Subcultural Dynamics of Theosophical Groups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Abstract
Daugavpils University researchers contributed to the comparative analysis of the subcultural groups in Eastern and Central Europe by first considering the social adaptation of the theosophical groups, which is a quality of their relationship with the larger society, and, second, by identifying the values which determine the different activities (culture, education and politics) carried out by the theosophical groups. Having modelled the subcultural dynamics resulting from the reconfiguration of values and beliefs in different theosophical groups, the researchers established a pattern of reconfiguration of values and beliefs. This model reveals the important mechanisms present in the processes of forming those subcultural groups which are based on a particular doctrine.

Keywords: subcultural groups, theosophical groups, New religious movements, values and religious beliefs, social adaptation

Introduction
The appearance and expansion of New religious movements in our day is a worldwide phenomenon but, in Europe, it is nowhere as evident as in the countries that have undergone the process of emerging from Soviet ideology in the political, cultural and economic sphere (cf., Lucas et al., 2004). This creates many new problems in society, and it is difficult to overcome the bias which people and society have toward that which is “other.” As the experiences of other countries have shown, integration of New religious movements and their representatives into society without causing anyone to lose his or her identity depends on the understanding of society (cf., Barker, 2006). The shaping of this understanding relies to a great deal on scientific research. We contributed to the research by considering the theosophical groups in the post-Soviet countries. Latvian researchers, Prof. Anita Stasulane (Daugavpils University) and Dr. Janis Priede (Latvian University) performed the documentation and study.

Methods
We examined the process of social adaptation by Theosophy in the post-Soviet countries. In doing so, we examined not only cases of the contemporary theosophical
movement but also the movement’s historic development. We engaged religious history and the sociology of religion – i.e., to complete the comparative analysis of the theosophical groups, we moved in the direction of a historically grounded sociology of religion.

To reach a better understanding of the dynamics and contents of the phenomenon and of its implications and consequences in the lives of people, we first identified New religious movements in the Baltic countries by mapping, which was based on a vast amount of media information. The objective of the two fieldworks was to point out the main trends of values and religious beliefs in theosophical groups. To reach this objective, the researchers observed how groups interact with their socio-cultural environments and examined: (1) the way diverse groups are formed and maintained; (2) the internal dynamics that make them social entities; (3) their economic, social and political structures and (4) the type of leadership and the level of commitment demanded from devotees. Methods of the research were observations, participation, interviews (open-ended, semi-directed interviews functioned as a tool of this research method) and documentation. The research was carried out in all Baltic countries; it included 10 theosophical groups. Data were collected from 72 respondents (37 interviews and 35 questionnaires).

Results

Looking for the factors that shape the social adaptation of a theosophical movement within its social environment, we addressed (1) movement structural attributes, (2) religious doctrine and (3) set of values.

Movement structural attributes. The total number of active theosophists in all three Baltic countries is about 3,000-3,750. The adherents are mostly middle-aged people excepting Aivars Garda’s followers who are mainly youth. Theosophical groups are characterised by feminine domination (about 80%). Dislocation of the groups shows that Theosophy in the Baltic countries is an urban phenomenon.

Religious doctrine. Since religious beliefs do not exist in isolation but are composed of symbols that have implications for social practices and relationships, we examined the symbols used by 35 contemporary theosophical groups in different post-Soviet countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Bulgaria (Stasulane & Priede, 2008). The correlation between symbols used by various theosophical groups clearly demonstrates the main axis around which their identity is formed. From the total number of 35 groups included in our research, the symbol of mahatmas is used by 94% of the groups. It demonstrates to what extent the theosophical groups are formed around beliefs in Masters or Teachers. The shared communication through symbols makes possible a transmission of the ideas of the
group which they form in-part themselves. The research on symbols contributed to understanding intra-groups relations. Theosophical groups can be characterised as highly consolidated.

**Values.** The core values of each group are based on selected common beliefs that become central for the group's members and activities. Study of the beliefs and values offered an opportunity to understand the processes of reconfiguration within the same set of beliefs leading to a different field of activities (Stasulane & Priede, 2009). By comparing the values of different groups, it was possible to identify culture as the axis of the core values for members of the Latvian Roerich Society, Lithuanian Roerich Society, Vydūnas Society and Tartu group; education as a keyword for the members of the Latvian Department of the International Centre of the Roerichs, Klaipėda group, Estonian Roerich Society, Kohtla-Jarve group and Johvi group and politics as the axis of values of the Aivars Garda group. The different orientation of the core values is evident, despite the fact that the beliefs of each of these groups have the same source – the teaching of the Roerichs.

**Discussion**

As the following graphics show, the source includes various doctrinal elements (a, b, c, d, e). Through selection, and therefore through reconfiguration of these doctrinal elements, a group arrives at one or perhaps more particular elements which, in the system of beliefs, becomes central to all members of the group. In the case of Theosophy, the Latvian Roerich Society, Lithuanian Roerich Society, Vydūnas Society and Tartu group have selected the concept of culture. The Latvian Department of the International Centre of the Roerich, Klaipėda group, Estonian Roerich Society, Kohtla-Jarve group and Johvi group have opted for the Roerichs' idea of education, but the Aivars Garda group – for the political aspects of N. Roerich's doctrine.

