalty if she admitted her lie. She began to noticeably weaken, getting a little teary eyed, but remained defiant. I told her to go away, think about it, and come back in an hour. My offer of her redoing her paper would remain until then. At that point I would ask her one final time and be done with it.

In less than an hour she returned, back to her indignantly raging self. Frustrated, I tossed the copy of the article I had printed from the website onto the desk atop her paper and asked why she just threw away an entire semester's work. Neither she - nor the hostile-then-fawning father who visited me later that week - could comprehend why I insisted she receive a zero in my class. When I pointed out to her that I had several times stressed the penalty she was facing, she shook her dumbfounded head and remarked that she simply could not believe I was serious.

What, I asked, could possibly lead a *fourth-year* university student to conclude that a professor is not serious about failing her for cheating, stealing, and lying in an attempt to pass a course?

Could it be that her academic authorities in the past had made empty requirements so normative that she concluded there was no reason to take a professor at their word?⁵³ Does it have to do with the greater set of authorities in her life – including

⁵³ In fact, I'm confident this is at least *partly* to blame. At the beginning of the next semester the then department chair asked me to reconsider the student's grade so that she could start the year with her

possibly her father who first took a menacing stance in negotiating with me then, having failed at that, an obsequious one - having earned so little of her respect that she holds all authorities with contempt or at least take their demands as trivialities? What impact would a lack of respect for the word of her professors have on her even being able to take what they say in class with any seriousness?⁵⁴

I've encountered in young Central and Eastern Europeans a deep resentment to any type of authority that prescribes certain behavior and who expect obedience to given rules. Instead, many are enamored with the idea of lawless gods; a torah based on mood, and a judge whose only gavel is ambivalence.

Formal and informal authority

A disdain for structure

What with the above, it is no surprise that as a general category, CEE young people do not respect or desire formal authority. For clarity, I mean here all those vested with the official trappings of authority: mandate, strength and power, privilege, office, rule and the like; whether the authority in question was elected, appointed, hired or whether they arrived at their status through power, influence or bloodline.

These authorities include persons such as policemen, teachers and professors, kings, presidents, judges, priests and abstractions such as law, duty, hierarchical structure, policy apparatus or expectation.

Young people say these authorities are easy to recognize and describe such things as uniforms (from a soldier's to a politician's); age (graying hair); demeanor (typically arrogant, condescending and aggressive) and gender (most often male). Considering that by-and-large, the dominate, officially appointed authorities in CEE life are men and, especially in the case of politicians and, often, ecclesiastical authorities, are even graying men in suits or uniforms it's more easily understood the depth of our problem.

An illustration: at a conference in Budapest in the spring of 2002, I was speaking with a Hungarian friend about their recent presidential elections. According to his recounting, Árpád Göncz was the incumbent president and the heavy favorite to beat his rival, Ferenc Mádl, considered comparatively inexperienced and unlikely to pose any significant challenge. Early in the campaign process, however, it became clear that these assumptions had failed to take into account a critical point: Mádl, however under-qualified, was downright charming.

regular class and graduate on time. When I refused, the chair told me that he had the authority to change the grade himself, replacing my signature with his own, even if I wasn't willing. When I told him that was the only way the grade would be changed, he went ahead and did so. In a single flourish of ink, he undermined his own integrity, the integrity of his department and that of his student's education and he compromised both my authority and the authority of any principle or any professor in any future course in which that student sat. Corruption has costs we cannot afford.

⁵⁴ What, if any, connection exists between this attitude toward the will of authority and the Slavic bent on self-reliance? If self-reliance includes ignoring the prospect of being penalized for a dismissive attitude toward authority, can't it be a far more destructive characteristic than an empowering one?

At a platform debate held shortly before Election Day, the two candidates met to contend for the unusually large pool of “undecided” voters – who, it was clear, would decide the race. My friend remarked that Göncz was the very picture of competency. He was clear and articulate. He was confident. When asked questions regarding strategies over a range of social and political issues, Göncz answered with clear and deliberate arguments. His ideas were compelling and delivered with a practiced certainty. Mádl, on the other hand, was a shadow of his opponent. Not nearly as eloquent, Mádl bumbled his way through policy concerns, presenting little coherent strategy. My friend insisted that Mádl was anything but the image of a reliable leader.

In summary, my friend reported that Mádl failed to do any of the things that Göncz accomplished, including one vitally important (and ironic) thing: *he did not present himself as the very picture of competency.*

My friend cited a question asking what candidates would do to address the crises facing retired people and the wretched state of their pensions. Göncz outlined a strategy attacking the issue at a variety of levels: financial, social, institutional and through the idea of civic duty. He augmented his plan with data analysis, relevant examples and quotes from esteemed experts. It was clear he had spent long, hard hours wrestling with an issue he knew to be deeply important to voters. Mádl presented hardly any policy at all. Instead, he simply pointed out a few concerns, summarizing with something like, ‘what do we know for sure? We know we can’t leave a single elderly person behind. We need them to know we share their fear. They need to know that we are there for them.’

At the conclusion of the event, the audience was asked to fill out reaction cards. My friend said there were two questions: 1. Who won the debate? 2. For whom will you vote? There was nearly unanimous agreement that Árpád easily won the debate. But nearly everybody said that on Election Day they would vote for Ferenc. They apparently did so as he won the presidency. I asked my friend if Árpád would be the better man for the job, and he replied, “Absolutely, he would.” When asked specifically if Mádl Ferenc was significantly less competent, my friend nodded, “Without a doubt,” he said.

However much less qualified Mádl proved himself to be, he represented a substantial change from the normal visage of political power. He seemed more like the ordinary people, he said the things that they wanted to hear in a way they could hear it.

Negotiated and non-negotiated authority

A part of what’s at issue is the idea of choice. Young people don’t often feel they’ve any real decision in who is an authority over them or not. Even in regards to an elected official – assuming the one you’ve endorsed actually won – the only real influence a young person feels is the “simple” act of casting a single ballot. The typically low turnout rate of young voters demonstrates how little regard they have for this process and their belief about just how important their one vote is. Especially after the elected official takes office, young people assume the distance between them is now unbridgeable. To young people, nearly every formal authority feels inaccessible and out-of-touch - both in terms of understanding young people’s issues and in the more simple sense of basic approachability.

Part of this sense of distance stems from young people believing that there are two types of people in the world: those with the access, opportunity, resources or special knowledge necessary to seize or win positions of authority and those who do not have these things. This recognition – whatever the truth of it – carries with the expected dose of resentment and bitterness. It also allows for a fair degree of suspicion, cynicism and even nervous anxiety as those without the access to power typically expect that those in power are only in positions of authority for themselves and that they most emphatically do not have the interests of others in mind.⁵⁵ Young people expect that authority will not only abuse their positions but will do so in a way that ultimately abuses them as well.

It's not only non-negotiated *human* authorities that CEE youth resent. Non-negotiated authorities include other freedom-limiting factors like physical, mental or psychological handicaps; a lack of financial or talent resources and any of a host of things that can in some way limit one's ability to be as free and self-reliant as they would like.

Understandably, Central Europeans (as everyone in the world perhaps) are most comfortable with those authorities they have chosen or negotiated prior to their assumption of power and those with whom they can continue to negotiate in the regular exercise of that power. These include spouses and friends, chosen advisors, confidants, and select colleagues. With such authorities there exists not only the confidence that mutuality will allow for all parties to have one another's best interests in mind but that the terms and conditions of their relationship can be chosen just as much as the actual relationship itself was originally negotiated. Young people feel more at ease and more able to "be themselves" in the presence of such authority figures, believing the whole while that "who they are" will be taken seriously and seriously into account.

Powerlessness and control

During an Open Ears weekend, in a discussion we were having about authority, one participant described demon-possession as the single most terrifying thing he could ever imagine. Immediately, many in the group concurred. While I doubt this is an abnormal thing (who wants to be host to even a parasite let alone a devil!) the fear of it seemed particularly endemic to this group as they went on to cite several other descriptions of such powerlessness as something absolutely terrifying to them.

The idea of not being in control of their future held a high degree of anxiety. But many didn't even feel in control of their daily life, their bodies, and the circumstances that surround them or, really, much of anything at all. This fear of "being possessed," controlled by powers greater than you, must be particularly frightful in view of the prevailing negative view of the existing authorities.

⁵⁵ Stephan Hrib, senior editor of Slovakia's *Domino Forum* on September 20th, 2002 editorialized, "The political elite that is seeking to get its hands on the reins of power in Slovakia is completely self-obsessed, unaware of its own mediocrity, and is gradually dragging down everything and everyone around it. Increasingly, an awful ennui is spreading through Slovakia, public debate is being transformed into dull slogans and phrases, so that the civic sector's call to action--"Vote"--echoes in a void of unknown depth." Hrib describes a view common – for many good reasons – to young people in Slovakia and throughout the CEE. For a fuller treatment see *Political Participation* in Section III of this paper

Such a fear has very real practical problems, among them a compromised ability to submit to authority – even the ones that are benevolent. In the course of the discussion mentioned above, I had students select pictures that illustrated for them both the positive and negative aspects of powerlessness. Several times, students in different groups independently chose the same picture but where one student meant it as a positive the other meant it as a negative. The picture depicted an adult hand gently cupping a tiny chick.⁵⁶ Most students described the picture in entirely positive terms, suggesting that this mixture of vulnerability and power is the situation we find ourselves in when gently grasped in the hands of a loving God. But many other students saw the picture as the very paradigm of the horror of being powerless, held in the grasp of a superior force whose benevolence or malevolence seems a matter of sheer whim against which you can do absolutely nothing.

Anything but serenity

It is difficult to accept those things that cannot be changed. The resentment built up against those authorities with power over us is real and crippling. The history of this region is one of constant forced-submission to rulers. But rather than work itself as a will to revolution, the resentment instead tends to breed a deep cynicism against any notion of control, mandate or ruling force. The hazard here is that instead of carefully discerning which authorities warrant submission and which warrant resistance, some instead disregard the whole lot out of hand, ending with a desire to be left un-ruled and free. Failing to even believe in the *idea* of benevolent authority carries with it obvious dilemmas not only for religious ideas but civic and judicial ones as well.⁵⁷

When they feel forced to recognize formal authority, young people see only the divide between those who rule and those who are ruled. In a society in which there used to be no real class distinctions, many young people say they now feel betrayed by neighbors who have sought positions of power and, they believe, the privilege that goes with it. Young people are highly suspicious of anyone entering a position of formal authority for anything other than their own gain. To rule is always fraught with certain perils. How much more perilous it must be to rule those who dig in their heels at the very notion of being led.

⁵⁶ The chick looked to be entirely at peace, nothing suggested menace, just the opposite in fact. The image was cast in a pleasant blue, almost pastel, hue and showed no sharp angles or lines. If art can convey anything at all objectively (and I believe it can) than it's quite clear this picture was intended to be a pleasing (albeit it slightly sentimental) portrayal of a vulnerable creature in the care of a more powerful and benevolent being.

⁵⁷ A significant issue is that young people are often doubtful of the very value of doing the hard work necessary to discern proper authority from improper authority and to try and establish which authorities use their only position and power as the justification for their mandates and those which instead substantiate their decisions by an appeal to known realities, truth, or a carefully presented argument. If they *do* happen to believe in the virtue of the effort, many young people doubt they have the skills necessary to pull it off.

Institutional versus relational authority*A question of content*

A student held up the glossy picture of a brick-faced edifice lined with pillars and punctured by dark-glassed, often heavily curtained windows. Some illegible lettering was stenciled monumentally across the lintel and stamped to a pillar a stately seal completed the image.

“This is the kind of authority I despise,” he said. Then, in his other hand, he held up the picture of a young boy being held in the arms of a wizened old man with billowing hair and a flowing beard. The boy was leaning back against the bosom of the man and the man was pointing gently somewhere off into the distance. It was even shot in pastel. “This one I like,” he said unnecessarily.

Common to nearly every single CEE young person I’ve met is an intense disdain for institutional authority; those authorities expressed or organized through institutions or formal bodies: government offices, administrative complexes, churches, military and civic facilities. Young people disparage them as lacking soul, individuality, for being highly structured, locked in routine and insensibly uniform.

Sterile, hollow, and inaccessible, they are filled with suit-wearing men without faces and spew cold proclamations devoid of human character and set against everything that is relational in life. There was very little balance to how young people felt toward the first picture mentioned above. Contempt is the only word that would serve as summary.

Young people are dead set against any authority that does not rule within the context of an interpersonal relationship. They do not want to be talked *at* nor *down to*. They want to be *spoken with*. They do not feel they find such mutuality from the kind of authority housed in a brick-faced edifice lined with pillars.

Masculine and feminine authority

Overwhelmingly, Central and Eastern European young people described positive and negative aspects of authority in terms of gender competition, seeing the sexes as engaged in a kind of combat for control. When specifically exploring this idea, they also tend to suggest that young, youthful and beautiful females will win the vast majority of skirmishes.⁵⁸ When men are seen as winning over women, the victory is usually shockingly dominant, often violent and nearly always oppressive.

