Christians as Citizens of a Persecuting State:
A Theological and Ethical Reflection in an Historical Perspective

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It was the early 1980s in Estonia, then one of the Soviet Republics. At the doorway of a lecture hall in Tartu University's main building a man was waiting for me. "We need to talk," he said, and insisted that we meet in a nearby hotel after my lecture. There was no doubt that he was a KGB officer. I was a philology student at the university and actively involved in a local church: sometimes preaching, regularly taking part in Christian youth group meetings, and very interested in theology.

The invitation posed a dilemma for me. To go to the meeting could be interpreted by the authorities as the first step towards co-operation. I did not want to give that message. What if I refused to go? The KGB would find me anyway. Perhaps it would be better to go and see what they wanted and not postpone the unpleasant interview. I also asked myself, Isn't it true that God has somehow allowed even oppressive power structures, and that a Christian should-at least to a certain extent-obey the commands of those structures?

I tried to imagine what would happen during the interview. What if they began to ask questions about other believers, about information related to local churches, about Christian typewritten publications... How could I answer such questions without betraying friends or causes-for even silence becomes information?

And after the meeting? What will I say if the KGB demands that I not tell anybody about the interview? Shall I agree, but tell anyway, at least share something with my friends? That would be lying to the KGB... And could it be that my fellow Christians might misinterpret my story? Could it destroy the atmosphere of trust and friendship?

But remaining silent... how is that compatible with honesty and integrity? I felt trapped, guilty, and powerless.

I did not think then that similar questions had already been asked and similar feelings already felt by many others through the long tradition of Christian experience of living under an oppressive state. Furthermore, there was little information about the persecution of Christians in other countries. For example, the Christians in Estonia hardly knew about Archbishop Romero's martyrdom in 1980 in El Salvador, as a result of his attempts to be a "spokesman for those to whom no one would listen."[1] Nor were we aware of the dilemma of the church in Pinochet Chile, whether publicly to take sides with the oppressed or to use methods of diplomatic maneuvering.[2] Such situations as these belonged on the other side of the "iron curtain." Even Stalin's oppression of Christians in the 1930s was not much spoken of.

In the Soviet context, individual Christians and the Christian church as a community both tended to react spontaneously to the oppressive context, while theological and ethical reflection required some distance from the experience of persecution. In the present paper an attempt is made to explore some of the questions posed to Christians living in hostile contexts. The discussion is put into an historical perspective.

Obey God Rather Than Men: Early Church Experience

The issue of how Christians should relate themselves as citizens to an unfriendly or overtly persecuting state is as old as the story of Christianity itself. The New Testament reflects some of the early Christian approaches to this theme. Paul suggested that Christians should submit themselves to the governing authorities not only because of possible punishment, but because political authorities were ordained by God (Ro 13:1-7). However, the early church soon ran into conflict with the Roman authorities, as Christians "refused to concede the state's absolute power if its commands contravened those of God."[3] Some passages in the Book of Revelation (e.g., chapter 13) give a much less favorable picture of state powers when compared to that of Paul in Romans 13. Even Paul himself saw suffering and persecution as a sine qua non of being in Christ.[4]

Later in the history of the Western church, the dualistic relationship between church and state, between Jerusalem and Babylon, was never satisfactorily solved, and continued to create tensions.[5] For example, though both Luther and Calvin believed that the temporal government and spiritual authorities function in different realms, in practice they had difficulties keeping these two "kingdoms" separate.[6]

[1] S. Bergman, ed., *Martyrs* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 77.
[2] See William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).
[3] Roland Bainton, *Christianity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 58.
[4] John S. Pobee, "Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 6 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 107.
[5] W. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1965), 537, 569.
[6] David M. Whitford, "Luther's Political

During the first centuries, Christian loyalty to God was frequently interpreted by the Roman state authorities as disloyalty to their state. The Roman understanding of religion generally focused on civil virtues and outward observance. Even the public sacrifices "were simply a routine genuflection to the government," and, as Paul Johnson stated, "on the vast majority of Rome's citizens and subjects they imposed no burden of conscience."[7] However, the Christians' view tended to be different, for they applied theological and ethical evaluations to all civil acts. When Christians opposed an imperial cult they seemed to deny the emperor's right to rule.[8] Pliny the Younger explained his practice of dealing with Christians as follows: if, after three times, they did not deny being Christians, he sentenced them to death, because "whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished."[9] Christians often found guidance in the attitude of the first apostles: "We must obey God rather than men" (Ac 4:19-20; 5:29), a curiously subversive text when compared with Romans 13.

