Introduction to the Topic

Life in Slovakian society has been changing dramatically in the newly forming culture of the post-communist times. After twenty years of experience with democracy in a post-Communist nation, such as Slovakia, one feels that our society is still in transition. The lack of an enduring and successful democratic experience can be felt in the everyday life of the society. Thus, there is a great deal of confusion, fear, and ignorance as to the direction we should go. An uneasy mixture of hope and disillusion is felt in the society with people trying to cope with their past and looking for a bearing into the future. The ‘burden’ of the past, which is the burden of un-freedom, is one of the most important reasons for this.

In my lecture today I argue that the Slovakian post-communist society cannot be renewed unless it is able to cope with its past and unless it is able to draw from its rich heritage of values and tradition in confronting the new challenges of the present. In order to achieve this goal, however, the people need a solid, authentic education which will boldly analyze the past and present and which will help cast a vision for the future. Given my Christian background and professional experience as a director of a Bible School I also argue that Christian education, in its rich variety of forms and target groups, can help and has already helped in this process by exposing the roots of our civilization, by bringing to light the value of our Jude-Christian heritage for the daily decision making of the people.

To support these claims, a careful analysis of the crucial events in our nation’s history will be offered together with concrete examples of how the ‘burden of the past’ affects lives in the present. A case study of an institution offering a variety of programs of Christian education will follow, in which a 'student centered and Bible focused' model of Christian education will undergo

1 Under ‘Bible focused’ should be understood the focus on biblical teaching as it is conveyed in a particular confessional theology of a church – in this case the Lutheran Church – and expressed in the ecumenical interactions of Christians in the process of listening and learning from one another across denominations.
a careful scrutiny, including an analysis of the impact of such education on the individuals (students), the church, and potentially the society. By referring to “A Decade of Miracles” I mean precisely the breathtaking adventure of changing people’s lives through the educational programs I have had the privilege being part of. However, by the decade of miracles I also mean the unprecedented economic growth of Slovakia accompanied by numerous new opportunities and freedom during the past decade.

Careful Listening as the First Act of Love: The Need for a Historical and Cultural Analysis

One of the main pillars of meaningful educational activities is the following principle: *The first act of love is a careful listening.* I consider it vitally important for educators to know the culture, in which they ought to be “the salt” and “the light.”\(^2\) They have to know the struggles, the joys, and the pains of the nation, in which they live and teach. Education conducted without such understanding is bound to remain shallow, arrogant, and ultimately irrelevant. This is what we must try to avoid. A careful analysis of the past can become a useful interpretive tool for the present.

One of the main tasks of education in Slovakia, therefore, is to help people comprehend the ‘Slovak specifics’ and to resist the temptation to indiscriminately apply the ‘proven’ western models of how things work in a post-communist setting of our society. Besides this critical role, education also has a constructive role. It tries to look for ways how to move forward from the current state of things, while remaining faithful to the cultural heritage of Slovakia.

The heavy burden of the past

When people come to Slovakia, it is helpful if they are aware of the so called ‘burdens of the past’. This awareness will help them understand why people, both in the secular realm and in the church environment, behave the way they do. The ‘Truth and reconciliation’ problem with regard to our painful history is a complicated one. Besides Nazism and Communism, there are at least two other issues from the past that have had a haunting effect on the ‘Slovak mind and spirit’: a painful history of counter-reformation\(^3\) and a long struggle of national emancipation over against the Hungarian oppression in the 19\(^{th}\) century. All of these continue to shape the minds, attitudes, and behavior of individuals and communities in Slovakia. Once the euphoria of the peaceful revolution\(^4\) began to fade, the civic societies in Eastern Europe had to face the crucial task of coming to terms with their past and defining their vision in a new, democratic context. It has proven to be a painful and difficult job that has required intellectual capabilities hard to find within the existing political and religious elites. Yet, it has to be done, and to some extent, it has been done.

The purpose of this study does not demand (or allow) a thorough description of each of the before mentioned events, though a more detailed analysis of the essence and the effects Nazism and

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\(^2\) Mt 5:13-14

\(^3\) Also known as ‘recatholization’ – a time period full of violence, injustice, and religious wars between 17\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century.