Masculine authorities are universally described in terms of military and political power. Such leaders are the already mentioned aged and graying males clad in an armor of business suit and tie.⁵⁹ In word associations and pictures, the negatively

⁵⁸ In *The Russian Mind*, Ronald Hingley wrote, “[In Russian literature]...the clash between strong female and weak male is more than ever in vogue, and has been well analyzed in terms which recall the life-cycle of the spider. In Russian fiction...a feeble, vacillating hero is again and again ‘contrasted with a young woman of unusual strength and integrity of character’ who shows ‘more purity and dedication and also more practical common sense than the man.’ Thus do firmness of purpose and strength of character tend, in Russian fiction through the ages, to be confined to the female sex.” Pg 156

⁵⁹ While the picture of the wizened grandfather garnered attention as a positive authority, the context was critically dominant, a graying male in a grandfatherly position is quite safe. Also, when young people selected pictures identifying positive or negative authorities, the relationship between the viewer of the picture and object viewed or the relationships displayed within the picture clearly

portrayed graying male is never engaged in relational activities but, instead, is described as domineering, aggressive and angry. His authority is almost never the result of consensus but rather of usurpation and conquest.

Feminine authority is viewed as standing against overt expressions of raw power. Feminine authority is rooted in beauty and grace; it is highly relational, idyllic and comforting. If the male tendency is all crushing, the female's is to cuddle.

But, interestingly, this is frequently seen as a gambit.

Many described female authority as being just as much about control as male power. Disarming, manipulative and undermining, feminine tactics are often seen as a means to circumvent masculine aggression and strength. Several Slovak friends – male and female - have pointed out that while Slavic society seems patriarchal, it is a false front. “Take a walk down Bratislava’s quay and watch the young couples,” one friend suggested. “You’ll see how it’s almost always the girl sitting and the man lying on his back with his head in her lap. She’ll be stroking his hair and talking baby talk.” I pointed out that this just as well happens in America and that it sounds quite romantic and nice. “But,” my friend insisted, “It’s different. Here the girl is less the girlfriend in these moments and more the mother. So many Slovak men leave their mother and, never having been on their own, run to their girls or wives.”

Whatever the truth, it’s clear that male headship is not always what it seems. Men are aware that women win the victories and more often than not run the show.⁶⁰ Men have several responses to this. Sometimes there is an almost fawning acquiescence – as perhaps typified by my friend’s example of the quayside. Men allow themselves to be made into a type of dependent child,⁶¹ holding all the mantle of power but little of the substance. Another response often cited is male aggression, where men take the opportunities they can to win back some face either through condescension, anger, whining or simply cruel put-downs. Some research suggests undercurrents of repressed sexuality or even latent male homosexuality, seen as a reasonable response to feminine control.

differed depending on whether the association was good or bad. The wizened old man was engaged in a positive relationship with the young boy or, at other times, the positive authority – though a graying male – was photographed in such a way that he was maintaining gentle eye contact with the viewer. Contrasting this, the graying males of negative authority were in conflict with the other people in the pictures, or were doing something demonstrating anger, political collusion and the like and either failed to have eye contact with the viewer or held the viewer’s eyes with a menacing glare.

⁶⁰ While mentioned earlier, it’s worth reiterating that around the turn of the last century, tens of thousands of Slovak men traveled abroad in order to work and earn far greater amounts of money than they could at home. Thousands upon thousands of women became responsible for running the home, raising the children, managing finances, bringing in the crops and every other responsibility association with life and home. When the husbands came home, they encountered different women than the ones they had left. And, whether overtly or otherwise, the majority of the women were in no mood to surrender the power they had been forced to shoulder. Attitudes get handed down. This probably partly explains the relative strength of Slavic women in comparison to their men.

⁶¹ I sometimes wonder the degree to which this is fostered by how women treat their men. Riding public transportation, for instance, you’ll notice young boys – anywhere from seven years to about fifteen – sitting comfortably in a crowded bus while their mothers stand beside them. In several other ways you often see young boys being children like weaklings and denied the responsibility of learning to act like men and they are not often encouraged to care or sacrifice their own comfort for the women in their lives.

Regardless, the tension is palpable. Feminine authority is seen as a veritable Eden, with all the warmth, comfort, relationship and security the garden could offer. And, hey ho, with a beast in the brush as well.

Mentoring and exemplary authority

“There’s no shortage of people telling us how to behave,” said a Romanian I had met while working in his country. “It’s just that when we actually *do* want to listen to them they rarely help us to do so.”

He underscored a common frustration and further described the problem as he explained how many would-be teachers often point to themselves as exemplary models to follow rather than point to some set of principles or values that could be reckoned with and understood. Such exemplars, they feel, so often demand that the young person mirror their life on a set of behaviors, of which, presumably, the exemplar believes he himself to be in possession. Rightly or not, the exemplar, while pointing to himself, offers little to explain how the people they are addressing ought to go about changing. This leaves people feeling talked down to, frustrated, exhausted at their failures, ashamed of not being able to change by simply trying hard and, finally, angry and resentful at the condescending and patriarchal manner in which they are addressed by people full of prescription but precious little assistance.

The image that does go a long way with CEE young people is that of a mentor – a guide under which one can apprentice. Young people everywhere are searching for a guru, someone that can help with them with the daily struggle of living and, specifically, can help them with the daily struggle of living *morally*.⁶²

Such a mentor is seen in highly idealized terms: he leads through sharing knowledge in a deeply relational way, guiding in a way that builds up the apprentice at their own pace and by their own terms, challenging yet always gentle. Dominate images selected to describe a mentoring authority include the now-proverbial wizened old man sitting behind a young girl, his hands on her own, guiding her fingers as she learns to draw.

There is a strong sense of shared journey when it comes to describing the mentor as authority. Pointing to a power higher greater than themselves, the mentor doesn’t convey the idea that they are already on so great a plane and recognizes the gap that exists between all beings and perfection – or nirvana, or ecstasy or glory or whatever they happen to be calling it.

Young Central Europeans essentially desire to be good and moral people; they simply don’t want particular authorities telling them how to be so. Especially when originality is at such a premium, the idea of being forced into mimicking someone they cannot respect is all but impossible and certainly never desirable.

⁶² If it seems surprising that young people desperate for freedom would willingly submit to a mentor, it must be understood that in this case the apprenticeship is completely voluntary; it is the supplicant who seeks out the guru, not the guru who subjugates the supplicant and the terms of the relationship are often very guarded. On a different note, I think this seeming contradiction can also be just that – an overt contradiction that underlines the tension young people have learned to live with: the fear of authority and, at the same time, an absolute need for it.

Mechanical and intimate authority

Imagine a vast marching army moving in perfect rank-and-file unison. It's an impressive sight: polished boots rise and fall in a rhythmic staccato, arms swing crisply, eyes set, weaponry impressive. The whole thing is the epitome of strength and military efficiency. This is how a Russian participant in a Gospel in Society session described negative authority to me.

Such authorities are seen as process oriented as opposed to people oriented. They are seen as impossibly unwieldy – a marching army can hardly react quickly to rapidly shifting terrain while maintaining its seamless precision – unable to respond to changing circumstances they are suspected of only being able to offer very particular kinds of solutions that may or may not help the problem at hand. “They are too mechanical,” said the Russian, “Their solutions are always the same, but problems hardly ever are.”

Regardless of whether he is right, his perception is important. He is afraid of being lost in the impersonality of a bureaucratic process or of not having his problems meet the required standards of some vast authority that cannot therefore concern itself with meeting his needs.

When such authorities do try to help, many find their very assistance to be just as mechanical as their structure. Such authorities provide quick and ready answers to complex problems and thereby seem to trivialize what may be weighing heavily on the mind of their petitioner. Such quick answers can be belittling.

Young people here want deeply intimate authorities who are relational, commiserate and who apply answers in a way that feel tailor made and unique to the individual in front of them and the individual's particular problem. A Slovak friend remarked that a mechanical approach to problem solving tends to make her feel that though authorities often answer her questions comprehensively, they still leave her feeling like she hasn't been listened to.

The Beach is a novel (and a movie) that has resonated deeply with many CEE young people. In the novel, Richard, Etienne and Françoise are three teenagers trying to reach mythical-sounding community secreted on a hidden Thai beach. They've heard that the beach is a post-modern paradise, where esoteric and communal egalitarianism has replaced the global rat race. The trio overcomes several obstacles to make it to the beach community but is afraid that the community's rules and fear of newcomers will leave them unwelcome and forced to leave. Instead, they discover a community that, though weary, is willing to give them a chance and, in short order, accepts them wholeheartedly and warmly invites them to become residents. In describing his feeling of having “come home” for the first time in his life, Richard describes an evening ritual that occurs as the community drifts off to sleep in the communal living quarters.

The ritual consists of someone calling “Good night” to a specific person. That person in turn would call out “Good night” to another and that person to another until everyone in the lodge had been bid a good rest.

“Anybody could start the game off and there was no order to the names called out. When there were only a few names left it got difficult remembering which people had been mentioned and which hadn't, but that was part of the game. If you screwed it up, then there'd be loud tuts and exaggerated sighs until you got it right.

Although the ritual was sort of taking the piss, in another way it wasn't. No one's name was ever passed over and right from the first time we heard it Etienne, Françoise and I were included.

The nicest thing was when you heard your name but couldn't recognize the voice. I always found it comforting that someone unexpected would think to choose me. I'd fall asleep wondering who it could have been, and who I'd choose the next time."⁶³

Community, acceptance, tolerance, security, fellowship, intimacy, being known and knowing others; these are some of the terms and phrases repeated time and again as CEE young people describe the kind of authority figures they long for – and the kind they feel they rarely encounter.

In Summary: Positive and Negative Authority

Following, I have compiled a summary conclusion of the most common word associations CEE young people have used to describe “positive” and “negative” authority.

Characteristics of positive authority

- Competent and experienced
- Strength used for helping others
- Humble and mild-mannered
- Doesn't seek to change or manipulate others
- Natural and consistent
- Draws on the strengths of those around them
- Sympathetic / Empathetic
- Cooperative
- Commiserate
- Full of praise and respect
- Sensitive and caring
- Highly relational
- Works toward consensus
- Appeasing
- Full of beauty and youth

- Accepts others as they are
- Open-minded

Characteristics of negative authority

- Breeds fear
- Insists on having own way
- Demagogue

- Iconoclastic
- Dark personality
- Unstable
- Holds some sort of monopoly over others
- Violent
- Conspiratorial
- Manipulative
- Wants to change people
- Intolerant
- Higher than others
- Always right
- Threatening
- Cold or impersonal

- Forceful
- Dull or Routine

⁶³ Garland, Alex; *The Beach*, Penguin books, 1997 pg 120 – 121

- Safe and non-threatening
- Spontaneous
- Diligent
- Forgiving
- Understanding
- Tolerant and non-dogmatic
- Not-demanding
- Seeks harmony
- Sincere
- Open and Transparent
- Forgiving
- Full of integrity
- Problem free
- Without strict definitions
- Develops subordinates
- Listens to others
- Places truth over people
- Dogmatic
- Hypocritical
- Overly confident
- Too powerful
- Restrictive / demanding
- Bureaucratic or rigid
- Unqualified
- Has a hidden agenda or is not transparent or upfront
- Makes others uneasy
- Legalistic or too religious
- Makes others feel stupid
- Puts goals or agendas over people

Overall, positive authority can be summed up in a single phrase: *that which helps me feel good about being me and who accept me as I am.*

Negative authority can be summed up in the phrase: *that which sets boundaries and demands particular behavior and belief particularly in a way that requires I change.*

Some problems

There are several problems here. First, the two lists tend to set up an unnecessary duality between those authorities deemed “highly relational” and those who are seen as placing relationship beneath other concerns – among them the notion of truth. But this is an unfair juxtaposition. Many supposedly non-relational linear thinkers do not see truth as more important than relationship per se but rather as an indispensable *pre-requisite* for genuine relationship.

The second problem is one of context. I note that some of the negative characteristics above would, in certain contexts, almost universally be seen as virtues.⁶⁴ “Dogmatic,” for instance, can be merely another word for “resolute.” And what about shades of difference? “Forceful” is just a touch away from being “assertive.” Even those characteristics regarded as positive can be the converse at inappropriate times – such as in the “appeasement” of evil. *Atlantic* magazine correspondent David Brooks noted,

⁶⁴ Words themselves face redefinition depending on the context of the times, “The philosopher Leo Strauss once noted that the word “virtue,” which in classical times meant “manly courage,” had by the nineteenth century come to mean something very different—“female chastity.”” Quoted from David Brooks, “Lions and Foxes,” The Atlantic Monthly, October, 2002

“Different times call for different virtues. The age of harmony called forth leaders on the model of Bill Clinton—leaders who were flexible, charming, empathic, cooperative, and tolerant, leaders who saw the complexity of things and who erred on the side of indulgence. The era of authority calls forth leaders who possess the vigorous virtues—leaders who are often more solitary than social, who are stern, combative, contemptuous of self-indulgence, fiercely loyal to friends, and persistently hostile to foes.”⁶⁵

The things that might make one “feel bad about themselves” may well be things they need to address – confrontations regarding anger, abuse of others, false belief that could be harmful to themselves or to others are just a few examples that sometimes warrant a strong authority figure willing to simply get in our face until we’ve taken an honest look at ourselves. Sometimes we need to be offended. Sometimes those who love us need to do the offending. Equally, it would be preposterous to consider a medical doctor a negative authority when, upon discovering you have a gangrened foot, tells you that you will have to have the limb removed in order to save your life – this despite his being fiercely “intolerant” of gangrene. And what, by the way, is it about the Sovereign God of the universe that would lead anyone to declare Him “safe” when by “safe” the categories above seems to mean “unthreatening”, “not-demanding”, “accepting of others as they are” and “open-minded”?