In many cases, popular superstitions added to the picture. Tertullian said that Christians were blamed "for every public disaster and every misfortune" that befell the people. "If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence..."[10]—Christians were made the scapegoats. Tension between divine and earthly authority, accusations of disloyalty or of being disruptive of the state's unity, and the exercise of popular superstitions-all these themes came to be repeated in the story of persecution.

However, Christians met new challenges when they ceased to be a persecuted minority and turned into a privileged majority after the Constantinian reform of the fourth century. Social pressure and legal compulsion, and sometimes the hope of improving one's standing in society, emerged at that time as new motives for converting to Christianity. "To adopt the emperor's religion could promote one's chances in the world."[11] Later in history, for example for a period in the early 1990s, after Communism collapsed in the former Soviet Union regions, Christians in Eastern Europe faced similar issues: how to adjust to the rapid change from a persecuted group into a socially respect-

Encounters," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 189-190; "Civil Government," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). In general, Lutheran church-state theory yielded relatively large powers to the state while Reformed theologies encouraged the faithful to hold civil authorities to constant account.

[7] Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Norwich: Pelican Books, 1982), 6.

[8] Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 41.

[9] Pliny the Younger, Epp. X (ad Traj.), XCVI, in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

[10] Tertullian, Apology, XL. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 47.

[11] John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

ed force. This transition was found to be difficult.

After the Constantinian reform, some latent tensions-doctrinal, disciplinary, and personal-came out into the open: "The Christians had won, but the attitude of the survivors reflected the bitterness of the struggle."[12] The emergence of similar phenomena can be traced in the post-persecution situation in the former Soviet Union, where unity was endangered not only by previous atheistic pressures but also by the unexpectedness of freedom. One of the clearest examples was in Ukraine, where for almost sixty years there was only one legal Orthodox church; since 1989 the country has been compelled to face a situation where four Orthodox churches are competing for influence.[13]

Beyond this, the traumatic experience of persecution needs to be evaluated. The past needs to be reconciled with the present. Both martyrs and apostates belong to this picture. In the case of the early (medieval) church, the martyrs shaped the theological and behavioral patterns of Christians, both in the East and in the West. Heated discussions about the rehabilitation of lapsed adherents in the early church only emphasized the need for a process of repentance and forgiveness inside the Christian community after a period of external state pressure. Scripture was quoted both in favor of rigor and in favor of mercy.[14] In their context, churches in Asia Minor were rather "modest" in their requirements for penitence: the fallen were readmitted after three to five years of penitence, and even traitors who had denounced their fellow Christians to the authorities might be rehabilitated after ten years' probation.[15]

Though present day Christians may have different opinions about the methods of repentance, the need to become reconciled with the persecution experience, find forgiveness for compromises made, and interpret heroic episodes, is a continuing task for Christians in the post-persecution period.

Waldenses: Keeping Identity in Persecution

Persecution of Christians by state structures has taken place in more than the non-Christian setting of the first centuries. The rejection of nonconformists and their suppression happened also within Christendom, when state and ecclesiastical patterns were intertwined. In the context of medieval and Reformation-period Christendom, several dissenting groups experienced persecution and had to respond to theological and ethical challenges that emerged from this experience. In the following sections a reference is made to only two of these movements: the Waldenses and the Anabaptists.

The Waldensian dissent existed in Europe from the twelfth century until the Reformation when they issued

[12] Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 537.
[13] S. P. Ramet, Nihil Obstat: *Religion, Politics and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 246.
[14] McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 45.
[15] . Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 538.

a confession of faith "that marked them as a Reformed Protestant group."[16] The Waldenses emphasized the lay preachers' role in proclaiming the gospel and a commitment to poverty. They refused to take oaths and strongly believed that the Word of God had to be applied to the letter.[17] In its initial stages, the movement, though unorthodox in many respects, was tolerated by the official church and there were cases when the Waldenses abjured their views.[18]

Nevertheless, after the 1230s, the Waldenses' social and religious behavior was increasingly changed by the continuous threat of inquisition.[19] Persecuted by ecclesiastical and temporal powers, the Waldenses formed underground, secret networks. They faced a painful dilemma: to preach publicly, a conviction that was a part of their identity, or to restrain themselves from public dissemination of their ideas in order to survive.

By the thirteenth century the majority of Waldensian communities had chosen the latter option. They had become unobtrusive; "outwardly the Waldensians looked like lukewarm Catholics."[20] Like many other persecuted communities, they had to cope with the question of what the price was for their survival. Gabriel Audisio has suggested that the Waldenses were forcibly obliged not only to hide their convictions, but to allay suspicion by paying lip-service to opinions they reproved. However, this was a sign of fear, and so a source of guilt.[21] There is no doubt that their experiences also shaped their understanding of what a Christian community should be: according to their view, it was a fellowship of dedicated members who expressed mutual support for each other, however, there was also a sense of exclusiveness, of belonging to the elect. A kind of superiority complex is frequently the case among persecuted minorities.[22]

The Waldenses' case, though rooted in a concrete historical situation, helps to illuminate the dilemma of many Christians during an age of repression: how far is it possible to go with self-censure and compromise without losing one's theological identity and ethical integrity? There has been a wide range of answers to this question.