\(^4\) The so called ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and shockwaves of these events made the Communist government in former Czechoslovakia step down and allow the first free election after four decades of totalitarianism.
Communist totalitarianism will be offered. However, for the sake of a better understanding, a brief illustration of the historical burden from the period of counter-reformation will help explain the anti-ecumenical attitudes in the Lutheran Church in Slovakia.

The Burden of Counter-Reformation: A Case Study

The Lutheran Theological Faculty in Bratislava (Slovakia) hosted a competent American visiting professor/missionary between 1994-1999, Dr. Paul Hinlicky. He tried to emphasize, among other things, the importance of ecumenical cooperation among the established churches in Slovakia, primarily among the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. He met with an unexpectedly radical resistance from the side of some of his colleagues, as well as students at the Theological Faculty, whose arguments were more historical than theological ones. They substantiated their feelings of discomfort, apprehension, and even animosity against the Catholics on the basis of the inequities done toward the Protestant Christians (mainly Lutheran) in the 17th and 18th century. Confiscated church buildings and schools, forced labor in mines, torture, extortion, discrimination in the religious, political, social, as well as academic sense – all of these belonged to the harsh reality of those times. It is only proper to add, though, that the Catholics were not the only ones who acted unjustly and inequities were committed by both parties. In any case, the ratio of Lutherans dropped down from 90% in early 1600’s to less than 7% today, as compared to 70% Catholics.

It took a rather long time for Dr. Hinlicky to fully realize how much wounded the Lutherans in Slovakia are and how afraid they are of losing their identity, for which their forefathers lay down their lives. The main reason why the Lutherans in Slovakia look with suspicion at all the ecumenical statements, the changes in the liturgical practice or elsewhere in the church, is the uncertainty and pain stemming from the past. This does not mean that changes are utterly impossible. But it does mean that the way forward will have its specific challenges, that it will be a long, painful process. It means that both sides need to commit to listen to one another, that a lot of

5 Dr. Paul Hinlicky, PhD habilitated at the Lutheran Theological Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. He wrote several theological textbooks, including: The Reader to the History of Dogma; Apologetics; The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue… He is currently a professor of religion at Roanoke College, Virginia, USA.

6 Hinlicky proposed a theological framework for an ecumenical dialogue between the Catholics and Lutherans in his work: HINLICKY, P.R. Budúcnosť cirkvi : Čo by pre nás mal znamenať luteránsko-katolícky dialóg. [The Future of the Church : What Should a Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Mean To Us] Liptovský Mikuláš : Tranoscius, 1999. The Obstacles to the dialogue, the way he perceived them, are described on pages 14-18 of the book.

7 KÓNYA, P. Krvavý súd. [A Bloody Trial] Prešov : Expertizny a vzdelacny inštitút, 1992. Truly cruel atrocities took place in Presov during the so called ‘Presov Bloody Trial’ of 1687, in which several dozens of protestants (Lutherans) were tortured to death. See: Ibid., pp. 54-70.

explaining, confessing, healing needs to take place.\textsuperscript{9} Hinlicky’s theological and catechetical mission had to be reshaped in the light of the new pieces of information and his own experience in Slovakia.

The Haunting Past of Nazi ideology

Nazism can be described as a renewal of paganism in a traditionally Christian European culture. It is a coherent system, a worldview that uses racial chauvinism, social Darwinism and nihilistic existentialism to create the idea of a super-human – the ‘Übermensch’. There is a competition of the human races in the history of the world for gaining adequate ‘Lebensraum’ – (living space). Wars, in this struggle, are the necessary and inevitable mediators of ‘progress’ (the social evolution). The identity of a person is an illusion until this person finds his/her identity in his/her nation (‘Volk’). Individual human rights are illusory, or even dangerous, whereas propaganda and manipulation of the masses prove to be useful tools in promoting the well being of a nation/race.\textsuperscript{10}

Part of the church in Germany and in other countries under German influence, including Slovakia, adopted some of the demonic rhetoric of the Nazi propaganda and tried to adjust Christianity to comply with the principles of Nazism (The ‘Deutsche Christen’ serve as the best example). Hitler had promised a kingdom of new order (Dritte Reich) for the Germans (and their supporters) and they believed it could happen. Though there were those who resisted and showed courage and willingness to self-sacrifice for the truth, others were too weak and/or too fearful to react until it was too late.