There are several additional problems. First, the classification of certain characteristics is sheer nonsense. What, for example, is negative about being “too powerful?” Power is at least merely neutral⁶⁶. Shakespeare goes so far as to say, “it is excellent to have a giant’s strength.” But he also recognized the abuse of power when he concluded; “It is tyranny to wield it like a giant.”

Also, we get to decide which characteristics are virtues and which are vices? It would seem that any authority figure who gets to so determine is passing judgment and is, therefore, a negative authority – why then would we listen to or value their opinion? There is even a need to have authoritative judgment over the mere nuance of a term. For example, when does someone who is “spontaneous” – a positive characteristic – become “unstable” – a negative one? Someone needs to decide.

But the classifications are wrong in another important respect – I do not think they are an accurate reflection of what people really want. This isn’t to say it’s not an accurate reflection of what people have *said* or *believe* they want. I agree that CEE young people are more comfortable with the easy authority of the first column; but I also believe CEE young people are better than their comfort-zone. The young people I know want to have boundaries by which they can have a sense of security, expectation and a mechanism to grow. A leader who carries “tolerance” to its final expression is no longer an authority at all but rather an obsequious rubber-stamp

⁶⁵ Brooks, David “Lions and Foxes,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, 2002

⁶⁶ In fact, some would argue that power is actually inherently good. “Catholic tradition taught a classic understanding of power: power is the capacity to achieve a corporate purpose for the common good. Power is not to be reduced, or traduced, to violence; on the contrary, violence is a limit-case testing the boundaries of a rational and ethical politics. Power thus has a positive dimension; its proper exercise is a form of human creativity...Power, in this understanding, is not the antinomy of peace...power, rightly understood, is a means to the achievement of the good of peace.” Wiegel, George, “World Order: What Catholics Forgot”, *First Things*, May 2004

providing only leniency and not leadership. The CEE young people disregard these types of invertebrate authorities and want to be held to noble standards so as to become noble people – even the ones who don't know they believe in nobility.

The categories as young people see them are in the end too simplistic, especially as a means of addressing the character of God; Who as authority seems to straddle, in different ways, both categories at the same. The resulting tension is how it must be. A leader who demonstrates only the values of the first column would be incapable of providing real leadership at all and would leave its followers without the ability or reason to resist any kind of behavior or belief. But a leader who rules with only the second set of characteristics is what compels many young people to desire from authority only to be left alone. They have learned from watching their parents, the news or simply life around them that the world is full of salesmen offering every kind of worldview or system of belief.

Tired of being talked to, young people are abandoning traditional forms of authority and going it alone. They sense a deep and critical need for ruling authority, and are hesitant to believe that they possess these qualities within them, but they are nevertheless profoundly doubtful about finding guidance anywhere outside of themselves. In response to their disappointment with the way things are, young people too often fail to allow that fallen people will never do anything with absolute integrity. Dealing in impossible ideals, they hold those around them to a standard against which they are certain to fail.

Part III: Ramifications on Relationships

Cause and effect is everywhere. The baseline beliefs that Central and Eastern European young people have regarding authority are not without their consequences – both positive and negative. The following section will explore these consequences where they directly or indirectly affect CEE young people's and three key relationships: that of the self and the self among others, that of time, history and the present day, and that of God, His Kingdom and His Church. Again, as this is a paper concerned about the gaps in the way things *are* and the way things *ought* to be, I will be dealing primarily with the negative ramifications and the ways that relationships have been deteriorated by errant beliefs about authority. It should then go without saying that I do not consider this a comprehensive treatment of these key relationships as they concern CEE young people.

Ourselves Among Others

Me, Myself and I: The triune god of the self

One of the most difficult things we can do in our entire lives is to reconcile ourselves to the reality that there exists a God of the universe and we are not it. For reasons concerning our own egotism and sin, the betrayal of the authorities in our lives and the seeming incompetence of those from whom we have sought aid, we have misunderstood our relationship to our own being. We're often ready, with a greedy eagerness, to believe the message of this consumerist age that we deserve the very desires of our heart no matter the costs to ourselves or to others. William Temple has said it well and it's worth quoting him at length:

“When we open our eyes as babies we see the world stretching out around us; we are in the middle of it; all proportions and perspectives in what we see are determined by the relation – distance, height, and so forth – of various visible objects to ourselves. This will remain true of our bodily vision as long as we live. I am the center of the world. Now just the same thing is true at first of our mental and spiritual vision. Some things hurt us; we hope they will not happen again; we call them bad. Some things please us; we hope they *will* happen again; we call them good. Our standard of value is the way things affect ourselves. So each of us takes his place in the center of his own world. But I am not the center of the world, or the standard of reference as between good and bad; I am not, and God is. In other words, from the beginning I put myself in God's place. This is my original sin. I was doing it before I could speak, and everyone else has been doing it from early infancy. I am not 'guilty' on this account because I could not help it. But I am in a state, from birth, in which I shall bring disaster on my self and everyone affected by my conduct unless I can escape from it.”⁶⁷

Central and Eastern European young people are verbally against a self-centered and egoistic outlook to life. Central Europeans in general believe strongly in community and doing things under consensus and care for the welfare of others, and are

⁶⁷ Temple, William; *Christianity and Social Disorder*, Shephard-Walwyn, London, 1976, pg 60

incredible hosts and a profoundly generous people, especially when it comes to helping strangers in need.⁶⁸

But they are, after all, merely human and everyday human selfishness coupled with the residue of a history that has taught you cannot trust those around you – especially those in positions of leadership, power or influence – forms an aggregate very much prone to ego-centeredness. Central and Eastern Europeans spent a lot of time searching for loopholes and ways of deceiving the powers around them and they knew everyone else was doing the same. In such a potentially competitive environment where there were simply not enough resources to go around, you did not want to get caught being someone else’s pawn. In the end, seeming practical necessity has made selfishness a something of a survival skill.

Ego in a sea of egos: the dilemma of relationships

Relationship above all else

We’ve already looked at the profound premium placed on highly relational authorities. In order to understand some of the dynamics of young people’s interpersonal relationships within the CEE we need to understand what it is about relationships that they most prize.

At the suggestion of a friend, I’ve spent the last several months asking the following question of as many people as I can: “What is worse, to tell a lie or to make someone angry?” The question stands as it is and I do not elaborate about circumstances or context. Take a moment and field the question yourself.

What did you answer?

In my case, almost without thinking, I answered that it would, of course, be worse to tell a lie. In my unofficial little survey every single Anglo-American I asked (several dozen) said the same thing and with the same immediate “that’s just common sense” attitude. That’s batting a thousand.

Amongst the Central and Eastern Europeans, there’s been a fascinating divide. Of the Slovaks I’ve surveyed – maybe a couple dozen - all but three responded that it would be worse to make someone angry. Hungarians, showing a bit of their war paint, sided with the Americans and have every time said they could not tell the lie. While I’ve only asked a half-dozen, the difference is compelling.

What’s at work here?

Ask yourself why you chose the answer you chose – upon what principles do you suppose you made your choice?

It might have to do with a basic way of thinking. In his book *Cross-Cultural Conflict*, professor Duane Elmer writes,

“In Western Culture⁶⁹, especially among Western white people, a very high value is placed on accuracy and truth. So lying is the greater sin.

⁶⁸ I’ve been told this generosity to strangers may be more because I’m a foreigner than a stranger. My Slovak friends are often surprised how helpful Slovak villagers have been to me when, say, I had car trouble in a somewhat remote region of the country. Regardless of the reason for their generosity, there are few other countries in the world in which I would rather have car trouble.

Outside the Western world, for most part, greater value is placed on relationship. Losing one's temper is a more grievous sin, but it represents a rupture in relationship."⁷⁰

I completely agree with Elmer's analysis of the root catalysts prompting different people to answer differently; but I would take pains to emphasize that, many times, it's not that people answering "to tell a lie" have chosen truth *over* relationship but that they recognize the utter necessity of the presence of truth *in* relationship – most often over and above the risks that anger might produce. From the perspective of the linearly thinking Anglo-American (and Hungarian?) the most detrimental thing to a relationship is for a lie to penetrate the progression of learning to know one another. To have honest communication, open dialogue and any ability to trust what one another are saying we need to rest assured that we are dealing truthfully. Truth allows for that progression to occur, lies stall and cripple it.⁷¹

Therefore, rather than saying those who answered that making someone angry was the worst option value relationship over truth, it might be more true to say, instead, that they value *sensitivity and feeling* above *accuracy or truth* and filter things through a complex web of interconnected relational considerations. They prize equality and the security that comes from good feelings, mutuality, getting-along and generosity – all of which they feel would be jeopardized by any significant degree of anger. Rather than to risk this anger, then, they avoid confrontation and argument.

Beliefs about the results of anger are managed by culture as well. Where an American does not associate disagreement with a relationship in jeopardy, many in the CEE do and are willing to go to great lengths to preserve good feeling, even if it means denying reality.⁷² Part of what I think is at work here is a misunderstanding about what peace really is. Many in the CEE describe peace as the absence of tension when I would begin by saying it's more about the presence of freedom, justice and security – none of which are possible in the absence of truth. If we are

⁶⁹ Writing in 1992, Elmer limits European inclusion in the term "Western Culture" to Western Europe

⁷⁰ Elmer, Duane; *Cross-Cultural Conflict*; pg. 14

⁷¹ Some would argue that the deepening post-modernity in American culture would produce a generation of young American relativists who would insist it is worse to make someone angry given that a lie is meaningless if one doesn't believe in objective truth. But this is mistaken at two critical points, 1) post-moderns are *not* relative about *all* truth but simply *moral and ethical* truth. 2) However much relative truth is valued among post-moderns, the holy grail of their thinking is absolute *authenticity*. Relationships that tolerate deceit and lies cannot accommodate authenticity. For the post-modern, reference to truth might be a misdemeanor level of sin, but to be hypocritical is a mortal transgression.

⁷² Very few absolutes exist and exceptions are everywhere. I saw a great deal of resolve in Eastern Europe during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Whereas much of Western Europe continued to try and appease the Iraqi regime, most of the governments of Central and Eastern Europe understood the time for verbal diplomacy was over. While there were many advantages for the CEE to be in support of the coalition, there were also many hazards for them in going against France and Germany – key members of the EU. I believe that history has taught the people of this region that there really are indeed times when only military force will end tyranny.

only after the avoidance of tension over truth⁷³, then we are free to placate, appease and look for consensus when the situation might demand a more black-and-white response whether we've consensus or not.

It's important to recognize that both types of thinkers may equally prize relationships and that they simply employ different tools to enhance those relationships. Being one who values truth in relationship, I am aware of the great hurt and misunderstanding that can come from others assuming people like me do not value those around us. Equally, folks like me need to understand that many who are avoiding the harsh reality of a given situation are not necessarily cowardly or morally lax. Once again, it seems that grace and humility must abound when we regard one another.

Family: the new generation gap

While not unexpected, family received the strongest endorsement in terms of being a source of positive authority. Ideally, family contains the full measure of highly relational interconnectedness that CEE young people crave. The mutuality, security, encouragement and unconditional love help to fill the void left after engagement with the world.

But there are gaps even here. Young people have grown so idealistic, so insistent on authenticity, that they have a hard time accepting their parent's willingness to compromise or their having compromised in the past. Parents understand that practical necessity sometimes prescribes one set of beliefs that you hold publicly and a second set you have at home. Young people cannot endorse "such nonsense."⁷⁴

The frustration that results from watching your most highly regarded authority figures betray ideas you hold sacrosanct can be devastating. The resentment that builds against these authorities can send cracks zigzagging through even the most enduring foundations of Central and Eastern European society.

The Crises of Leadership: conflict between the leaders and the led

The wedge

In a region where power has always been overwhelming and frequently randomly imposed, the relationship between those in authority and those under them has understandably been strained. There is a deep "us against them" attitude between those with and those without power. Those who submit to their rulers do not necessarily respect them nor do they believe that the leader actually expects his

⁷³ Of course, eventually tension *will* erupt, as the cost of a lie will at some point have to be paid. Avoidance of tension by appeasing injustice or not addressing wrongs is probably the surest way to guarantee running headlong into conflict.

⁷⁴ If you've noticed a contradiction involving the anger children feel toward parents they feel act hypocritically and the hesitance toward feeling anger mentioned in the previous section you're right. While the sheer familiarity of the parent-child relationship might allow for the expression of anger I think another factor is the parent's role as authority. CEE young people, while avoiding anger in relationships with friends and peers have no trouble expressing anger at authorities and holding them to account. In fact, they are so willing to do this that they sometimes see things like hypocrisy even when no hypocrisy is present.

mandates to be taken at face value every time. Totalitarianism was many things, including selective in when it insisted on absolute obedience. It left those under authority to figure out which rules had to be followed to the letter and which could be flouted. Even now, you see in one thing a strict adherence to law while in a second thing – stamping your ticket on mass-transit, punctuality at work, respect for office property, traffic ordinances, etc – you see an open dismissal for recorded rules. The problem in the modern day with this age-old understanding of what constitutes a judicial mortal sin and what is a mere venial trespass is that the last ten years has thrown the whole rulebook on its ear. A period of renegotiation has emerged, as Central Europeans have to rediscover what they are really being held to and what they can fudge. The process is excruciating painful for those who haven't either the capacity or the sense to figure it out.