In the early fourth century, a Christian engaged in a lawsuit over property in Alexandria was able to give a pagan friend power of attorney to act on his behalf and participate in an act of idolatry, which was a condition of litigation. Though feeling un-

[16] "Waldenses," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, ed. by Jerald C. Brauer (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971).

[17] Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival* c. 1170-c.1570 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

18. Euan Cameron, *Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 11-60.

[19] Cameron, *Waldenses*, 66-68.

[20] Bernard Hamilton, *The Medieval Inquisition* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 91.

[21] Audisio, The Waldensian Dissent, 88. Cameron has pointed out that the Waldenses' partaking of church ministrations may not have been a deliberate pretence, but due to the fact that many medieval "anti-clericals were also conventionally devout." Though they may have kept their views secret they often "did not hide themselves from the rest of the congregation" (Cameron, Waldenses, 109-110). However, Audisio has rightly drawn attention to the psychological and ethical tension created by a hostile context and the fear of persecution.

[22] Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, 37.

easy about this solution, he could present his case and at the same time avoid persecution.[23] In the Soviet Union, many Christians took part in the "strictly voluntary" demonstrations to celebrate the October Revolution, a symbolic act that at least indirectly gave honor to the atheistic state. They "fulfilled their responsibility as citizens," but in their hearts did not agree with the values that this public ceremony represented. After World War II the Russian Orthodox Church frequently praised Stalin as "the greatest friend of all believers," and denied, in public statements, any intolerance or persecution in the USSR.[24] Other churches also voiced similar statements.

Even if public support for the persecuting state could be avoided on the level of individual Christians, choosing a low profile as a Christian could easily result in losing one's identity as a believer. Analyzing the story of the Waldenses, Audisio states that self-suppression, both of individuals and of Christian groups, cannot be total and lasting; it will either break down, or one's identity dissimulated and lost altogether.[25]

Anabaptist Separation Theology

The early Anabaptists, whether broadly or narrowly defined, when compared to the Waldenses, maintained more visibility and audibility on the sixteenth-century scene. They "did not actively seek clashes with a secular authority,"[26] nevertheless, the conflicts with ecclesial and temporal powers came to be the mark of their journey in history. James Stayer has stated that at least 679 Anabaptists were executed in Switzerland and the South German areas from 1527 through 1533.[27] Persecuted in one region, they fled to another, thus spreading their convictions. The Count of Altzey is reported to have exclaimed: "What shall I do, the more I execute, the more they increase."[28] This was neither the first nor the last time in history when persecution, paradoxically, was a ferment for the mission of the church. However, there were also places where the Anabaptist movement was totally wiped out.

What was the Anabaptists' response to a hostile environment? Though it would be more appropriate to talk about a variety of responses, with the risk of oversimplification it is possible to say that separation from, and the boycott of, the persecuting structures came to dominate Anabaptist views regarding oppressive powers. Among these religious radicals, the separation from life in the world was emphasized by the prohibition of oath-swearing, which was "an essential glue in early modern civic affairs."[29] Their view of the believers' church and the rejection of infant bap-

[23] McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 45.
[24] Tatiana Chumachenko, Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 53.
[25] Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, 89.
[26] Hans-Jurgen Goertz, The Anabaptists (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 97.
[27] James Stayer, "The Anabaptist Revolt and Political and Religious Power," in Benjamin and Calvin Redekop, eds., Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 57.
[28] William Estep, The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 75.
[29] Stayer, "*The Anabaptist Revolt*," 56.

tism placed them outside the established ecclesial and social structures, and "attacked the foundations of the spiritual and temporal social form of the *corpus Christianum*."[30] A clear boundary was drawn between government and the congregation, a dualism that reflected basic differences between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light, flesh and spirit, Belial and Christ.[31] John H. Yoder has pointed out that it was the persecution experience that imposed separation on the Anabaptists "against their will," and that they continued to affirm the legitimacy of the civil order,[32] though within the limits of the temporal sphere. Nevertheless, for these radical believers the focus was on the spiritual realm.