The highest example of collaboration was the president of Slovak Republic – Jozef Tiso (a Roman Catholic priest). In October 1938 he became the leader of the Slovak clerical government. He signed a mutual agreement with Hitler, according to which the “German empire takes over the defense of political autonomy and territorial integrity of Slovak republic.”\textsuperscript{11} The price for this protection was a total “compliance of the foreign policy” with that of Germany, including a military alliance. Domestic policy in Slovakia was shaped according to the example of our German protector. This included the infamous discrimination of the Jews. At least 70 out of 90 thousand

\textsuperscript{9} The very first attempt at such reconciliation through intentional listening and a desire to understand the position of one’s opponent can be considered the book \textit{Ekumenicky dialog} [Ecumenical Dialogue] written by ThDr. Julius FILO, Sr. (former bishop of the Lutheran Church in Slovakia), Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 1997. The Roman Catholic bishop, J.E. Vladimir Filo, who reviewed the book, commented the text with these words: “Your study is the first work that I have become familiar with in this field. I consider it a pioneer work in the dialogue between our churches in Slovakia, a work that is extremely useful and much needed.” Ibid., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{10} A summary of Gene Edward Veith’s well written book \textit{Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo Christian Worldview} could be presented in the following points: If the term ‘human person’ is an illusion, everyone had better find their identity in a ‘Volksstaat’ (people state); if society creates an individual then let it be and let all the respect toward human rights be substituted by propaganda; let it manipulate humans and make them into what we (the government) want. If it is power alone that stands behind all of the institutions, let us take this power. If there is no overarching truth valid for all people, if race is the determining value, let us evaluate all of the ideas in the light of the racial interests and usefulness; if societies are in essence racial (racially based), let us be racists and let us try to rule over other races and people. See: VEITH, G.E. Jr. \textit{Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo Christian Worldview}. Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

Jews were deported to concentration camps from Slovakia between 1942-45. A vast majority of them never came back.\textsuperscript{12}

Most of the Slovak society, including the church, accepted the regime as a ‘smaller evil’ when compared to a direct occupation by the Nazis. However, face to face to the atrocities of dehumanization and death in the concentration camps that Slovak regime became part of in its alliance with Germany, smaller evil became just a plain EVIL at its worst. A more resolute criticism came after it became clear what the ‘final solution’ of the Jewish question entails. When the church started openly criticizing the ‘racial principle’ in 1941, it was already too late for many victims of the discrimination.

The Principles of Communistic Ideology

The fundamental conviction of Communism stems from Marx’s \textit{Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law}, according to which the “man is the highest essence for man”\textsuperscript{13}. Thus atheism (or atheistic materialism) is an essential axiom of Communistic ideology. Man becomes what he is by his labor – by making things he creates his personality and destiny. Through a necessary ‘evolution’ of the division of labor and the gathering of wealth and knowledge, human society gradually transforms itself from a primitive to a more sophisticated (feudalism, capitalism) socio-economic structure, finally reaching the social and economical ideal of Communism. War is being waged on at least two fronts: the conflict with nature, over which man is destined to rule, and the conflict between various social classes about the appropriation of created wealth. The class struggle is the all pervading principle/dynamics of human history. Revolution is the unavoidable means in attaining a ‘classless society,’ in which the alienation of man on the social, material, and existential basis is overcome. Not the product, but only the labor itself has a true value. Thus private ownership is yet another expression of human alienation. All property, then, should be distributed evenly to everyone.\textsuperscript{14}

The Communists despised the Christian churches because they were against the revolution as an inevitable outcome of the class struggle. Christians had the allegiance of many people in the society and thus became rivals to the attempts at total control of the society. They saw the fundamental problem in the human alienation from God, rather than in the alienation of man from the fruits of his labor (struggle of the working class); they did not want to take destiny into their own hands but rather relied on God’s Kingdom to come on its own terms. Religion was thus defined as opium of the people and a popular superstition. It was tolerated as an insignificant ‘private delusion’ without any real influence on culture and politics.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 288-290.
\textsuperscript{13} “The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that \textit{man is the highest essence for man} – hence, with the \textit{categoric imperative to overthrow all relations} in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence, relations which cannot be better described than by the cry of a Frenchman when it was planned to introduce a tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you as human beings!” MARX, K. “Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” In \textit{Deutsch-Französischer Jahrbücher}, February, 1844 [online]. Available on the Internet: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 398.
The Struggle of the Church for Survival

