
REACHING 'EASTMODERN' SERBIANS

The cities of Eastern Europe pose a particular challenge for evangelism in the 21st Century. While my focus here is Belgrade, Serbia, there are, no doubt, numerous comparisons that could be drawn with other Eastern European cities sharing a similar cultural, religious and political history.

Effective evangelism must be culturally relevant and at the same time faithful to the Bible. In order to conduct effective evangelism we therefore have to understand people's worldview (in order to apply God's word), the culture (in order to overcome barriers to receiving the gospel) and the people themselves (in order to apply the right strategy in evangelism).

1. Worldview

The predominant worldview among the younger generation in Serbia is 'Eastmodern.' This worldview is a mixture of the pre-modern worldview and postmodernism. For many centuries the *Pre-modern* worldview of Serbian Eastern Orthodoxy shaped the culture and beliefs of Serbian people. Truth is discerned primarily through religious institutions and mythology under the guidance of religious leaders; individuality is discouraged while conformity to community traditions is highly prized.

Modernism as known in the West has never taken root in Serbia and only a small number of people today hold a modern worldview. This worldview is primarily associated with middle-aged people; those who grew up under the communist regime and experienced secularism. The *Eastmodern* worldview emerged during the modernisation of non-Western countries after the fall of communism. The existence of this worldview shows that the 'progression' from pre-modernism to modernism and then postmodernism is not a universal phenomenon.

During the turbulent 1990s many Serbians returned to the traditional faith of Orthodoxy. While at the beginning of the 1990s 36% of the population of Belgrade declared themselves to be Orthodox, by 2002 this percentage had risen to 91%. The influence of postmodernism however means that it is acceptable for young Orthodox believers to choose what to believe according to their personal needs (e.g. astrology alongside Christianity). There is also a huge decline in the knowledge of basic Christian beliefs (e.g. God as Creator, Jesus as the Son of God, the existence of heaven and hell). God is viewed and experienced in whatever way suits the individual. There are also other characteristics of postmodernism, such as a dislike of authority, the importance of friendship and the pursuit of fun.

At the same time, some characteristics of postmodernism, such as valuing diversity and tolerance are not present in the Eastmodern worldview. This is a result of the influence of the pre-modern (Orthodox) worldview, with its focus on tradition and, in Serbia, nationalism and lack of tolerance towards other religions. The Eastmodern worldview could be therefore described as the existence of many mini-narratives (relativism) among one, predominant meta-narrative (Orthodoxy).

The way to preach the gospel to this worldview is to focus on the gospel of the *cross*. An imaginary god who suits one's personality (relativism) and loves without regard for repentance of lifestyle, does not need to pay any price to love us. However, belief in Christ, as he had to suffer and die on the cross to save us, means admitting that God is more loving than we can ever imagine: his love is not a cheap love.

2. Culture

Since Serbian culture is shame-based – and to some degree fear-based – it is necessary to present the gospel in terms of shame and fear. This is not to deny the concept of sin as guilt and the necessity of personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis and the order of presenting the gospel.

In a shame-based culture one's identity and worth comes from the network of relationships to which one belongs, such as family, friends, clan or nation. Not surprisingly, shame is the biggest barrier to Serbian people following another faith tradition, as this is considered an act of betrayal.

Witnessing in a shame-based culture therefore should focus on the restoration of the broken relationship between man and God, expressed in a language of shame and honour. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden (their home) because of their sin, they were shamed. Sin which brought them shame also brought dishonour to God. Only through Jesus can the Father's honour be vindicated and man's shame taken. Thus, those who trust in Jesus will share in his honour before the Father. But those who are now ashamed to trust in Jesus because of their expulsion from families and friends (their home) will continue to be expelled from God's presence and ultimately bring dishonour to God.

Serbian culture is not a typical fear-based culture where people are afraid of ghosts and ancestors. Rather, people in Serbia are afraid mostly of a Christian God and of his punishment. This view of God may be a result of Communism, which was based on power and fear. In Serbia 76% of people say they firmly believe in God, but to them God is like a cosmic power, mighty and unpredictable like thunder or a storm, a God more likely to punish than to bless. In practice, appeasing God takes the form of doing some 'good,' external things which are not an expression of belief (e.g. when passing a church people may enter briefly to donate money or light a candle).

The way to witness is to explain the gospel of *grace*. God's love is undeserved and shown on the cross. By trusting in Jesus we are fully accepted with no reason to fear. However, it is necessary to uphold both God's holiness and God's love.

3. People

Although church attendance at present has grown in comparison to the Communist period, the number of people who regularly go to church is still very small. Unchurched people are unlikely to respond quickly to the gospel. Evangelism takes more time and requires the explanation of foundational Christian truths. Unchurched people are also more concerned for the present than for the future. This is even more intensified by the current difficult economic situation in the country. To evangelise these people it is necessary to present the immediate benefits of Christianity.

In a culture where family relationships are strong, the focus of evangelism should also be on whole families rather than on individuals. David Garrison points out that only this would succeed in penetrating the broader community because 'those who are willing to make decisions without considering their community's counsel are generally individuals who are already on the edges of society and looking to escape.'¹

¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 227-8

In conclusion, the building of trust and long-term relationships are essential for effective evangelism. For people with a traditional worldview and in a shame-based culture, group identity and family relationships are most important. Incidentally, for people with an Eastmodern worldview, the primary relationship is friendship. Suspicion towards evangelicals and their image as a sect requires time for building trust. Also, since most people are unchurched, effective witness will happen only over a longer period of time. There is no shortcut in evangelism. People will be open to talk about their faith and the gospel only in the atmosphere of trust and already established relationships. Believers need to spend time with their friends and neighbours, and it is vital to build a community where people can be open and feel loved and accepted.

And finally, while understanding worldviews and culture is important, we have to remember that evangelism is an encounter with a personal God, rather than with a tradition or simply intellectual convictions. Because worldviews are held unconsciously we always need to answer the question: "What does a man do with God, and why does he do it?"

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