Tendencies towards separation, both theologically and even in practical terms, shaped Anabaptist realities. However, this feature is not only distinctive of Anabaptists, for it can be found among many persecuted Christian communities. In the case of the Anabaptists, persecution and separation came to mold their understanding of being a church. Indeed, "brotherhood" would be a more appropriate term for the fellowship groups they formed in the early stages.[33] Perhaps the only exception was in Moravia, where the early Anabaptist groups became better organized, due to a higher degree of religious toleration in the area.[34] In general, the Anabaptist ideal of church life was restricted by civil authorities, but it only deepened their understanding that the true church manifests itself in fellowship, unity of the spirit, and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper[35] — even if they had to meet secretly.

This is certainly not to say that outside pressure was the only phenomenon molding their ecclesiological views, but it is possible to argue that suffering can offer a key for understanding not only a church-state or church-society relationship, but also the dynamics within the persecuted Christian communities. Balthasar Hubmaier, explaining the meaning of the Lord's Supper, said that it is a public testimony of love, "in which one brother pledges himself to another before the church. Just as they are now breaking bread and eating with one another, and sharing the cup, so each will offer up body and blood for the other, relying on the power of our Lord Jesus Christ."[36]

Suffering required interpretation. The majority of Anabaptists interpreted their experience of being persecuted within a Christological perspective. Menno Simons believed that Christ left an example that His disciples should follow. Jesus' words, interpreted literally, and His life, became "the central ethical measures for Menno, as they had become also for the Swiss [Brethren] and the Hutter-

[30] Goertz, The Anabaptists, 129.
[31] Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 98.
[32] John H. Yoder, "'Anabaptists and the Sword' Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 85 (1974), 139.
[33] Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism, An Interpretation* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 115-116.
[34] George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 1992), 315.
[35] Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, 118.
[36] Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline. Selected Primary Sources* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), 194.

ites."[37] Christ suffered, and thus His followers also have to suffer.

Walter Klaassen has stated that for Anabaptists, physical and spiritual suffering "served as a theological integrator, prompting the rediscovery of the early church's view of Christ's suffering continuing in his members."[38] As early as 1524 Conrad Grebel wrote: "And if thou must suffer for it [for faithfulness to the Scriptures], thou knowest well that it cannot be otherwise. Christ must suffer still more in his members."[39] Outside pressure moved Anabaptists towards a deeper identification with the suffering Christ-"not merely following his example or suffering on his behalf."[40]

In addition, the Anabaptists were forced to interpret martyrdom, which was for them not only theoretical but an actual option. The "Martyrs' Mirror" and the Hutterite *Geschictes Buch* became a sort of "martyrs' theology," where martyrdom was defined as *imitatio Christi*, or rather as *participatio Christi*, and often seen in an apocalyptic perspective.[41]

Surprisingly, some parallel features between sixteenth-century European dissent and the twentieth-century Latin American context can be found. William Cavanaugh, analyzing the Roman Catholic Christians' experience in Pinochet Chile, talks about the "Christo-form nature of martyrdom" and "a following in the way of the cross,"[42] instead of defining martyrdom as dying for the cause of the faith. Referring to ancient martyrdom, which helped the church to gain visibility in society and claim its identity as a disciplined community, Cavanaugh stated:

> The ancient martyrs often asserted the kingship of Christ in refusing to offer worship or service to the emperors and their gods. The church was, by its nature as Christ's crucified and resurrected body, a challenge to the violence and idolatry of the secular authorities... From a theological point of view the conflict is the same; it is the conflict between Christ's body on earth and the powers of the world which refuse to recognize Christ's victory over it. Christians see acts of injustice and state violence as the continuing struggle between the people of God and the forces of death.[43]

Anabaptists, in their own context, in many cases reached different practical conclusions when compared to the suffering church in Latin America.[44] They would, however,

[37] Arnold C. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1995), 213.
[38] Klaassen, ed.,*Anabaptism in Outline*, 85.
[39] Conrad Grebel, "Postscript or Second Letter to Thomas Muntzer, September 5, 1524", in G. H. Williams and A. M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 84.
[40] Laverne A. Rutschman, "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology," in Daniel S. Schipani, ed., Freedom and Discipleship: *Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 62.
[41] For a helpful summary of the Anabaptist understanding of martyrdom, see Ethelbert Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," in Wayne Pipkin, ed., *Essays in Anabaptist Theology* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 211-236.
[42] William C. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 61.
[43] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 63.
[44] For a short comparison of Anabaptist and Liberation spiritualities, see Jose Miguez Bonino, "On Discipleship, Justice and Power," in Daniel S.

have agreed with the basic Christocentric approach and an appeal to the early church underlying Cavanaugh's words.