After World War II, the official policy of the Communist parties taking power in Eastern and Central Europe was to suppress any religious presence by imposing severe restrictions on churches and other religious institutions. Pastors were not allowed to meet freely outside of their deaneries. The only thing they could do was worship services and burials but anything else put them in a grave danger. All of the orphanages, church schools, retirement homes, homeless shelters, etc., as well as most of the church’s property were confiscated. All of the pastors became state employees receiving their salaries from the state. The government authorities worked to ensure that the church would lose its independence and its social, political, and moral influence in the society. They believed that if they could destroy the religion, there would be no obstacles to creating the new humanity in and through the ‘perfect (classless) society’.

In every country, the police and secret service were used to blackmail, brainwash and coerce its political and religious opponents. There was an all pervading propaganda of the state-run mass media. The whole education system was at their service. For the educated classes and intellectuals, a more refined system of historical and philosophical discussion was employed. Examples from social and political history were used to undermine the credibility and the prestige of political rivals and religion as a whole.

The most difficult were the years immediately after the communist revolution from 1948-1960. The Greek-Catholic Church was dissolved altogether and the believers were ‘transferred’ to the Russian Orthodox Church by force in 1950. Dozens of people were murdered, tortured, imprisoned without a fair trial. After a short period peace and more extensive freedoms (1966-68) came the era of ‘normalization’ – going back to the Soviet type of communist dictatorship. More than 70 pastors and lay leaders of the church were imprisoned between 1968-1988. Roman Catholic dissent was better organized and had a greater force than the protestant one. Exceptionally strong was the Catholic underground movement in Poland. They held secret meetings and seminars. They had secret ordinations of pastors, or even bishops. It was not by accident that John Paul II – a bold...
critic of Communism in Poland – was elected to become a pope during the tough times of Communism. It was an open statement of faith, a statement of rebellion, a sign of hope for the future of the Eastern European countries.

The best example of public opposition to the Communist regime in former Czechoslovakia was the publication of Charter 77 – a Czechoslovak human rights document. Charter 77 was a petition calling on Czechoslovakia's Communist authorities to respect the international human rights agreements they had signed. It was drafted in secret in late 1976, initially signed in Prague by some 300 people, mainly dissidents, and released to foreign correspondents in January 1977. Among the signatories were many pastors, mostly from the Catholic Church, but also Christian lay intellectuals. The signatories defined themselves by these words:

Charter 77 is a free informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths and different professions united by the will to strive, individually and collectively, for the respect of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world -- rights accorded to all men by the two mentioned international covenants, by the Final Act of the Helsinki conference and by numerous other international documents opposing war, violence and social or spiritual oppression, and which are comprehensively laid down in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Charter signatories then went on criticizing the regime on many important issues pertaining public life and basic human freedoms defined by the International Charter of Human Rights:

The right to freedom of expression, for example, guaranteed by article 19 of the first-mentioned covenant, is in our case purely illusory. Tens of thousands of our citizens are prevented from working in their own fields for the sole reason that they hold views differing from official ones, and are discriminated against and harassed in all kinds of ways by the authorities and public organizations. Deprived as they are of any means to defend themselves, they become victims of a virtual apartheid.

Hundreds of thousands of other citizens are denied that 'freedom from fear' mentioned in the preamble to the first covenant, being condemned to live in constant danger of unemployment or other penalties if they voice their own opinions.

Freedom of religious confession, emphatically guaranteed by article 18 of the first covenant, is systematically curtailed by arbitrary official action; by interference with the activity of churchmen, who are constantly threatened by the refusal of the state to permit them the exercise of their functions, or by the withdrawal of such permission; by financial or other measures against those who express their religious faith in word or action; by constraints on religious training and so forth.