All or nothing

Ronald Hingley, writing about the Russian character, illuminates another point consistent throughout the Slavic world when he notes,

“At any given moment the Russian tends to be highly conscious either of being or of not being in a hierarchic relationship. He is apt to make the most of such a context, playing to the limit one of two contrary roles: giving and receiving orders. But outside that context he has a keen sense of equality. ‘In all relations which are not defined as leader and led, super-ordinate and subordinate...Russians demand the most absolute equality. It would appear that the Russians do not conceive of any intermediate positions: there is either complete equality, or complete super-ordination and subordination.’ They thus tend to seem doubly polarized – first, between wholly authority-free and wholly authority-dominated relationships; secondly, within the latter only, between total domination and total subordination.”⁷⁵

This type of mentality has several repercussions. First, it creates deep resentment toward those under whom you feel forced to submit. As already mentioned, this resentment breeds a submission that is not total but is expressed through a complex mix of passive submission and passive resistance.

The passive submission is frustrating for leadership today. In an organization – whether it's a bottom-line, profit enterprise; an NGO or a non-profit – in which there is a hierarchical structure it is difficult to get those not in the “top echelon” to feel any real loyalty or sense of ownership in their work. This has an effect on job performance, initiative and a sense of pride in workmanship.

The passive resistance has much the same affect except that here we often see small groups form within an organization. These groups tend to withdraw to some degree from the rest of the work team, creating a varying degree of tension or sense of disunity. They form an almost village-dynamic, the negative aspects of which include gossip, chronic and unproductive complaining and passive efforts to undermine the leadership – whom they perceive as the “enemy” of their community.

Work and the authoritarian boss

Reflecting on an experience he had in forming an organization in England which employed several Russians, Hingley described trying to empower his subordinates with a sense of ownership and responsibility. But all sorts of mild and severe frustrations met him as he

⁷⁵ Hingley, Ronald; *The Russian Mind*; London; The Bodley Head Ltd., 1977; pgs 170-171

discovered a Russian soul prone toward “charmingly evasive tactics, disarming unreliability and delightful unpunctuality.” Hingley muses that, “these qualities may well enchant the casual observer. But what about the man in charge with a practical duty to perform?” After having experienced first-hand his need to accommodate to Russian work habits by adopting more severe measures at work than he would normally utilize, he writes,

“The experience did not reconcile me to the methods of an Ivan the Terrible, a Peter the Great or a Stalin. But it made it possible, as nothing else could, to understand that neither elemental perversity nor an evil-be-thou-my-good philosophy need be invoked to explain the proceedings of the Russians’ many despotic masters. Perhaps there was simply no other way of achieving results...The mailed fist or total anarchy: here is the choice with which subordinate Russians tend to face those responsible for their collective efforts. Must one then conclude that it was the Russian mind which molded the authoritarian state? Or is the Russian mind rather the outcome of that authoritarian state? All one can assert with confidence is that the two phenomena have interacted for at least half a millennium.”⁷⁶

Now, I’m hoping this winsome piece is intended at least partially tongue-in-cheek, as a reader could be forgiven for wondering if the author isn’t close to suggesting that the gulag was the fault of Russian stubbornness and lack of productivity. But, hyperbole aside, Hingley’s salient point is well received. One can imagine that a bit of truth exists in both possibilities – namely, that the Russian national character helps to develop a certain type of leader and that this certain type of leader helps build the Russian national character. One sees a sordid spiral effect as both realities begin playing and building off one another. Couple this with the natural inclination toward allowing absolute power to corrupt one absolutely and we find reason for the powder keg that was Russia of the last century.

Absolutism can exist in other ways as well. My Slovak friends are most set against bosses who they claim to be too theoretical and they resist authority that shows interests in ideas only if they seem intellectually sound; or those who want to help by explaining the underlying causes of a concept or system; those who help others figure out where their ideas are sound and where they need to be reconsidered; those who help bring out the complexities of proposed solutions; and those who set high expectations for the quality of information. These types of authorities are seen as autocrats with no regard for people but only for ideas and systems. For sure, such bosses can come across – intentionally or not – as unbearably arrogant. But, again, the question of which came first – the worker with no regard for ideas or the boss who is by default forced to deal almost exclusively with them because no one else will?

Regardless, the situation is what it is: real tension exists. The lack of subordinate initiative and the passive resistance that highlights a yearning for independence is set against authorities that do not inspire these qualities in those beneath them but, instead, often rule by suppression and condescension; the result is that both parties allow little room to grow and no means to generate a sense of partnership, reciprocity or respect.

The great sham: the false relationship with intellectualism

A few years ago, I had asked my literature class to complete a two-page essay in response to a particular set of poetry we had been reading. I cringed at even this

⁷⁶ *ibid*, pg. 169

short-task, as it would leave me with thirty pages of reading to wade through during what was promising to be a beautiful weekend. I've come to expect Slovak college students to turn in writing from all over the competency map – from barely junior high level to well beyond my expectations. Slovak university students usually fancy themselves intellectuals and often write lung-bursting sentences with true Central European flair. One fourth-year student, nevertheless shocked even my jaded sensibilities when he turned in a twenty-page tome of such incomprehensible prose that I – had I for a moment wanted to – would not have been able to make out even his basic premise. When I told him he would need to edit it down to the assigned number of pages and make it, well, understandable, he was indignant and went on accusing me of poor English, sham academics and a whole host of things that are probably true but, in that context, quite beside the point! Finally, in response to my suggesting his paper was unreadable I'm pretty sure he mumbled the Slovak term for "Neanderthal" and then, louder, added, "But this is how Nietzsche wrote!"

Of all the things resulting from the work we've done on authority, the above story helps demonstrate why the single most surprising thing for me was to discover that the Slovak penchant for intellectualism has either skipped a generation or is an outright sham. So absolute was the affectation of intellectualism in my university classes that I am utterly dumbfounded at the amount of suppressed hostility CEE young people have toward intellectual authority.

Force without feeling

When describing intellectual authority, young people used words like: destructor, illusion, machines, addiction, self-importance, inquisition and smothering. They aligned such concepts as faith, religion and politics to intellectual authority and selected images of skeletons, mass graves, oil refineries, commercials and a variety of people dressed in costumes and masks. The most striking overall description of intellectual authority was one participant's response when he said intellectuality is the serpent in Eden. The greater deceiver, he believes intellectuality is ultimately going to be our undoing.

At an apologetics conference in Budapest a group of around 100 participants listened to a series of lectures given by Dr. William Lane Craig, an American expert on Christian apologists. The group was comprised of people from all over Europe, America, England and Scandinavia, including maybe two-dozen from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia and represented predominately professionals – doctors, lawyers, professors, foundation directors – and missionaries or people otherwise involved in Christian work as vocation.

For those who aren't familiar with Craig's work, he is a consummate professional with a double PhD and he lectures all over the world on Christian apologetics, particularly in the area of cosmology. He knows his material well, is engaging and provocative and resoundingly articulate.

His lecture series was essentially a manifesto on Christian apologetics with a chunk of it focusing on advice to those wanting to enter the field, particularly those wanting to enter the debate arena. Given that the field is highly specialized, Craig insisted that you need a PhD – an essential credential in order to be invited to speak in forums such as Oxford. He also pointed out that since the vast majority of material and debate is in English, you must have mastery of that language. He didn't get much further than this before discovering that the room had suddenly divided

roughly – though *not* exclusively– down the middle of the Western European/Anglo-American and Central and Eastern European divide. The former were listening with rapt attention, aware that his words were accurate given the nature of the field and other realities. The latter group, incensed at what they saw as imperialism, accused him of being culturally insensitive and arrogant.⁷⁷

In the course of the seminar, there were several opportunities to try and understand the dynamic behind what was happening. Speaking with my Slovak colleagues, they confirmed for me the things I expected to hear from them. First, they found the very notion of having to jump through certain hoops (PhD, language acquisition) to be demeaning, rigid and uncompromising. Secondly, they found the notion of having to learn *English* particularly chauvinistic.

The other issue with Craig was stylistic. The arrangement of the room we happened to be in was much like a classroom with one side full of chairs facing a speaker's rostrum. This gave the room a formality and presented Craig as an authority figure – which, of course, he was. They also cited frustrations over the way Craig worked with his notes. Likely having delivered the lecture series several times already, Craig had essentially memorized his entire presentation. His words were crisp and accurate, his voice moderated for clarity and to heighten his listener's ability to follow his reasoning. My colleagues found this mechanical, insincere and impersonal. They also pointed out the *way* he answered questions, which involved his listening closely followed by a quick, brief, highly intelligent and reasoned response. My colleagues felt it was arrogant to so succinctly field an issue that had likely been weighing on the questioner's mind for years. Everything from the way he inflected his voice to his well-tailored suit was batted around with annoyance. "Why does he always have to be right!" one colleague wanted to know.⁷⁸

When I asked them to disregard his presentation for a moment and to consider whether or not Craig was right, they agreed that they thought he was. They also agreed it was clear he knew what he was talking about and could help many reasonable people better understand a rational justification for the Christian faith. But they also said they would never invite him to speak in their home country and, if he did, they would never recommend their non-Christian friends come hear him.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ To be fair, it has to be said that the primary speaker for the angered participants was an English academic with a strong PhD and well respected for her work. However such a crossover was an exception. While many Westerners challenged particular things Craig said, very few had such an outright negative reaction as she had. Also, as later revealed, this particular English academic had several very personal reasons for avoiding an overly aggressive intellectual response to human problems. Nevertheless, it seemed she misunderstood the lesson she might have learned from her own experiences and instead created a blanket objection to the kind of address Craig had prepared.

⁷⁸ One interesting, albeit sad, result of their resentment over Craig is that some of the Central and Eastern Europeans tried to find ways to belittle Craig. Though typically very loving, highly relational people, they resorted to the child's tactic of reducing someone else by pointing out minor foibles in order to make themselves feel better. They did not do this in front of Craig and would have been devastated if he had overheard them. They did not mean what they were saying but the act of saying them seemed to inflate their sense of superiority and their group dynamic – making their unseemly behavior "worth it".

⁷⁹ The tragic-comedy is this: in the midst of the controversy, Craig broke away from the apologetics seminar to give a scheduled lecture on cosmological proof for the existence of God at Central European University. Primarily, members of the philosophy and mathematics faculties attended the lecture and they encountered a thoughtful, winsome, engaging intellect. The philosophical banter that

What's going on?

William Lane Craig has an appreciable intellect. The arguments he utilizes and the information he conveys is of the highest caliber in terms of intellectual merit. Why then did so many Central and Eastern Europeans disparage him?

Why do so many young Central Europeans go through the pains of fancying themselves intellectuals if they find intellectuals so insensitive and anti-relational? I suppose the cultivation of image has something to do with it - as intellectual angst is a rather sexy accessory. There's also an element of self-protection – they can wrestle with an idea while holding it at arm's length. There is no danger to this and it has little to no real impact on their everyday life. An academic exercise, they are able to feign an interaction with the world around them while committing nothing but so many words and some time. In so doing, they create a fantastic irony, making the grappling with an idea the safest way to avoid being confronted by it.

But I also suspect subterfuge here. Young people have found a clever way to sauce over their despair with a fine sounding philosophy. I've always wondered why it's mostly intellectuals who are cynical, angry and distrusting people. I now understand that its mostly cynical, angry and distrusting people that are so ashamed of their inability to find joy, satisfaction or purpose that they hide their shortcomings behind the appearance of having reached the end of inquiry only to discover that it's the world – and not their souls – that is incapable of generating meaning in their lives. The intellectual existentialist image propagated by many young Central Europeans is, as I encounter it, a sham. It is a defensive mechanism set up to counter the raw-worry of their souls with a false nonchalance and the crafting of a philosophy from what is really just a practical condition. They exchange despair for doubt and avoid reality with the proceeds.

I am not saying that there does not exist very real intellectual concerns⁸⁰. Young people do seek knowledge and their questions must be taken with a life-or-death seriousness. We may have unvoiced suspicions about the motivations behind the questions and, more critically, we must seek the question that is behind the question. The articulated question, while never wholly irrelevant, is equally hardly ever the real issue. Part of the witness of the kingdom of God must still include apologetics and the reasonable presentation of the faith. But we must be careful to not go down

went back and forth was as stimulating as it was mystifying for someone like me who is apt to confuse cosmology with cosmetology. In his element, among truly intellectual Central Europeans, Craig was able to connect with professed unbelievers in a way that captured their imagination, won their respect and provided a robust defense of the Christian faith. And my colleagues wouldn't even invite him to their country?