Though the Anabaptist emphasis on the fellowship of believers and on Christ-like discipleship continues to inspire churches, especially those belonging to the Radical Reformation tradition, there was also an inclination to become closed, separated, and inward-looking communities. The questions are similar to those which many believers face: to withdraw into a spiritual cocoon, to yield to outside pressure, to fight back, or to find some ethical, theological, and practical compromise between these options? In addition, context clearly shapes the believers' Christology, their understanding of suffering, and other aspects of theology and practice. Constant interpretation is needed, in light of Scripture and communal discernment, in order not merely to accept external influences passively, but to keep the inner dynamics of the church, react creatively to the context, and maintain healthy resistance to external pressures.

Persecution of Protestants in Tsarist Russia: A Question of Ethnic and Religious Identity

In the following sections of this paper two periods in the history of Eastern European Christianity will be briefly discussed. First, the conflict of Slavic ethnic values and evangelical Christianity as seen from the official tsarist (and Orthodox) point of view at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century will be presented. Second, some conclusions will be drawn from the situation of Christians under atheistic pressure in the Soviet Union.

Walter Sawatsky, a Mennonite scholar, has pointed out that since the nineteenth century, persecution became "hereditary" for Protestants, especially for evangelicals, in the Slavic region of Europe.[45] Initially protected by their social status, even some of the evangelicals' aristocratic leaders such as Colonel Pashkov and Count Korff, were subsequently exiled from Russia, and both died in exile.[46] Exceptionally, Pashkov was allowed to return for three months in the 1890s. His dilemma was whether to visit Russia secretly or to preach publicly. As he believed that only the second option enabled him to be faithful to the New Testament model and to his evangelical identity, he decided to preach. Immediately, he was summoned by the tsar, "ordered to leave at once and never to return."[47] Religious convictions, for these evangelicals, weighed more than their national belonging-and for Pashkov and Korff this resulted in exile.

Russian evangelicals in tsarist Russia, trying to remain faithful to their convictions, often chose a position that was not advantageous for them as citizens or as members of their ethnic group. Being Russian, for

Schipani, ed., *Freedom and Discipleship: Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 131-138.

[45] Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), 27.

[46] Michael Rowe, *Russian Resurrection: Strength in Suffering - A History of Russia's Evangelical Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 27, 32.

[47] Rowe, *Russian Resurrection*, 32.

them, did not automatically mean to be Orthodox. In the initial stages of the movement, many evangelicals in Russia were left without legal rights: their marriages-if not conducted by an Orthodox priest-were invalid, and their children were consequently illegitimate.[48] After the so-called Tolerance Manifesto of 1905 several evangelicals who had been exiled or imprisoned returned home. For example, Feodor Kostronin had been in exile for sixteen years and in prison for nine, and Vasili Ivanov-Klyshnikov had been twice in exile and thirty-one times in prison.[49]

Though there were other ethnic groups represented among evangelicals, such as Germans, it is interesting to see how Slavic national ideals and religious preferences caused tensions and conflict for Russian evangelicals. The state, wishing to consolidate its unity, did not favor the idea that Russians may loosen links between being a Slav and being Orthodox. Evangelicals, with their more "international" views on religion, however, wanted to exercise this freedom. This led to difficulties.

From another aspect, close relationships between the tsarist state and the Orthodox church make it difficult to differentiate between these two in the persecution of Protestants, especially in the period of 1880-1905 when Konstantin Pobedonostsev was the Chief Procurator to the Holy Synod (a lay representative of the tsar to the Orthodox church administration). He exercised wide powers to persecute non-Orthodox believers, and Russian evangelicals began to call him the "Russian Saul."[50] For Pobedonostsev, the religious (Orthodox) identity and ethnic (Russian) identity were inseparable, and he believed that it was the duty of a Russian man to impose Orthodoxy on others by force, if necessary.[51] Hans Brandenburg stated: "The unity of the people in the Orthodox faith was for him the guarantee of the state and its security."[52] His violent measures against Protestants were the consequence of political rather than religious convictions. He was profoundly convinced that Russian nationality and Orthodoxy were one, and consequently, any deviation from Orthodoxy represented betrayal of national identity and of the Russian empire.[53]

Accusations against Christians in general, or of some Christian groups, for breaking the unity of a state or national identity are nothing new: these voices can be heard all through the history of Christianity. However, for Russian Protestants the question was raised: is Protestant Christianity compatible with Slavic ethnic identity? Russian evangelical attempts to solve this issue from the perspective of individual faith and religious tol-

[48] Rowe, *Russian Resurrection*, 28.
[49] Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty: The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 130.
[50] Steve Durasoff, *The Russian Protestants, Evangelicals in the Soviet Union: 1944-1964* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), 47.
[51] Constantine Prokhorov, "Orthodoxy and Baptists in Russia: The Early Period," in Ian M. Randall, ed., *Baptists and the Orthodox Church: On the Way to Understanding* (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 105.
[52] Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*, 119.
[53] Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*, 119-120, 123.