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Needless to say, the signatories of the Charter 77 document were hunted down, many of them imprisoned\textsuperscript{21} and others punished by a loss of job, a fine, or endless interrogations, etc. Suspicion and fear dominated the minds of the people. Twelve more years had to pass by before the monstrous regime finally crumbled.

Post-Communist Situation in Slovakia

Life in a post-communist society resembles in some respects the life of Israelites roaming across the desert. Freedom and democracy goes hand in hand with the loss of numerous social securities. People are often puzzled with regard to how to use their new freedom. The spiritual vacuum in their minds and hearts are quickly being filled with the offer of spiritual experience from newly emerging sects and religious groups. Stemming from the times of oppression are various prejudices against free market economy, against democratic institutions, and against Christianity. Thus, a rather stifling and depressing atmosphere prevails, both in the church and in society. An atheistic ideology led in practice to moral relativism. The ideal of total control over the lives of the citizens resulted in a lack of ownership and a weakened sense of personal responsibility. The injustice of this monstrous system caused numerous inequities which helped form a culture of fear, distrust, and suspicion. All of these played, and continue to play, a terrible role in forming the attitudes and influencing the actions of the people.\textsuperscript{22}

The scale of the corruption can clearly be seen in the moral uncertainty, in the unwillingness or inability to take on responsibility, or to take initiative, or to be creative.\textsuperscript{23} It can be seen in the irrational, paranoid fear that somebody is out there to hurt me. Most importantly, it can be seen in the overall loss of vision for the renewal and development of the society and church communities.\textsuperscript{24} The fact that church life was reduced to a bare minimum during the time of totalitarian oppression is still reflected in what is expected of many pastors. It is often thought that the liturgical and catechetical activity of the pastor is not only the sufficient but sometimes even the only legitimate expression of the life, teaching and mission of the church.

Many Christians in Slovakia have become so used to this unfortunate reduction of the life of the church that for all practical purposes, everything is left to the pastor! Any active participation in the sense of the lay people assuming the responsibility for the life specific expressions of church ministry, or their participation in the liturgical, catechetical, diaconal, or mission life of their

\textsuperscript{21} Former Czechoslovak and Czech president Václav Havel, among others, belonged to the signatories of Charter 77 who were imprisoned for a number of years because of their bold statement.

\textsuperscript{22} The first serious study in this respect was conducted and published in 2006, seventeen years after the fall of communism! It is a socio-theological survey conducted in the Slovak Lutheran congregations under the title: GULÁNOVÁ, S. Preparing for the Work of Ministry. Martin : Biblická škola, 2007. The survey was facilitated and co-sponsored by the Bible School in Martin and conducted by Slávka Gulánová over the course of one year.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 18-20.

\textsuperscript{24} Cf.: Ibid., p. 27-28. Over 40% of the respondents in the survey indicated that their congregations are not even talking about mission and have no plan for revitalization. Furthermore, a majority of the respondents said their church is not cooperating with any institution or another denomination. Pastoral conferences of the Lutheran Church talk about a renewal of the church, however, the national church has so far not been able to propose and implement a concrete strategy.
community of faith, tends to be perceived as potentially sectarian.\textsuperscript{25} Yet the responsibility and active participation of the lay people in the life of the church is one of the main ideas of the Reformation\textsuperscript{26} and was also promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

Still, it is not just direct effects that the regime had on the structure of the Church and the contents and forms of the religious life. There are even more bitter failures that the churches across the denominational spectrum have to face: the issue of collaboration! This haunting question seems to be more difficult for the Lutheran Church than the Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church had a strong dissent with a strong underground church structure. This could be attributed, among other things, to the international unity, the transnational reality of the Catholic Church. It is not surprising then, that when the classified archives of the secret police were opened to public scrutiny, and when many people in the church leadership positions were found there (as collaborators with the regime), the Catholics were more ready to openly admit their failure, the “sins of the past”, and offer a public statement of confession and a genuine plea for reconciliation. On February 23, 2005 The Slovak Catholic Bishop Conference made the following public declaration:

1. We admit that some ordained clergy cooperated with and served the state secret police and we do not wish to defend them.