⁸⁰ I'm also not saying they had no legitimate complaints with Dr. Craig. I believe that rationalistic philosophy, apologetics and debate have greater limitations that perhaps Craig would allow and, in certain instances or done with a certain style, even sometimes do damage, propelling people away from the faith. I also recognize that the formality of his presentation presents significant problems at an evangelistic or relationship building level. But I have to concede that it's often a question of audience. As mentioned, in his element Craig was very well received indeed. While his methodology isn't the only way to share the truth claims of the Christian faith – and, for many, maybe even for certain generations it's among the least effective ways – nevertheless, it is, in most cases a way that is absolutely correct in his field and for the people in his field and his material has been of incalculable worth to an untold number of people. To react against it with carte blanche dismissal is far too reactionary.

rabbit trails, assuming that intellectual angst is the real language of the post-modern age. It is not. It never has been.

In Summary:

Central and Eastern European young people have a keen awareness of the value of relationship. In their efforts to prevent tensions from seeping into their associations with others, they are willing to compromise what they know to be true.

This is even more understandable in a world that so often seems focused on dehumanizing people with mass-media appeal to cosmetic values and materialism instead of on human empowerment, compassion and community. Especially in the city, the urban glare of mass-humanity has its own dehumanizing effects. Ever increasing in speed, people are looking for respite from the hectic pace of agendas, targets, numbers, converts and other means of ascertaining measure, worth and productivity.

People are frustrated that they cannot find this respite. Everyone is looking for a sanctuary. A long-running American sit-com focused on just such a group of people who found identity, meaning and companionship in, of all places, a bar. The theme song of *Cheers* echoes the sensibilities of CEE young people:

*Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you've got.
Taking a break from all your worries,
Sure would help a lot.*

Wouldn't it be nice to get away?

*Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came*

*You want to be where you can see
The troubles are all the same.
You want to be where everybody knows your name.*

CEE young people are yearning for the security that comes from people who care about you and who you respect. They are not finding it in the authorities around them, sadly including the church. Real efforts have to be made to help young people believe they are more to our ministries than mere targets. It does no good for us to address only *ultimate* need; we need to find ways that first help us to meet real people at their real point of *felt* need.

One frustration with this is that you are never quite sure with whom you are dealing. We've seen how the ground seems to shift around us all the time. One Central European is a dogged individualist while another is highly collectivist and communal. Another might be one thing in one situation and the second is another. Authorities must figure out a way to be flexible enough to meet a variety of people in ever-changing circumstances yet confident enough about their message that they can resist the temptation of watering down what they stand for.

The risks of not doing this will mean a generation of young people that will disenfranchise themselves more and more from traditional forms of rule and authority. They will abandon traditional sources of meaning and identity. They will seek fulfillment in places that cannot offer the highly nuanced sense of identity, belonging and freedom that a properly functioning community can provide. It is clear: they will reject out of hand hard-nosed, absolutists and non-relational authorities. Down on power they will respond with a “Been there done that” attitude. “B’bye,” they will say; and spinning on their heels they will go it alone.

History, modern times and a sense of tomorrow

The death of history

The Central and Eastern European world has changed so much in the last decade that it is almost unrecognizable. The available choices and opportunities resulting from the collapse of communism and the advent of globalization has provided CEE young people the chance to reinvent themselves.

The students entering university this year have no real memory of communism affecting their everyday life. Therefore, though they’ve heard their parents’ stories and understand something of the anger and shame associated with that period, the tragedy is theirs only indirectly. The roots of this generation are not very deep. Many young people cannot imagine why that past should have any bearing on them at all. The fact that it does is foreign to them.

Young people are looking for sources of influence that can help fill this identity gap; as evidenced, for instance, by the renewed interest in the region’s Celtic past and the hope associated with joining the West in such venues as NATO and the EU. Still others are finding sources of representation, authority and a release for their anger in the neo-fascist organizations that have continued to grow in strength.

No ability to envision the future

If CEE young people have a really short view of history, their view of the future is equally diminished. There is a poverty of hope⁸¹ in the minds of many young people here.

Long-term vision is a luxury of the well fed – well fed in all ways. The shorter your time frame, the more intense your experiences need to be. CEE young people are becoming more involved in satisfying their immediate hungers even at the risk of their long-term gains. Long-term investment is not something the people of Central Europe are used to. There’s always been a different empire taking from you what the last regime allowed you to keep. You learned to invest in the things that you

⁸¹ Hope is built upon two things: *expectation* and *desire*. If we expect something but do not desire it, we are filled with dread. If we desire something yet have no expectation of its fulfillment, we have despair. In conversations regarding what young people imagine themselves to be in ten years, their expectations and desire usually did not coincide. Despite the many positive trends emerging in Slovak society, there is still little real hope in the future. At best, many “hope” that the coming entry into the EU will afford them opportunity to get out of Slovakia and begin building the life they desire.

could to some extent control: your village and the people immediately around you and your family.

Moj Vlas and the problems of nationhood

In most of the Slavic countries, ties to nationhood mean relatively little.⁸² Certainly, there's pride of place and, in Slovakia for instance, locals are proud of their wilderness – the mountain ranges especially and there's a growing pride in representatives of Slovakia in sports, for instance – especially the Slovak National Hockey Team. But there's not a general sense of being proud to be Slovak per se. Many young people are rather embarrassed at the notion, finding the idea of putting too much value in national identity quaint at best and dangerous at worst.

I was watching the film *Gladiator*⁸³ with several Austrian friends. At the end of the movie we ended up in a discussion about whether we would be willing to die for our countries. My Austrian friends couldn't even understand the question, calling the very notion "stupid." While Austria certainly has a complicated history that makes a lack of interest in war appreciable, their adamant refusal to acknowledge that it might sometimes be necessary to fight for your nation is interesting.

What are the results of a lack of patriotism? In terms of identity, if we cannot define ourselves at least partially by where we are from, from where can we? Especially in a world that does not generally believe in definition, sources of identity are increasingly hard to come by. One tension is that having a pride of place or origin seems a natural tendency for humanity. One Slovak friend, after disparaging a Hungarian's rather strong sense of national heritage, privately lamented, "Here the only people who are patriots are the skinheads." He was partially kidding but there was a note of strain in his laughter. He understands that people are aching to belong to something and that there are many things in which a Slovak can be proud. It is a shame that he feels that it is only in the extremists groups – who tarnish the very thing they are proud of and are not so much proud of being Slovak as they are merely angry and turning to rage as anesthetic – and in the brief moments of an athletic competition that he can shout out for his nation.

Political Participation

In a dizzying cycle, the abusive and incompetent authorities who have helped to eradicate the credibility of *any* authority has also helped to deepen the lack of pride in nationhood felt by CEE young people. In turn, the lack of national pride in young people makes it difficult for them to show much concern for the nation's affairs – particular within the political sphere.

This is understandable if lamentable. Young people are tired of governmental services so entangled in bureaucracy that bribery and other underhanded dealings have become the expected way to get things done – leaving those who possess

⁸² This is not usually an issue in Hungary where Hungarians feel a strong sense of national identity and are quite proud. Also, in isolated pockets throughout the Slavic region you find exceptions to this rule – such as in the Istrian Coast of Croatia where the people are deeply proud of their Venetian heritage. One man said to me there, "Am I excited to join the EU? Why? We've been Europe for a thousand years!"

⁸³ A film set in ancient Rome in which a Roman general gives his life for the good of the Empire.

fewer resources without a level playing field. Young people see the state of the streets, the graffiti that no one makes any effort to clean up and the trash that moves like tumbleweed on windy days. They have studied in the universities, where many well-educated teachers are so poorly paid that they are essentially forced to find work outside the university just to make ends meet, let alone get ahead and have the kind of lifestyle their qualifications would normally enable. Many continue to hold down teaching jobs – either for the sake of double dipping or because they truly love to teach and want to go on trying to make a difference in the lives of students. Nevertheless, they end up being part-time workers trying to do a full-time job – teaching suffers, students feel cheated and the professors grow in resentment and shame.

Instead of feeling motivated to create change, many young people feel powerless to make any real impact.⁸⁴ They are cynical about not just the known demagogues, but also all politicians; doubtful that anyone could be in politics for altruistic reasons. Stephan Hrib, writes,

“The political elite that is seeking to get its hands on the reins of power in Slovakia is completely self-obsessed, unaware of its own mediocrity, and is gradually dragging down everything and everyone around it. Increasingly, an awful ennui is spreading through Slovakia, public debate is being transformed into dull slogans and phrases, so that the civic sector’s call to action--“Vote”--echoes in a void of unknown depth.”⁸⁵

Hrib articulates the frustration of many young people when he goes on to suggest,

“It is possible that many politicians would prefer not to lie and steal if they only knew what else could be done in politics. But this model of politics was built for them over many years and today has codified itself into accepted rules: You enter politics not to serve others, but yourself. You tell sweet deceits, not the bitter truth. You promote comfortable compromises, not uncomfortable views. Several hours remain before the elections, and for the first time since 1989, it seems that it makes no sense to vote. Why should we replace one cynic with another, when we will become part of the West with either?”⁸⁶

The cynicism that has developed toward politicians is not without its significant consequences. As mentioned earlier, when we do not trust the political system and have little faith in the words of politicians we are apt to evaluate political candidates and legislation by the fickleness of our mood and not by an analysis of the words, principles and policy agenda of the candidates. In the CEE, mood tends toward those who, in keeping with the kind of authorities that approved of here, make people feel good about whom they are and who say things in a way people want to hear them. The most recent Slovak election was shaping up to be a battle between a moderately disliked party with a stronger sense of policy and principles and their opponent, a charismatic though politically unpredictable challenger sometimes compared to Mečiar. In a world in which charisma still sells, the challenger looked

⁸⁴ This despite the fact that it was the young voters who most significantly helped to oust Prime Minister Mečiar and usher in the first significant steps toward a pro-western government in 1998.

⁸⁵ Hrib, Stephan, September 20th, 2002

⁸⁶ *ibid*

to be in real contention, “An additional pungent factor in all of this election business is raging populism. The Slovak political makeup is awash with populism. The result is that a large portion of the population identifies strongly only with a personality as opposed to an identifiable set of ideals,”⁸⁷ confided Jake Slegers, the executive director of the US Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia. The Chamber and like-minded organizations spend considerable resources on educating local citizenry to look beyond the cosmetic and to delve into issues of policy, statesmanship and principle.

As important as all this is, Hrib, Slegers and others understand that the vote and political participation as a whole is about more than percentages and who wins and who doesn't. Mixed in amongst all the political nonsense is a real opportunity to stand for something. Hrib suggests that through voting, “We will find out what Slovakia is.”⁸⁸

This is a truth for all nations.

The challenge of success

It was one thing for the people of Central and Eastern Europe to endure together the difficulties of the past century. It will be another thing altogether as they prepare to “enter Europe” and to begin to enjoy the many expected benefits. The young people we've talked with are hesitant about the idea of success. They've experienced much already and are beginning to be doubtful that it can make the difference they've been led to believe it can.

Many young people have, by the time they leave college, already acquired the skills necessary for them to get well paying jobs. As young people begin to acquire the trappings of success, they assume that it will satisfy their many longings. Young people are beginning to mirror the material affluence of the West and they have grown remarkably savvy in keeping current with trends and what's hot and not in music and fashion.

Many of the recent university graduates I know are already significantly out-earning their parents – sometimes by several multiples. This is a cause of great pride for parents but it is understandable that it can place a certain strain on a family as well. It's to be expected that a certain anxiety and shame can occur as parents realize their children are now able to provide for themselves what their parents could never have even dreamt about.

The influence of success on families can be even greater in regards to young married couples. Writing for a local newspaper, sociologist Dr. Antônia Sotáková commented, “The problem is...[when] they have suddenly started earning far above the social average, and don't know how to handle it.” She went on to explain some of the specific risks, “It's mostly clever young guys with top business jobs who

⁸⁷ Slegers, Jake; “The Underestimated Importance of the September Elections;” *The Washington Times*, 2002

⁸⁸ And who they are turned out to be something unexpected indeed. Slovakia became the first nation among the former Eastern Bloc countries to re-elect a Center-Right government and, even more, they gave the ruling government an even greater mandate to push for strong economic change and to focus headlong into integration with the West. On a slightly darker note, for the first time since 1989 the communists won a few modest seats in the parliament. Change is a process.

suddenly get the chance to travel, live in a huge house with a pool, even buy a yacht. They sometimes think that taking a lover is part of the deal, and then we start seeing these deserted wives and problem children who live in beautiful houses that lack one thing: a husband and a father.”⁸⁹

Success can breed new perils.

A perhaps silly though resonate example involves the 2002 World Ice Hockey Championships. For the first time ever, Slovakia became the world champions. The scene in the Bratislava streets was beyond description. I had watched the game with a mixture of locals and expatriates at CityGate and after the game we decide to make our way downtown. What was normally a five-minute drive took close to forty. Strangers were sharing bottles; fireworks and shouts filled the air with minor seismic booms. One Slovak commented that it was like 1989 all over again.