erance led to conflicts with political and religious structures that emphasized Slavic ethnic and Orthodox values, instead. Also, different views on mission caused tensions, and continue to cause tensions, in Eastern Europe. The Orthodox view of "canonical territory," that is, the exclusive right of the Orthodox to represent the Christian faith in a given area without any competition from others, is very different from a Protestant-evangelical understanding of mission, often focusing on the search for personal conversion.[54]

Soviet Persecution-Leading to a Split Among Evangelicals

Paul Marshall has said that outside of Communist (and radical Islamist) settings, it is comparatively rare for someone to be repressed merely for their individual confessional beliefs if these beliefs do not affect some other facet of life. "It is usually the very interrelation that leads to persecution." For example, Marshall added, in Chiapas, Mexico, Protestants were persecuted because they refused to pay unreasonably high prices for goods to be used in religious ceremonies that they rejected.[55] However, totalitarian regimes tend to aim at controlling citizens' minds and attitudes. This is one reason why, for example, Nazi Germany was hostile towards religion. Nazism was "demanding of its adherents total submission of their consciences and surrender of their souls." Christianity, at least in the form of the Confessing Church, disputed these total claims.[56] Conflict was inevitable.

Certainly also the Soviet totalitarian regime, especially in its initial stages, was interested not only in outward submission, but in active commitment to the Communist cause, with a requirement that all become active citizens. Just being a Christian was suspicious in itself. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union introduced severe atheistic repressions. Several laws passed in 1928 and 1929, "confirmed a very restricted role for the churches in Soviet society." Believers and "non-working elements," such as the clergy, were considered to be second-class citizens.[57] At the end of the 1950s, a campaign was launched by Khrushchev to reach a stage where all citizens followed the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism. If they did this, society would be liberated from the "survival elements of capitalism," such as faith in God. As Christians emphasized a transformational process taking place in the life of a believer, Christianity was seen as a rival to the Communist worldview.[58]

[54] For the need to rethink Orthodox and Protestant relationships in the area of mission in Eastern Europe, see Mark Elliott and Anita Deyneka, "Protestant Missionaries in the Former Soviet Union," in John Witte and Michael Bourdeaux, eds., *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia. The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 205-215.

[55] Paul Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World: A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 17.

[56] Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Pan Books, 2001), 252, 255-256.

[57] Philip Walters, "A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy," in Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., Religious Policy in the Soviet Union (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13.

[58] Constantine Prokhorov, "The State and the Baptist Churches in the USSR in 1960-1980" (MTh. diss., International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 2004), 6-8.

On the other hand, the Soviet state learned quickly not to accuse anybody for their beliefs officially, as theoretically the government guaranteed religious freedom. As Christianity affects decision making and behavior, usually some of these facets caught the Soviet authorities' attention and were used as a pretext for persecution. Christians continued to face the issue of being marginalized. It was very unlikely that a Soviet citizen would "encounter any evidence of church activities in his normal daily life."[59] Believers had to cope with the many ethical and theological questions that emerged in the context of living in an atheistic society. One of these questions was a question of compromise. How far should they cooperate with the state, if at all? How much should they let the state shape Christian theology and practice, for example in the field of missions and evangelism, or in the field of worship?

The feelings that atheistic pressure created are well described by Hans Brandenburg:

> ...the Bolshevik GPU [a predecessor of the KGB] continually levelled political accusations, made slanders and denunciations which could not be checked, held secret trials or took open police measures, all of which created a general insecurity and mutual suspicion. People never knew who had been suborned to act as an informer. ... [F]alse denunciations were used to play one group off against another. As in the persecution of Christians under the old Roman emperors, now too were *lapsi*—apostates.[60]

Though referring to the pre-war period in Russia, the quotation correctly conveys the inner insecurity created among Christians by outside pressure. Maintaining the atmosphere of trust was one of the important challenges for Russian Christians in the Soviet period.

Believers also had to ask what meaning does truth-telling have in an environment where the state authorities manipulate whole populations by the massaging of statistics, coercing them through repressive structures, trying to capture their minds by control of the mass media? The state systematically created a distorted picture of Christians, depicting them at best as primitive and unreasoning people or at worst as dangerous fanatics.[61]

At the same time, Christians, and especially leaders, were expected to be obedient to the state's religious policies. Evangelical Christian-Baptist leader Jakov Zhidkov wrote in 1946 that the great October Revolution, "brought to our country the basic true freedom of conscience," and praised the Stalin Constitution as "the most democratic of all constitutions in the world."[62] Did Zhidkov, having been in prison and in exile himself, write this with the hope that church members would understand his delicate position and not take his words too seri-