2. If they willingly offered themselves for this type of service for career reasons, or because of money, or if they reported on someone and wanted to harm others with malicious intentions – it is condemnable.

3. If they cooperated because they had been extorted on the basis of their crimes, or personal weaknesses – it is lamentable/unfortunate.

4. If, because of the many visits from the secret police agents and their pressure, they got entangled into their traps and if in their loneliness they lived in a constant fear and tension; if they were extorted because of their trespasses; if they gave in to the panic and tried to maintain an acceptable level of contacts – we need to feel sympathy toward them.

5. If they do not even know how their names got into the evidence of the state secret police, and if they explicitly claim that they did not sign (a contract of cooperation), and that they reported no one and had no advantages, but that, quite on the contrary, they lived in constant fear and anxiety because of the secret police agents – we need to believe them!

We know of our human weaknesses and priestly failures. Therefore, we the bishops ask for forgiveness all those, who had been hurt by the ordained clergy that cooperated with the state secret police (whether they are priests or lay people). We ask all those, who were

\textsuperscript{25} This type of perception is true for the mainline churches, such as the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, or Orthodox Church. Evangelical denominations are much more flexible when it comes to engaging laity and looking for new ways of expressing Christian faith.

\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Luther’s treatise \textit{An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate}, (1520), in which Luther maintains that the lay people are together with the ordained responsible for the reform in the church, and, that under some circumstances, the lay members have to even take the initiative into their own hands.
shocked/scandalized by the collaboration (of some churchmen) with the secret police, for forgiveness. ...

One thing troubles us, though. Although the media on one hand show the names of the priests and other collaborators in their publicized texts, they do not talk about the agents/members, who had organized and coerced the whole cooperation and through it they extorted (their victims). All of us, the whole Slovakia, should live cleansed according to the truth and in the truth, which is the only safeguard of our dignified life in the future.27

The Lutheran church stayed silent for a long time. Sixteen years had passed and the church failed to produce an open, honest public statement regarding its failures, but also faithfulness during the communist times. The issue was raised on several occasions in pastoral meetings in different regions of the country. But the wounds were still fresh. The debate degenerated into personal invectives and a general sense of frustration…28

In a public discussion in November 2005, some 80 lay and ordained leaders of the Lutheran church in Slovakia talked about church under communism. It was a heated debate. Stories and opinions were told from different sides of the spectrum. And though the content of this debate was striking, what was even more striking was the fact that the Lutheran church had to wait until November 2005 to really open the discussion on this issue in a public forum…

Have individuals, media, public institutions within the society done enough in revealing their failures and asking for forgiveness? Can there be reconciliation without being confronted with the truth of our historical failures? There is still a debate in our society about this question. Some say that there is no need to go back any more. Others say that there are things to be said, confessions to be made, asking for forgiveness to be conducted, if we as a civilized society want to go forward.

Can the church retain a respected and credible voice in the public life without coping with its past? The churches in Slovakia are slowly losing their influence in a more and more secularized social environment. Only a sincere, humble, truthful approach to ones history can be a basis for meaningful, relevant public theology. Truth is intimately connected with reconciliation. And both, truth and reconciliation are intimately connected with the renewal of the church, including its relevant impact on the life of the larger society. Christian education can and has helped in this process. It is through books, articles, and public debates where the haunting past can and should be analyzed, described, and confessed. People have to learn how to cope with the mixed heritage of their forefathers, praising God for the heroism of many pastors and lay Christians, and asking for forgiveness and reconciliation with respect to those, who had failed.


28 Attempts were made in different ‘Seniorats’, that is, deaneries of the Lutheran Church (such as Liptovsko-oravsky seniorat, Turciansky seniorat, etc.) in the late 1990’s with no results.
Looking into the Future

As salt is worthless when it stays in the salt shaker, so the life of a Christian who limits his/her ‘Christianity’ to a passive presence at the Sunday worship service is unfulfilled. The Communist totalitarian regime decided to destroy the Church in a very sophisticated way. Instead of forbidding Christianity altogether, it limited the life of the Church to the worship services in church buildings. Thus it prevented a living organism from developing. Christianity was vegetating instead of living. It had its heart (which could beat only under the supervision of a church secretary), but its hands and legs of active charity in the society had been amputated so the blood circulation started to stagnate.