We had a pleasant celebration in a local pub, singing the national anthem and waving flags. As the party wore on, the mood began to change just a bit. One friend began to comment loudly, “At least we didn’t play the Czechs!” He said it with an air of playful self-mockery but he was also quite serious. The Czechs are Slovakia’s arch-nemesis – at least from the Slovak point of view. The Czechs have won the bulk of match-ups including every match played against Slovakia in World Championship competition and therefore bring an immense psychological advantage to their games. Even as I write this, the 2003 World Championships is on. Since it’s past midnight, later today the Slovaks will play the Czechs. Currently, the Slovaks are playing incredibly impressive hockey and are undefeated – as are the Czechs. In fact, both teams are going into the game tied with eight points apiece. The game is, in one sense, pointless; both teams will advance into the next round regardless of the outcome. But, in my estimation, it may well be the most important game Slovakia has ever played and has ramifications extending well beyond hockey. Not having played the Czechs last year on their way to the championship crown, the Slovaks will now play the Czechs as the defending champions. While you cannot compare two teams from different years, the game nevertheless will serve as something of a validation of the Slovak victory last year in the minds of millions of Slovaks. Already, many Slovaks are beginning to doubt they will win. They’ve no reason except history to say this.⁹⁰

Last year, as the party finally began to ebb and folks started to make their way home, I emerged from the pub and instantly knew the streets had changed. Now, menace was all over the place. Most of the crowd was gone and the remaining stragglers, once happy revelers were now drunk and vomiting all over the place.

While not wanting to read too much into the aftereffects of a hockey celebration, I sensed in the after-party streets a realization that the success of their hockey team

⁸⁹ Quoted from *The Slovak Spectator*, 2002

⁹⁰ As I write this footnote following an edit of this paper’s final draft, the world championships are over. In the game I mentioned above, the Slovaks tied the Czechs. The country was ecstatic. More ecstatic was the match up several days later when the two teams again met to contest the bronze medal game. The Slovaks dominated the Czech team, virtually routing them. Sport is often about far more than a game. As the game clock neared its end, the Slovak announcer repeatedly shouted, “We’ve gotten rid of our complex, we’ve beaten the Czechs!” As had happened when the US hockey team handed the Russians their Olympic hockey defeat in 1980, new horizons and future hopes opened up for people everywhere. And this was just a hockey game.

wasn't going to change the lives of Slovaks after all. A country's sports victory can change the national mood and be the catalyst for renewed energy and national pride but it cannot, itself, change circumstances. The euphoria of the moment seemed to end for many after their last beer. For many, the hangover lasted longer than the joy.

Central and Eastern Europe is coming to grips with itself and will continue to do so. They are learning what the West has already had the time to digest – that success does not sustain you and that accomplishments are miserable as either idols or mistresses.

God and His Word

The supreme Authority of all the world is the Lord God Almighty. But this is hardly believed anymore. I said in the beginning that whatever we hold as the center of the universe is our god. Even those of us who profess to be followers of the Lord are prone to time and again place things in the center instead of Him. These things we refer to as idols – little gods. We could live our lives with them, if not steadfast and careful.

In this section I look at several areas as they concern CEE young people and their perceptions about God and related ideas as sources of authority. We will examine CEE belief about Reality, the Church, mission and sin. There is a lot more to be explored and the field studies branch at CityGate is planning an in-depth examination of this subject in the coming year.

Tarnished reality

The wool has been pulled over our eyes. In our post-modern world, it is easy to be skeptical about what we think we believe in. We've come to expect that there is more than one reality and that we've too few tools to discern them.

It's stating the obvious when I say the authority of our experiences and perceptions about the world is compromised when we fail to trust whether what we think we're experiencing is really real.

We look around but do not see – with our eyes or our intellect – clear proof of the existence of objective authority. Much of this is a problem with our understanding of what exactly is the nature of proof – would we know evidence even if we saw it? Another issue is our loss of the Biblical confidence that helps us to declare that there is one Reality alone and that all the other “realities” are merely virtual. Movies like *The Matrix* (1999) are popular in part precisely because they echo this deep suspicion that the world is not what it seems. This lack of confidence in everyday experience is, on one hand, a significant handicap in a person's ability to see the gospel in terms of addressing everyday concerns and answering the meaning of life. On the hand, it's also a healthy awareness that in a cursed world we do have to be suspicious whether or not we ever really have the full story about anything. It's not just a question of whether reality exists but also of how I can interpret that reality and how I can describe my experience of that reality. There are several places to get bogged down or fall through a hole in the fence. Reality, our experience of reality and our description of reality – it is important to get this three-tiered progression correct if we are to make sense of our lives.

The last refuge

In terms of creation, CEE young people often describe nature in almost neo-pagan terms. God is dormant, they say, He has abandoned the work of influencing human events. Now, residing in Nature, God has taken up residence in His last refuge.

Many young people in the CEE have a two-pronged approach to nature. First, nature is that brute force always acting against you. Nature has power and it can crush you. So nature then is something both feared and held in real awe. The second, different, view is that nature is motherly and is the protector and preserver of purity and goodness. In both cases, nature is frequently seen as God's last refuge. He has abandoned the everyday world of man and keeps the wilderness as His final stronghold. This notion of a physically limited God residing in a particular location reminds one of wood elves and hamadryads but it taken quite seriously. Nature is awarded a significant degree of authority based on this very notion.

The tarnished body

We were discussing the nature of authority with a group of young Christians when I asked them to begin calling out word associations they had regarding positive authorities in their lives. I began developing quite a list until the answers slowed and then, after another moment, altogether stopped. We had compiled some forty or so positive influences. "Anything else?" I asked. A few additional answers were called out then silence again. I raised my eyebrows, "Anything more?" A moment or two went by. "Are you sure?" I asked again and they began to sense I was fishing for something. After another moment had passed I again asked, though in a highly affected voice, "Are you SURE there is isn't anything else you – AS CHRISTIANS – should add? Suddenly a hand shot up and clapped itself to its owner's forehead. "Oh," said the student turning a slightly new color, "I suppose we should mention church."

Fast forward to another experience in which I first asked, as a warm up exercise, another group of students to give me all the words they could think of describing the benefits of belonging to a soccer club. They called answers such as a 'sense of belonging,' 'friendship,' 'fun,' 'feeling of shared purpose' and the like. We then did some intervening activities before I asked for words or phrases describing positive aspects of church membership. They rattled off a list of things. When they had exhausted themselves of answers I thanked them and then taped the list pertaining to football club membership up alongside the one about church. Unfortunately, the lists were essentially the same minus a few particular activities, though none of a "religious" nature. The list regarding church membership had no mention about either God or His Bible.

Another time in the Czech Republic we visited a seminary group and discussed both God and Church as authorities. They described aspects of both and, thankfully for a group of people about to embark on a profession in the church, had entirely positive things to say.

We then asked them to select from a table filled with pictures two images that they somehow associated with the concept of God as authority and two pictures of the church as authority. Individually, the pictures seemed chosen largely for their content but when we placed the one set of pictures on one large table and the other set on another beside it an interesting pattern emerged.

For the God pictures, the images contained a variety of highly positive relationships, gentle colors, and soft images. The pictures about the church were altogether different. The colors were harsh and antagonistic, there were very few people in the images and those that did have people usually were not engaged in any kind of relationship with anybody else. The seminary students were shocked at the simple level of visual difference between the two groups – one made you feel at ease and comfortable while the other set was caustic and harsh.

Throughout the course of this study, many young people cited the church as one or another negative authority. What makes the above three stories special is all of them concern churchgoers and young, future church leaders and that in each case the group itself was surprised and sometimes embarrassed by what seemed to be unexpected, gut-level beliefs about the church or their failure to mention the church. So while each group in the end was able to have a refreshingly honest discussion about painful aspects of the church, no one in any of the groups would have originally intended to say anything disparaging.

In terms of being an authority, many equate the church with the word-associations common to negative authority. They see the church as too hierarchical, irrelevant, structured, boring, too full of dogma, hypocritical and stuck in the past.

Tarnished mission

An informal survey among a few dozen Slovak friends and acquaintances regarding their thoughts about the presentation and activities of local and foreign missionaries in Slovakia demonstrates a mildly remarkable consistency in how young Central Europeans experience the most common types of evangelism to which they are occasionally exposed. These activities include street-evangelists: ranging from musicians, to mimes, to presentation displays, and to personal testimonies; public lectures: dealing with apologetics, discussion events on films, books and cultural and political themes; sports and language camps; and social activism.

Most of the people I asked are either professed non-believers or, by their own estimation, Christians based more on tradition and culture – very few consider themselves to be a born-again, Bible-believing Christian in any orthodox or evangelical sense. Nevertheless, perhaps surprisingly, a firm majority of those that *do* consider themselves Christians essentially echoed the sentiments of the marginally religious and unbelievers when I shared with them this information.

Characteristics and public image

Not surprising is the nearly unanimous personal disdain for street evangelism. While only a scant few felt that street evangelism should be outright prohibited, neither did anyone have much to say that was positive. The primary complaint was that it seemed disingenuous to shout answers at the passing public without having first engaged the public long enough to know the questions it's asking. Most Europeans I know complain of the American practice of using the phrase, "How are you?" more as a greeting than a genuine question wanting a real answer. In just this way, Central Europeans were annoyed by the notion of a stranger bringing up such personal issues as faith on the street and doing so in a way that he was essentially simply taking *at you* rather than talking *to* or *with* you.

The type of response these activities generated mirrored their descriptions of formal and institutional authority. Street missions, however winsome or theologically astute, tend to push away more than it attracts. Many of the Central Europeans I surveyed suggested that there may have been a time when such street presentations carried a lot of interest – especially in the very early days following the collapse communism as such events were then unheard of. However, the authority of what was once new has worn away, revealing a tired, old and impersonal device.

What tends to work and why it fails again

The most approved activity was, expectedly, the social activism found in soup kitchens, homeless shelters, hospice care, afternoon and summer activities designed to provide children something to do, etc. Activities such as public lectures and residential language or sport camps were typically met with neutrality – they are, as was often pointed out, wholly voluntary activities. However, disapproval or approval was often dependant on whether or not the activities were seen as attempts at “brainwashing” and whether the presentation of content was seen as threatening or open. Many felt that advertising for public lectures or camps needed to have an unmistakable transparency, feeling that it would be misleading and immoral to, say, invite someone to a sports camp with no mention of a religious element to the activity only to have that person arrive and find out that a substantial portion of the daily schedule is religious or evangelistic in nature.

Activities that would be seen as manipulative even in a voluntary event include making bible study a mandatory activity for participation in the “fun” element of the programming – the sports game, the field trip, etc. Also cited is the sometimes practice of telling somebody – usually children – that you will write or email them if they give you their address information. Later, the kids too often receive very little by way of personal communication, but, rather, receive a pile of evangelistic material. The same sentiment was felt in people offended by the seeming eagerness of program leaders to meet with them – on the pretense of sharing a coffee or something – only to be hit with proselytizing when the appointment is met.

This dilemma is relevant to a discussion on authority because the very fact that people feel this way about missionaries compromises a Christian’s ability to be salt and light in the lives of the people around them. Many Eastern Europeans assume that a missionary’s social action or friendship is held ransom pending their “target’s” participation in religious programming; on their church attendance; or, worse, on his having prayed a certain prayer. This can breed cynicism like a vat and people find Christians to be insincere, dishonest, mercenary and more interested making converts than making friends.

The missionary oddity

Another significant area in which the authority of a missionary is compromised is in the very notion of their being a missionary at all. The idea of “professional Christians” is very odd to many Central and Eastern European young people.

The primary problem people see is that a vocational missionary doesn’t live in a context which is familiar to people. People don’t see them as having a regular job with the list of common problems faced by working people every day. If the *missionary* doesn’t live in a context familiar to *working* people, then working people assume that *they* live in a context unfamiliar to the missionary.

Many unbelievers feel that Christians have isolated themselves in a sub-community already. Christians have their own music, their own art, their own books, their own societies and they typically have deep friendships only with other Christians. A Christian whose *job* it is to be a Christian strikes them as astonishingly strange and puts an ultimate emphasis on the notion of the Christian living outside anything familiar to the unbeliever. While some unbelievers can accept the similarities between a missionary's sense of vocation and that of pastor or priest they are able to understand the role of the latter more comprehensibly. The missionary creature is its own taxonomy.

The impact this has on a missionary's ability to speak with relevance and authority on issues important to Central Europeans is easy to see. Those I spoke with simply feel that a vocational missionary experiences very little of the everyday tensions that a "regular" working man encounters and therefore has little say about those tensions.

Integrity and no easy answers

Too often Christians are accused of having flippant over-easy answers to difficult, seemingly incomprehensible questions. We know, all of us, that our finite minds are incapable of fully knowing the Infinite. We know that we are astonishingly different, God and ourselves, and we know that it is precisely because of this difference – precisely because God is God – that we cannot utterly know him. Still, unbelievers sometimes suspect that we misrepresent the life of faith. Too often, they feel, we either say overtly or hint that with Christ in one's life, all pain and difficulty falls away and we enter a realm that is almost magical, "I became a Christian because I wanted to be like Uncle Cheong." Says the narrator in Wee Wee Tan's *Foreign Bodies*,

"I wanted the jazz alleys, the burning sands, the road black with ice, a life raised to a visionary pitch, soaring above the earth to the heavenly kingdoms...All I had to do was lift my foot and step into a new, magical world, a world shimmering with tremendous possibilities. And then I knew – big-deep-bass-strumming-in-the-heart kind of knowing – that if I became a Christian, somewhere along the line there would be visions and everything. Somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me."⁹¹

The Christian life contains these things too be sure. But we do an injustice to the truth when we lead others to believe that it contains only this. It's a very real temptation to put our best face forward but we have to be careful. Many compared this type of misrepresentation with the lies told by the communists and anybody else promising a universal elixir to all of life's troubles. As Christians, we need not do this. Our very message is a message of ultimate hope – not immediate cure. Our vision spans across the promise of eternity, not to the chimera-fantasies of the now.