[59] Jane Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), 273.
[60] Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*, 192.
[61] Trevor Beeson, Discretion and Valour: Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe (Glasgow: Collins Fontana Books, 1974), 48-49.
[62] Jakov Zhidkov, "Our Holidays," Bratskii Vestnik [Brotherly messenger], no. 2 (1946), 14-15, Quoted in Steve Durasoff, The Russian Protestants, 187-188.

ously? Was he threatened by the state authorities? Steve Durasoff seems to support these possibilities.[63] Nevertheless, one may also ask if Zhidkov might have thought that these and similar eulogies were the price to be paid for permission to preach the gospel in church buildings, a possibility he did not wish to undermine? Closure of churches would be even worse, so he chose "the lesser evil." Today, compromises made by Christians in these situations cannot be evaluated strictly according to a simplified black-and-white code.

In addition to these ethical complexities, a painful split occurred among Soviet evangelicals in the 1960s. It was a direct outcome of the persecution of Christians in general, and the new wave of Khrushchev's persecutions in particular. The official body of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) chose a moderate, even docile approach in their relationships with the atheistic state; they altered the union's statutes, and suggested to local churches that the focus of Christian work should be the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of believers, not the attraction of new members. "In effect, the churches were made instruments of their own containment and restriction."[64] However, there was an increasing number of those who became dissatisfied with the realities: diminished decision-making possibilities at the local church level; severe restrictions on doing mission and evangelism; the state's attempts to prohibit children's attendance at worship services in churches.

The dissatisfied group, called *initsiativniky*, or Reform Baptists,[65] chose "public protest" instead of "wise manoeuvring."[66] They became involved in underground activities such as the illegal printing of Christian literature. Refusal to register churches became a sign of true faith for them, and faithfulness to God came to be measured by disobedience to state requirements. "Illegal" believers often considered the "registered" believers as traitors, because they were prepared to let their church life be confined by restrictive state regulations.[67] Michael Bourdeaux has stated that the reformers opposed the AUCECB for its alleged compromises with the state.[68] Even more—the Reform Baptists felt that their identity as evangelicals was threatened by state demands. In 1966, the reformers' *samizdat* publication *Bratskii listok* (Brotherly leaflet) accused the AUCECB of trying to bend God's people to sin (i.e. registration of churches and obedience to the demands of the state), but "the faithful will continue to serve God in the same way as Mordecai, Daniel and the apostles..."[69]

[63] Steve Durasoff, The Russian Protestants, 188.
[64] Beeson, Discretion and Valour, 98-99.
[65] From September 1965 they used the name Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists.
[66] In the 1960s and 1970s a similar protest movement emerged also in the Russian Orthodox Church. See Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church, 290-447; Michael Bourdeaux, Patriarch and Prophets: Persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1970).
[67] Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*, 199.
[68] Michael Bourdeaux, Religious Ferment in Russia: Protestant Opposition to Soviet Religious Policy (London and New York: Macmillan and St Martin's Press, 1968), 22, 26.
[69] *Bratskii Listok*, no. 6 (1966). Estonian translation. Materials of Robert Vosu, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches of Estonia.

The registered believers answered, quoting Romans 13:1-2, calling for respect for the government, or 1 Peter 2:13-17, urging Christians to do good and in this way "silence the ignorant talk of foolish men." A particular government may be anti-Christian, but "God sets such governments as a judgment over the nations."[70] Emphasis on a "decent life," total abstinence from alcohol, honesty in the workplace, willingness to serve in the army, and giving to Caesar that which is Caesar's (Mt 22:21)—all this constituted the AUCECB position regarding Christian witness in the persecuting state. However, never appearing in print was the alternative choice, the call to obey God rather than men (Ac 5:29).[71] Fragmentation among believers themselves was inevitable.

The official line of Soviet evangelicals seems to have overestimated the positive effect of "cognitive dissonance"[72] whereby it was hoped that an exemplary lifestyle displayed by Christians would raise questions in the minds of their persecutors. Instead of becoming more favorably inclined towards Christians, some atheistic authors became even more convinced that Christianity was dangerous. One author described evangelical attitudes toward labor as "a pious fraud, and about-face tactic calculated to regain the respect of fellow citizens."[73]

By contrast, the Reform Baptists seem to have overestimated the effect of radical confrontation. Like some Christians in the early church period,[74] so also the Reform Baptists sometimes provoked the state authorities as if expecting hard measures to be applied. In some cases they refused to use "secular" language, thereby emphasizing their claim to exist under spiritual, not temporal, laws. Some evangelicals forbade their children to join the Soviet Pioneers' organisation, or to wear the "devil's sign," namely the red tie.[75] Reform Baptists tended to glorify the suffering and conflict that came their way from the atheistic state. They declared that many of their "brothers and sisters were elevated by God to His glory by imprisonment and prison camps."[76]