Therefore it is not surprising that even though Sunday worship still remains the centre of church life (of course in a freer and more inventive form than before), a greater emphasis is laid on and greater attention is paid to different activities. Christian club activities are becoming more and more attractive – meetings of children and youth; meetings of support groups (AA, divorced, grieving people etc.), prayer groups, choirs, etc. Social and charity work is developing and so is education. Lay people who have been excluded from active church life by the communist regime are given room within these activities. The church is learning to use its freedom.29

Re-thinking the Strategies for Outreach and Renewal

As it has already been mentioned the road of cultural relevance is risky and complicated. It still stands in front of the church as a challenge: the challenge to walk on this road without losing the values that spring from its Gospel identity. Yet, first attempts are being made. Christian camps are rethinking their recreation-centered approach. Instead they’re reaching the young generation through small group activities of great intensity. Experience like white water rafting, survival camps, rope courses, etc. would fall into this category. Effective evangelism for this generation begins with asking them to participate, that is, to act like a believer, and ultimately to affirm their actions through doctrinally appropriate statements. Young people are invited into the ministry of the church, particularly engaging in acts of compassion and service before they have come to formal belief in Christ. This shift in mental processing of the outer stimuli can be called ‘Experiential Epistemology’ or ‘Experience-based Epistemology’. This shift is a huge challenge for the church and its educational institutions both in the East and in the West.

Moreover, the challenge is coupled with the fact that the churches have been losing their traditionally established positions in the society. Even under Communism the churches had an established status in the minds of a vast majority of the people. For this reason the Communists were initially hesitant to launch a frontal attack against the Church. Even after the attack had been launched (in the 1950’s) the government allowed the churches to function in a ‘minimal survival mode’. Though suppressed and discriminated against, the churches were purified of most of their ‘nominal’ believer and to some extent even strengthened and unified by their common enemy.30

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30 See for example: FILO, J. Prenikanie soli. [The Permeating Salt] Martin : Matica slovenská, 2006. Former general bishop of the Slovak Lutheran Church heard his partners from the West speak about the church oppressed by Communism in Eastern Europe is “livelier than churches in the West”. Ibid., p. 106.
Shortly after the ‘Velvet Revolution’ thus people recognized the Church as a ‘political dissident’ against the hated regime. This euphoria, though, had a short life. With an ever increasing consumerism and hedonism in our society, churches were becoming more and more irrelevant in the eyes of many, considered as nothing more than a useless relic of the past.

The key to a renewed, relevant and mission active church, according to the founders, are faithful, adequately educated, and by God’s Spirit empowered Christians and Christian leaders – ordained and lay. There are very few of them in the church, especially among the laity. Unresolved issues from the past and new cultural and social challenges of the 21st century demand leaders who are intellectually capable, experienced, and mature in their character. For the church to be able to faithfully accomplish its purpose, it needs a competent formation and education of its workers. The change must begin with pastors and lay leaders (such as elders, presbyters, presidents of the congregations, etc.), and continue through to the lay people working in the church as well as lay people working in their secular vocations. A fresh, competent, theologically faithful, culturally relevant Christian education is clearly needed. Unfortunately, the Protestant churches in Slovakia have given relatively little attention and little financial help to develop Christian schools and high quality Christian educational programs.

Since 1998, the Bible School in Martin has been helping the church get prepared for its tasks and ministry in the world. To accomplish this noble goal, the Bible School has used its educational programs, its environment of Christian fellowship, and its activities aimed at spiritual formation and character development. As one of the few attempts that try to respond to the changed situation of post-Communist Slovakia, it is proving itself effective, with a great potential for growth. The mission statement of the Bible School, “To motivate people to know the Truth so they can become free in Christ to serve others” (John 8:32) corresponds with the purpose of the school “To prepare God’s people for their works of ministry” (Eph 4:12). The accredited, as well as the non-accredited educational programs of the School intend to give the students the necessary understanding, practical skills and habits required for their service in both the church and the secular setting. The goal is also to bring Christianity closer to those who live on the edge or even beyond the life of the church namely, the secularized, the alienated, the suspicious and the biased.