The world according to ourselves

A final sort of unintended travesty that missionaries sometimes wreck upon their mission is a common on-the-job-hazard. We really are peddling a true and life changing message of hope. When folks around us receive this message and feel the stir of the Spirit within them, they may place on the missionary a degree of esteem

⁹¹ Tan, Wee Wee; *Foreign Bodies*

appropriate only to God. They might begin to believe that the missionary is a know-all, capable of discoursing on and providing answers to an untold of number of issues.

Occasionally, I have seen how missionaries themselves begin to believe this. Sensing that they've made an impact on someone's life, they allow themselves to become a guru to that person, helping them to mold themselves not according to God's image but to the missionary's own. The missionary is also guilty of a certain transfer of authority – granting themselves them false belief that they have a great deal to say on a variety of subjects they've actually no qualifications in.

The competition for attention

Christian mission finds their ability to establish relevant authority challenged by the sheer amount of distraction found in the modern world. A walk down a Bratislava street is accompanied by an incredible cacophony of noise. Beyond the normal blare and rumble of any busy city, storefronts are often wired for sound, blasting music onto the promenade. Near several popular shopping squares, wide screen television screens pump out video channels with all the accompanying imagery and audio din.

The amount of input to the mind is staggering. With so many services vying for our attention, the commercial competition has grown remarkably savvy, whereas the proclamation of the Christian message is essentially unchanged. Imagine what's on offer to the young person in the modern world: MTV, VH1, DVD, MP3, XTZ, KFC and T130 – and then realize that all the Christian seemingly has to offer is WWJD. I'm not saying we market the faith like a pair of track-shoes, I'm merely pointing out that with all that's going on in the world, if a young person can keep themselves going at break-neck speed, they might never slow down long enough to let the emptiness in their soul grab the attention of their preoccupied mind.

Like seed scattered on hard earth, the Gospel will always fall on deaf ears; but I don't believe this is the primary problem in the modern world. Most young people are aware of the God shaped hole in the vicinity of their soul and would be ready to listen to a compelling message; but with all that's going on, it doesn't matter that they're not deaf -- they can't hear us above the clamor. We need something that allows us to duck under the din and access the attention of the unbelievers around us. But it can't be a matter of bait and switch. Having gotten on the inside, we must accept that ulterior motives and conditional love will only serve to justify the unbeliever's suspicions and will render our proximity irrelevant. We must have the confidence of knowing that love needs no ulterior motive.

Tarnished Image

Someone once pointed out the irony that while man cannot make even a maggot, we conceive of gods by the hour. Indeed, as we continually go about fashioning God in our image, it's no surprise the kind of God in which many young Central Europeans long to believe in. He's the kind of God CS Lewis described when he wrote,

“One reason why many people find Creative Evolution so attractive is that it gives one much of the emotional comfort of believing in God and none of the less pleasant consequences. When you are feeling fit and the sun is shining and you do not want to believe that the whole universe is a mere mechanical dance of atoms, it is nice to be able to think of this great mysterious Force rolling on through the centuries and carrying you on its crest. If, on the other hand, you want to something rather shabby, the Life-

Force, being only a blind force, with no morals and no mind, will never interfere with you like that troublesome God we learned about when we were children. The Life-Force is a sort of tame God. You can switch it on when you want, but it will not bother you. All the thrills of religion and none of the cost. Is the Life-Force the greatest achievement of wishful thinking the world has yet seen?⁹²

We try to fashion God as our best friend with none of the judgment. God is certainly the God upon whose breast leant John. But He is also He-Who-Rebuked Sodom. God is not tame. He is by no means safe.

Central and Eastern European young people will, I believe respond more readily to a God with this kind of integrity of purpose. As one young Slovak Christian once remarked, “We are aching for a Christianity with balls.” Such resolve does not have to coincide with belligerence. God is all-powerful and fully resolved but He is not obnoxious. Our invocation of Him must also not be.

In what might seem a contradiction of everything that’s been said, one of the features of Christian witness that we must recover is a robust understanding of the reality of sin. It’s when a thing is called for what it is that euphemisms can be peeled away to reveal the truth within. We must stop letting our words fall too far from their meaning. Young people may say they want freedom but they time and again express – in more roundabout ways – that what they are really seeking is accountability, discipline and something to believe in.

Gagged God

In a world that has lost faith in the power of words to convey any objective meaning, we are in a pickle when our faith rests on the premise that a book can have authority over everything we do and believe.

CEE young people cannot imagine a book written so many thousands of years ago as having anything to say to the modern times. We need to recover an appropriate apologetic for scriptures as the inerrant Word of God that is, itself, unchanging but that is at the same time wholly relevant to changing times. We must preserve the presentation of orthodoxy but do so in a way that speaks to young people in the vernacular of their times. It is content, not method, with which we must strive for dogmatic orthodoxy. We must recover the means to convey that God is there, He is good, and He is not silent.

⁹² Lewis, CS; pg 34, *Mere Christianity*, Fount, 1977

Part IV: Ways Forward, Ancient Truth for Changing Times

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. Then God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse heaven...then God said, “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear;” and it was so.”

The book of Genesis, chapter one, verses 1-9

“God created the great seamonsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind, and God saw that it was good...Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.”

Genesis, chapter one, verse 21; chapter two, verse 19

In the beginning there was order

The first words of the testimony of scripture give witness to, among other things, the birth of order. God made form where there was no form and brought clarity to where there had been only darkness. The passages above demonstrate the Lord God’s bringing forth of chronological geographical order, meteorological order the order of taxonomy and, through man, the order of calling things their proper names.⁹³

Order and authority are inextricably connected. Without the authority of God there would still be only the pitch and nameless void. When looking for signs of intelligent life in outer space, investigators listen for non-random sound structures. Order points to creator. A child banging randomly on the keys of a piano might still exist but Bach working the ivory proves beyond doubt that life is there *and* provides some clue as to the intellect, character and qualities of that life.

Just as Adam’s naming the animals likely said almost as much about Adam as it did about the animals he named, so too must we understand the pronouncements of the culture around us if we are to learn anything about it. DM Lloyd Jones wrote, “If I understand the modern religious situation at all this whole question of authority is one of the most important problems confronting us.”⁹⁴ If this is accurate, then it is critical we understand how the culture addresses this specific issue. In doing so, we will establish a framework of common understanding that will allow us to move forward with wisdom and confidence.

⁹³ It strikes me as supremely good to realize there were probably no euphemisms in Eden.

⁹⁴ Jones, DM Lloyd; *Authority*; London, Intervarsity Press; 1958 pg 7

Bridging the gap

The first step in establishing common understanding is to identify our own assumptions and to commit to holding them loosely – so loosely that if it becomes appropriate we will let them simply fall away. Our assumptions can blind us to the real issues. We might identify, for instance, that a group of seminary students lacks confidence in the Bible and therefore assume that they simply need a good lecture on the authority of scripture. But this would fail for two reasons. The first is that the lack of confidence in scripture is, as we've come to see, likely merely a symptom of a larger issue – the lack of confidence in any formalized authority period. You can talk on the authority of the word until you're blue in the face but it will consistently be undermined by their inability to trust authority at a more foundational level. Secondly, the seminary students themselves might have no real idea of their lack of confidence in scripture or of their lack of trust in formalized authority. They'll simply receive your lecture as preaching to the choir – believing one thing about themselves and, all the while, having a gut level set of beliefs they might know nothing about but from which their beliefs and actions are at least partly determined. The critical thing to keep in mind is that we do not always ourselves know the truth about what we really believe – by the time we are adults we have, everyone of us, become experts at withholding information; even from ourselves.

We need to help people bridge the gap between what they say believe and what they really believe. Getting people to identify their intuitive authorities and the kind of authority they consider positive and negative goes a long way in doing just this.

Ask people to identify various types of authorities in everyday life: maybe the news, their parents, friends, their endocrine system, their boss or Maggie Thatcher. Ask them what gives these things their authority – is it education? A uniform? Attitude? Age? Power or strength?

What are the positive or negative characteristics of these authorities? How do they feel in the presence of these authorities? Scared? Intimidated? Secure? Confident? Stupid? Oppressed? Do they willingly submit to these authorities or do they resist them? Why? What authorities would they more willingly submit? Are these authorities ultimate? What might be above them?

Establishing a Biblical understanding

How can we help the culture around us to understand the Biblical model of authority? What does the Bible have to say about submission to the above-mentioned authorities? If Christianity is truly the only thing that can address the chief issues of man, then we should be able to articulate a Biblical apologetic that is winsome, provocative, challenging and enticing. If the Bible answers the need of man's heart, than the Bible identifies the source of all that we desire. If the Bible is *true* than we can have confidence that its promises are not simply something we long for but rather something we can truly expect. As we've identified, the coming together of desire and expectation is called hope. In a region as uprooted as Central and Eastern Europe, the hope of scripture helps to allay the fear that we are locked down by our past. Especially in a transitioning culture, the hope resonant in believing that this is simply not true can be life changing.

What is freedom?

“In my youth, I stressed freedom, and in my old age I stress order. I have made the great discovery that liberty is a product of order.” Will Durant

A part of the first step is to recognize that this hope will be shattered if we continue to hold on to false ideas about freedom. Throughout the course of this field study, time again I ran across young people who believe the opposite of authority is freedom. In this sense, any attempt at personal authenticity must begin with a rejection of authority, restraint and constraint. William Temple addressed this misconception succinctly, “Freedom so far as it is a treasure must be freedom *for* something as well as freedom *from* something. It must be the actual ability to form and carry out a purpose.”

The freedom of form

The ability to form and carry out a purpose has as its very prerequisite the need for order. Harken back to Genesis and the formless void from which God brought purpose. We find the following principle in action all over creation – form, rather than erasing freedom, actually provides for the condition of freedom. We see it in the political scene where a democratic constitution protects the rights of all people from the arbitrary will of others. We see it in nature, where the human body allows us the freedom to act, to relate and to experience. The provision of the Ten Commandments wasn’t the giving of some arbitrary set of prescriptives. They are a call to intimacy, “I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the Land of Slavery...have no other gods before Me.” This isn’t God arrogantly demanding worship for having bailed us out of trouble. This is the God of the Universe who liberated His people saying “If you want relationship with Me, if you want intimacy with Me then I am ready – but there are some things you have to do. Namely, you must not let anything come between us. These things will interfere with our ability to relate. Only I can deliver you from slavery.” The commandments of God are His revelation of how to live in accordance with Reality. Only this can set us free to live as we were created to live. Refusing to live according to the law of gravity is not an exercise of freedom. In fact, it will very quickly result in a very real lose of freedom.

In any activity that has any type of goal or purpose, there *must* be form. Whether you are baking, running a nation, racing a bike, or relating to people, a total lack of form predicates confusion and disorder with nothing to refer to for guidance, no way to mollify injustice, an inability to have confidence in anything and no means to ensure the equality or security of anyone. An utter collapse of form would splinter everything.

This doesn’t mean everything is prescribed. We must find ways to articulate the need for balance between form and freedom. Francis Schaffer described it this way,

“The problem is this: if there is not a proper balance between form and freedom, then society will move into either of two extremes. Freedom, without a proper balance of form, will lead to chaos and to the total breakdown of society. Form, without a proper balance of freedom, will lead to authoritarianism, and to the destruction of individual and social freedom. But note further: no society can exist in a state of chaos. And whenever chaos has reigned for even a short time, it has given birth to the position of arbitrary control...Here is a simple but profound rule: If

there are no absolutes by which to judge society, then society is absolute.”⁹⁵

The cost of utter license

If you really want to hold fast to the notion that freedom truly means an absence of law that you would have to see what a horribly temporary arrangement is any one person’s freedom. An absolute lack of authority would be little more than utter license; and I wouldn’t give twenty minutes to a room full of average people with average human appetites trying to survive with complete and utter license. Boundless license – absolute lack of authority – doesn’t mean freedom at all, it means the strong confound and subjugate the weak. It means our lusts ensnare us. Where is the liberty in that? One thing is certain, unfettered freedom is a euphemism for chaos and death.

Ambrose Bierce, author of the cynical *Devil’s Dictionary* defined “Emancipation as “A bondman’s change from the tyranny of another to the despotism of himself.” While I don’t believe that humanity is merely bad, I know we are neither entirely good. We can expect that we will abuse our freedoms and our laws. And so far as I find these two aspects warring against myself I find some solace in a measure of external control, often assisting me in doing that thing which I most truly want to do – be kind, turn the other cheek, leave the girl alone and so on. Choice is as critical a part of protecting freedom as is law. It really is finally up to us.

What kind of Lord is this?

The greatness and goodness of the Lord

In the midst of the creation of the universe we begin to gain some hint as to the character of this Creator God. He is Lord for certain. Scripture attests beyond question that God is all-powerful, all knowing, all present – in terms of whatever is noble and good and right He is the omni-everything. He is Master. He is King. He is Judge. If our study of the beliefs about authority have taught us anything, it is that these are unpopular terms among the young people in the CEE. But in the course of this paper I’ve also tried to stress that my belief that young people are not necessarily opposed to these terms per se, it is simply that whenever they’ve seen these terms applied in their everyday life they have been shackled and battered and bruised by them. But they are open to a restoration of these terms.