As a result of pressure from outside, many Christians in the Soviet Union developed something like an "identity of the persecuted." When Communism collapsed, they found difficulty in actively and positively participating in the social and political life of their country. Certainly, there are today new challenges for Christians in the former Soviet Union, for example, the emerging Islamic identity in Central Asia has on several occasions put severe restrictions on Christians. Nevertheless, the question of how to keep one's identity, but still maintain the ability to dialogue with the wider culture, is still a challenge and a theological task for the Christian church, especially in situations of persecution. Also, maintaining the integrity and atmosphere

[70] Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*, 200.
[71] Durasoff, *The Russian Protestants*, 217-221.
[72] "Cognitive Dissonance," in Baker Encyclopaedia of Psychology, ed. by D. Benner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), 188.
[73] Durasoff, *The Russian Protestants*, 219.
[74] Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 505.
[75] Durasoff, *The Russian Protestants*, 191.
[76] *Bratskii Listok*, no. 6 (1966).

of trust and avoiding the "hermeneutics of suspicion" is an ethical challenge to believers under state pressure.

Conclusion

Christians in persecuting environments have faced not only restrictions, but physical and psychological suffering. They have faced the dilemma of belonging to the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of Christ at the same time. Seeking solutions to this dilemma has not taken place in a neutral setting, but has been influenced by the intensity of the persecution experience. In several cases, in early Christianity and later in church history, Christians have chosen obedience and respect for the state, even a persecuting state, but refused to admit that the state has the final authority.

There have also been attempts to ally the Christian church to state powers. In the West this arrangement has usually been designated "Christendom." However, dissenting groups such as the Waldenses and Anabaptists were severely repressed over the years. The Waldenses responded to the situation by attempts to keep as low a profile as possible, risking the loss of their identity altogether. Anabaptists ran into confrontation with Christendom's authorities; the persecution experience pushed them towards a conviction that Christians should focus exclusively on the spiritual realm, as the temporal power was, according to them, "out of the perfection of Christ." Persecution helped to shape their Christology, ecclesiology, and their understanding of suffering.

Evangelicals in tsarist Russia faced the question of how their convictions were compatible with the wider cultural, ethnic, and religious values, or if, indeed, they should be? Slavic evangelicals in tsarist times often chose conflict instead of adjusting themselves to Russian ethnic or Orthodox expectations aimed at the unity of the nation.

Christians during the Soviet period had to solve questions about their relationship with a state that was determined to stamp out Christianity altogether. Soviet evangelicals offered two approaches. The official churches preferred outward conformity and emphasized an exemplary lifestyle, believing that they in this way belonged to the same tradition as St. Paul. The underground evangelicals, such as the Reform Baptists, chose not to obey restrictive laws and regulations, or even to register their existence with the state, using their international networks to criticize the restriction of religious freedom in the Soviet Union.

Following a pattern established by some early Christians prior to the Constantinian reform, and later the Anabaptists, many Soviet evangelicals developed a cautious attitude in their relationship to the state and wider society, which has partly continued even after the period of atheistic state dominance ended. However, some of the dilemmas (such as how far to cooperate with the persecuting state; how to maintain an atmosphere of trust, personal honesty, and integrity; to what extent one should reject or embrace compromise) appeared certainly not only during Soviet times, but were and are characteristic of per-

secuted Christians in other historical and geographical settings, as well.

Epilogue

This article began with a personal note. With a personal note it should also end. Did I go to the interview? Yes, I met with two KGB officers, who, drinking wine from their tea-glasses, interrogated me for an hour or so. I tried to talk as little as possible, or only to say things that I thought would be generally known information. As the interrogation proceeded, the officers began to express their dissatisfaction with loud voices and verbal intimidations. They made it clear to me that I would never go abroad and that I had better abandon all hopes of studying theology. With this "anti-prophecy" I was sent away.

However, after some years the political and religious situation changed. The predictions of the KGB officers did not come true. I did study theology and in 1989 made my first trip abroad. KGB structures were dissolved in Estonia. My personal experience, however, though much less dramatic than the experiences of many other Christians in oppressive contexts, serves two ends as a framework for this essay. First, it shows the author's motivation to explore the wider story of Christian faith, practice, and persecution experience. Second, it hopefully serves as a reminder for Christians who come from a persecution experience, that for a better understanding of our identity as a fellowship of believers, the complex story (that includes both wise and unwise compromises, both heroism and weaknesses) needs to be analyzed and remembered both with thankfulness and repentance. Otherwise, we will be trapped in our past.