A great advantage is that all the accredited programs of the School are offered through a secular university, which is expanding the activities of the Department of Religious Studies.31 A state university, funded by state money, has become the School’s mission partner. The partnership with the Zilina University gives credibility to the programs, so seekers from various backgrounds are not afraid to sign up. In addition to that, being part of a state university means to have the teachers paid by the state. The programs of basic biblical education, diaconal training, missiology, religious education, and the free time animators’ program (mission work with youth and children) become an unexpectedly effective, sustainable, and even unique mission opportunity.32

31 The functioning of the department is fully realized by the teachers from the Bible School. To learn more about the study programs, visit www.bsmt.sk or www.fpv.uniza.sk.
32 Another unique opportunity is reaching out to children, their parents, and school teachers at the Lutheran elementary school in Martin, which was founded by the Bible School in 2004. Much of the same dynamics (as described above) can be seen in this environment. The gospel is communicated non-violently, long-term, in a competent way.
The Bible School and other similar educational institutions must yet explore the potential of university level programs based upon an intersection of social sciences and theology – such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, nursing, journalism, etc., very much like Christian Colleges and Universities do in the United States and elsewhere. Protestant churches must stop wasting this unique opportunity to communicate the great heritage of Judeo-Christian thinking to a wide variety of secular professionals.

The ten-year-long experience of the Bible school has shown that an appropriate approach of the pedagogues must critically and constructively take into account the limited terminology and almost unlimited prejudices on the side of the ‘secular’ students. The teachers of the School make it a point to offer their friendship to the students and to open their lives to them. Discussion, even pointed disagreement, are encouraged as the students and the teachers explore the deposit of Christian faith as it relates to everyday’s problems of the society. If Christian education is to ‘touch’ the students, that is, not only to inform them but to transform them, the students should be encouraged to work hand in hand to solve problems formulated by themselves and/or by their teachers. By experiencing a Christian community on campus, by having good personal relationships with the teachers, by experiencing the impact that students make on children and youth (as their target group) in the course of the program, something inside them begins to change.

Conclusion

The liberal and democratic societies of our modern time, as well as liberal capitalist economies, are built on the foundation of a ‘detached’ liberalism. This detached liberalism presupposes the existence of a secularized human society ridden of a guiding tradition with a moral imprint at its core. The legitimacy of this order, which once stemmed from the religious, Judeo-Christian fabric of the European society with aristocratic elite in the governing authority, is now transferred to the boundless choices of individuals. The individual choice is presented as a free and autonomous capacity and a right of man as a free agent, who can choose everything, moral values and a purpose of life included! There was little or no discussion about that in the society prior to the age of Enlightenment. When Europe lost its public religious discourse, which included an authentic Christian education of its population, our civilization was cut from its roots. Moral virtues were lost and the chaos that was spreading inside of the human mind and heart, permeated into the core of the liberal society. Detached liberalism brought growth and prosperity short term but long term it brought hedonistic consumerism with an omnipresent flavor of nihilism! What we are beginning to experience in Slovakia today and what we have been experiencing in Europe, America, and beyond, is not just an economic crisis. The crisis stems from a loss of moral vision and a higher purpose, and, as such, it can never be overcome by any well-meant government economic stimulus. It is not through the socio-economic structures that the world is truly changed. Something has to change on the inside of men, in the core of their being.

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After being in the midst of the wonderful adventure of training people, both churched and un-churched, the staff of the Bible School, the author of this article, as well as numerous of his colleagues in other Christian educational institutions have found that Christian education is indeed a uniquely effective tool for an inner renewal and an outbound mission of the Church in our post-Communist, secularized environment. It is much more than just about ‘producing church workers’. Christian education is about introducing the riches of theology and Christian values to the daily lives of people. It is about helping a wide variety of professionals regain a positive attitude to life and Judeo-Christian values. It is about physicians, lawyers, business people, teachers and many others being competent in what they do as they grow in maturity as people, as personalities. This is surely the marvelous and noble task of Christian education, so much needed in the post-Christian environment of today’s modern, democratic societies! This could be the long term answer to the current socio-economic crisis!

\[34\] Christian elementary, middle, and high schools, among others…