The real question isn’t “Is God Lord (or master or king or judge)” but, rather, “What *kind* of Lord (or master or king or judge) is He?” We need to articulate the full character of God. We need to demonstrate that He is a God concerned for beauty and the goodness of things. That He is a Master who recognizes the needs of those He is Lord over and provides for those needs. Among His many names, for instance, do we have a theology that begins to approach what it means when God comes Himself “Jehovah” – the covenant name meaning not merely “Lord” but a personal Lord? Consider that He is called Jehovah-Raah – the Lord Shepherd. How did Christ describe His role as Shepherd? Can we help young people to imagine that the God of the Universe would seek after His lost sheep like a good shepherd? What about Jehovah-Shammah – the Present Lord. When the Bible testifies that “The Lord is Present” (Psalm 46:1) or that “Christ is with us” (Matthew 28:20) can young

⁹⁵ Schaffer, Francis; from L’Abri Tapes and *How Then Shall We Live*; Crossway books; 1976

people come to understand that this not a Master who is distant and unapproachable but Who has made the first (and last and all the intervening) steps to be, Himself, close to us? Jehovah – the Lord – desires intimacy with us. What would it do to young people’s conception of ultimate authority if we helped them really understand what it means when God saw that it wasn’t good “for man to be alone?” (Genesis 2:18) The Lord of the Universe was already with man yet understood that man had a different need for companionship as well. Here is the Lord God allowing the provision of something that will have an important part to play in the life of Adam. Young people assume that authorities are in it for themselves, not caring for the needs of those under them – especially when those needs might compromise some aspect of the authority’s own dominance. Yet the Lord Jehovah is also Jehovah-Jireh – the Lord Provider. What kind of Master *is* this?

We need to articulate a theology to young people that is able to convey the character of God in all its fullness. It must be complete – we cannot only talk about the love of God. We must also talk about the Judgment of God and His absolute Holiness – no easy or safe thing. But the Character of God, given in a complete theology, is its own source of balance and we do not need to try and qualify it. In fact, it’s only by giving a complete account of God’s character that the “more pleasant” aspects of Him – His love for instance – begin to make comprehensive sense. The Love of God is not always apparent to young people (or to anyone) in a world so full of evil. It’s only after taking into account, say, God’s Holiness, that such things even begin to make sense. We do not have to make God in our image in order to make Him palatable.

Looking for a model: the unity and diversity of the triune God

Another place to start is to consider the triune nature of God. Within the Trinity we have a demonstration that submission does not have to mean a loss of identity. The Trinity is in submission to One and the Other. They live in agreement, as it were. But within this submission there is still individual freedom and cause and identity. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is neither of the Other Two. They are Their Own. The Three are One – Or the Three is One, or the One are Three or however you want to say it – but, even so, the unity does not mean uniformity. The community in the Trinity is not conformity and neither does it create a compound. A proper theology of the Trinity can demonstrate that submission does not mean a loss of freedom.

If not God, whom?

“There is nothing, there is no God and no universe. There is only space and in it a lost and homeless and wandering and companionless and indestructible thought – and I am that thought. And God and the universe and time and life and death and joy and sorrow and pain only a grotesque and brutal dream evolved from the frantic imagination and that insane thought.”

Samuel Clemens

What if there really is nothing?

What’s at stake in a world without authority? What would the world look like? I suspect the answer would be something similar to hell. A world without authority is *not* a world without God, because God’s existence obviously doesn’t depend on whether or not we acknowledge Him. A world without authority is simply a world

in which God is not worshipped – just as any individual life that denies authority is an individual life that also denies God. Within any given individual life comes particular occasions in which the individual acts unilaterally without consideration of an ultimate authority. In that moment, *for* that moment, he has denied God. Hell, I suspect, is continually like this. Hell is a place where God is known and He is not worshipped. After judgment, there will be no more ambiguities. I don't suppose that even the father of lies will be able to deny.

Of course, in the now we don't have an end to uncertainty – we are never fully aware of our predicaments. But there would be clues. A world living out the full logic of a denial of authority would have to be a world in which the primary catalyst for any action is our own self-interest. We would come to worship ourselves. And we would enter into a downward spiral. We would discover that because we are not the master of the universe that the universe will not acquiesce to be in orbit around us. Things would not always go the way we choose – we would not be able to provide for ourselves, to give to ourselves the longing of our hearts. This failure to provide for ourselves would lead inexorably to a kind of shame and to guilt and finally to a self-loathing. But we wouldn't even get that far. We would not be the only being worshipping our self.

The world would be a cult of conflicting egos.

In the world's insatiable hunger, we would drag everything to ourselves with the whirl and grind of a maelstrom. In a competition for resource and satisfaction, life would be a reduction to the level of insects – where the only apparent “law” is the savage conclusions of the wildest, most twisted and perverted version of Darwinism imaginable, pure brutishness. It is an all but impossible world, always in peril of contradicting itself; for even brutishness bears with it the law of the powerful. Chaos is not without order – it's simply the weak that would be subjugated.

Hope amidst the pain-filled memories

But of course the world is not yet living out the full logic of its denial. Here, then, I see some reason for hope. It seems we all of us know that at the end of the day we must be mastered by something. If through un-jaundiced eyes we look honestly at our relationships, at the motivations for our actions, at our decision making criteria, at the every-day way we run our lives we would see that we are constantly under the guidance of authorities – whether the particular authority is a personal God, an assumption, expert opinion, reason, consensus, lust, political or legal compulsion, fear or any of the myriad things that constantly prompt what we do and shape how we think.

And we further know that some authorities are better than others. We all the time inveigh one authority against others. We lift one action as superior to another. Without going into all the reasoning here, I do not believe this is merely instinct or whim. It is on account of a certain fingerprint with which we are marked, however marred or smudged and however very much against our sometime utmost desire. In the end the question is somewhat simple. We will be mastered by someone. So who do we have in mind?

When I read the account in Genesis, I long to fully imagine the profound joy there must have been, communing with God in the cool of the day as He walked in the company of Adam and Eve. But like Esau before us we all follow Adam in selling away our birthright for a bit of food. This current age we are in, disenchanted with

the notion of being bound by anything at all, finds its cause in a wretched three-pronged series of errors: our sinful rebellion, or proud indignation that anything should rise above ourselves and in our lack of moral imagination in conceiving that our authorities would never sour us with betrayal. Isn't it the height of romantic naivety, as Lewis said, "to suppose that any human beings, trusted with uncontrolled powers over their fellows, would not use it for exploitation; or even to suppose that their own standards of honour, valour, and elegance would not soon degenerate into flash-vulgarity?" And so, as Lewis further asserts, we enter the age of rebellion. Our journey is now indeed uphill in both ways at once and we are weighed down by the burden of our vanity and by our unwillingness to shuffle off the deadening coil of our pain-filled memories.

Ahead of us is the hard and exhausting work of sifting through the shadows of the past and tearing down the sullied edifices that cast them. It involves, as well, redeeming some of those very same structures, remembering that even though the romantic is a mirage to be scorned, even the mirage is an illusion of something real. While we have never been called to a romance with God, we have been called to something in some ways similar but too often overlooked for the sake of the romantic – we have been called to fidelity. And in that fidelity lays the only real means to hope. It's a hope that, someday, we will again submit to being mastered by Him-Whom-made-us, by Him Who alone can bring us out of our many "Egypt", and fully on His terms and not our own.

This hope begins with the realization that there really exists a Sovereign God of the universe and we are not Him.

It begins at the first hint of compulsion to bend at the knee, calling Him Lord and attending Him in worship. And that is just the start of the good news. Things will keep looking up from there. But in the cool expanse of that good day, all the rest will seem merely detail.

Appendix:

The Importance of listening

“I love the Lord, because he hears my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.” (Ps 116:1-2)

“So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.” When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” The man who had died came fourth.” (John 11:41-44)

Our God is a God who listens. He has made the first step – it is not us who call out and grab His attention rather we can call out because He has first inclined His ear to us. And there is power in listening – so much so that it can reach past death and bring forth people reborn – both physically and spiritually. We have been made in the image of God. And if our God is a listening God, we then must be a listening people.

While this paper is for the part of CityGate called “*Field Studies*,” it’s clear we’re talking about *research*, and, more specifically, *cultural* or *anthropological* research. This type of research has become unpopular, looked at by many with suspicion and conjuring thoughts of people dissected like frogs, poked and prodded like specimens. Certainly, much of cultural research has become so academic in nature, content and delivery that very few people outside of academia read it.

CityGate has no interest in research that robs people of their dignity, that is not accessible to the majority of readers or that does not benefit people in the every-day living of their lives.

The rightness and risk of meeting people

Our approach to cultural field studies strives to fully honor the humanity of individual people and human culture by first acknowledging that every individual is complex and, most important, is *uniquely* complex. Among other things, this means that we cannot make across-the-board assumptions and stick people in a box.

Imagine you are in a room full of strangers. How can you get to know the people around you? You can observe them, watching their behavior and interactions, how they are dressed, how they speak, you can note their skin color, build, and whether they have an accent. You can assume a great deal and likely be right about many things - but everything remains mere untested speculation. You must test your assumptions: make an introduction, talk, ask questions and listen. Engaging one another at a human level allows speculation to be replaced with fact and mystery with greater clarity. Our God is a God who listens, who knows His creation intimately – He knows the number of our days, our thoughts before they are spoken and the number of the very hairs on our heads. And He knows our names. There is no replacement for this.

This is the goal of our field studies; to allow us to understand a culture by understanding the people of the culture – and this by letting people speak to us, by engaging them as people and by listening.

There is difficulty in this because many things hamper real communication and understanding requires intimacy. Intimacy cannot be forced; it is patient work

requiring freedom, safety, confidence, and suspension of judgment, unconditional love, humility, mutuality and compassion – perilous things for sinful human beings!

The power and limits of the pattern

Obviously, there are limits to what one can learn from research. The common boast "tell me where you come from and I'll tell you what you are" can never be true. Taken one by one, people are individuals unique to themselves. While we *are* shaped by our culture we are not so utterly shaped by it that we cannot be influenced by outside stimuli nor be told apart from our countrymen. You can get to know 99% of a given culture and still have to be profoundly humble and cautious in the assertions you make regarding those final few. The kind of studies that constitute the majority of this paper will likely tell you little about any two nationals you happen to meet in any Central European town. What this paper *will* provide is a general composite – a summing up of the various patterns we've identified after encountering so many unique individuals. It *is* possible to get to know the dimensions of a culture through a careful examination of the ideas, characteristics, hopes, fears, questions, concerns, anxieties, loves and obsessions that are held in common across a wide cross-section of its people. The power is in the pattern. There can be no absolute declarations, but we can cautiously amend the claim and suggest, "Tell me where you're from and I'll show you what you *tend* to be like."

Of course, there is always the possibility of misunderstanding the pattern. If you were to discover that ninety-nine men all share a profound hatred of one particular person and they justify it with a consensus of complaints concerning the horrible character deficiencies of that one person, you might then conclude that the person is a scoundrel. The testimony of the pattern would insist on this. Yet your belief would change if you were to discover that the person happens to be a member of a nationally hated minority and that his detractors are fascist nationalists to the last. While this is an extreme example, it does demonstrate that the simplistic analysis can be misleading. We must work with diligence, nuance and detail. The identification of just one pattern isn't enough to make confident conclusions.

A second challenge is that people don't always say what they really believe. A friend of mine once remarked, "By the time people have achieved adulthood, they have become expert at withholding information." There are many reasons for this: a person might be ashamed of what they really believe, they may want to please or impress you or the other people in the room, they may be conditioned to watch what they say⁹⁶ or, as very often the case, they might not know themselves what they really believe. Francis Shaeffer used to quote a Dutch proverb that says there are two types of beliefs that people have: their articulated belief and their gut level belief – and it is the gut level beliefs that affect what they do. CityGate strives to get at these deeply held, gut level beliefs⁹⁷. This allows us to both really get at the core issues involved in a person's belief system and to help explain the gap that often exists between what people say they believe and what they do.

⁹⁶ In any totalitarian society – be it a communist state, oppressive family, a church, etc – it is common for people to have become conditioned to hold one set of publicly declared beliefs that puts them in line with "party" doctrine and another set of beliefs held in their private life. Such conditioning takes a long time to overcome.

⁹⁷ See the following appendix on "Methodology" for an overview of our field studies method used in this paper

Reflecting the spirit of the day

In summary, we conduct field studies is to acknowledge the nature of our times. Young people in the Western world are tired of being talked at. Too often, we have heard from the young people around us that there are so many answers being offered them from every faith and special interest group that answers have become one of the few things they have in abundance. The only problem is, they say, nobody has ever taken the time to find out the questions they are asking. In the toxic cynicism of today's world, we must take care to address the real issues of real people. We honor no one when we speak first without knowing what it is we most need to address. Through a concentrated focus on listening, we can provide a vitally important – and sadly novel – bit of respect to the people around us – the respect of having been listened to and heard. With all the energy and resource emerging from the West, there is no lack of activism. What we sorely need to invigorate is *reflective* activism.