After selecting the doctrinal elements from their common source, each elaborates on them and, what is more important, uses them to structure the group's value system. Thus, on the basis of one central element in their system of beliefs (a, b, or c), the core value of a group is founded (A, B, C). Most of the other specific values confessed by the group are subordinated to the core value of the group (b₁, b₂, b₃ to B etc.). A particular set of values comes to life and it manifests itself in the activities of the group (spheres of activities, Sₜ etc.). Since the theosophical groups in the Baltic countries have undergone a different reconfiguration of their beliefs and, therefore, have selected a different set of values, they are involved in different spheres of activities.
Conclusions

Having examined the factors which shape the social adaptation of a theosophical movement within its social environment, we identified different levels of the social adaptation between various theosophical groups. The Latvian Roerich Society, Lithuanian Roerich Society and Vydūnas Society maintain high accommodation. These groups are able to operate in a manner that avoids public controversy. They have not drawn any particular attention from the media, politicians, scholars or other agents capable of shaping public opinion regarding the nature of the movement. High accommodation does not mean that groups become so indistinguishable from their environment that they disappear as an entity but only that they are able to operate without generating much controversy or conflict.

Accommodation is a characteristic level of the Latvian Department of the International Centre of the Roerichs, Klaipėda group and Estonian Roerich Society. These groups are widely known to the general society. Public criticism, if any,
originates largely from representatives of established religious denominations. Most significant is the absence of opposition by powerful secular actors. In spite of their unorthodox characters, these groups are viewed as representing some admirable values and as functional for their adherents. In this situation, the theosophical groups neutralise potential opposition and shape public definition.

The emergence of opposition by powerful secular interest groups is the most important foundation of problematisation. This level of social adaptation is characteristic to the Aivars Garda group. This group faces a powerful coalition of secular interest groups and media. Although the membership of this group is relatively small and there are no signs of a dramatic increase in the future, Aivars Garda is portrayed in the public media as a forceful leader, who has the goal of instituting a national regime that would change the very structure of democratic society.

We did not identify any theosophical group as becoming controversial and a recognised “social problem”. A conflict between the state and the Aivars Garda group is not particularly noteworthy, but the combination of a powerful, popular opposition and systematic state hostility could produce a high level of problematisation. The nationalism of the Aivars Garda group and the public impression that they are overtly involved in political matters may appear to question the tendency in Central and Eastern Europe not to mix politics with religion.

Our subproject was a step in the process of gaining insight into the integration of subcultural communities in the social life of post-Soviet countries. All theosophical groups have shown an ability to move into some accommodative relation with their social environments. We argue that social relations are a more likely source of social opposition than the ideas themselves.

Recommendations for policy makers

During the fieldwork in different post-Soviet countries, we noticed that, although they had belonged to the same political system for a period of half a century and, at present, often meet similar difficulties and problems, it is necessary to take into consideration that these countries are different not only economically and socially but they vary from each other in historical, cultural and especially religious backgrounds and traditions. Therefore any uniformity of methods and activities of the democratising Eastern and Central European countries is hardly applicable.

The NRMs in Eastern and Central Europe often respond to the specific needs and aspirations of people undergoing the transitional period. Some NRMs have already demonstrated certain abilities to help with adaptation, to overcome identity crises and to provide maintenance for the social sphere. NRMs are acting as specific mediators.
between public problems and the fragmented private ways in which members of society try to deal with them. Often NRMs provide free seminars with meals and books, free English instruction and funding for study abroad. Nevertheless, some NRMs tend to transgress the borders between their doctrinal values and principles of a secular society by interfering in the state educational system and even by taking over full control of state-founded schools and introducing their own doctrinal and methodological principles in the process of education. A clear division between the secular fundamentals of the state and NRMs should be clearly upheld in the sphere of education and social welfare.

In the research, we have distinguished two aspects of religious liberty – a formal, i.e., institutional, legal aspect and an informal aspect connected with social and personal attitudes towards NRMs. While the contemporary religious situation is described as pluralism, in reality, it does not always designate a peaceful coexistence and dialogue between mainstream society and NRMs, because both aspects – the formal and informal – are mutually interrelated and interpenetrating. Tolerance of religious diversity and true religious freedom cannot be introduced by means of legal standards alone. They need gradual development through a positive cultural background and certain practical manifestations of tolerance in the society.

The investigation revealed a high level of negativity of NRMs towards each other and traditional churches. The state may not ignore these controversies. In this respect, issues that are also relevant regard the autonomy of religious organisations and the extent to which the state should be involved in resolving controversies between them and other institutions, religious and nonreligious. Laws and norms regulating the activities of various religious organisations should limit those activities which are incompatible with the rights of other people or society in general.

While, in the Eastern and Central Europe, some NRMs do present a threat to political and social stability, the rejection of them as “totalitarian sects” and “destructive cults” by the mainstream society is in no way a solution to the controversy. In order to understand the specific tensions arising between a particular NRM and society-at-large, we need a balanced and informed assessment on the basis of a close study of the doctrine, organisation, activity and methods of recruitment by each particular NRM in its particular environment. Public debates on the NRMs are dominated by misunderstandings, exaggerations and, sometimes, pure disinformation by different parties. Contacts with group members pointed clearly to a need for serious knowledge about NRMs.

The presence of NRMs in the societies of the Eastern and Central Europe raises a number of questions. We recommend establishing an international network of research centres on NRMs that could effectively examine the religious situation across countries and analyse data to make suggestions for local executives. The
NRMs are not isolated phenomena; therefore they can be seen as a focus for a wide range of problems, currents and controversies of various backgrounds. The NRMs are indicators of social difficulties and tensions which already exist or are in the process of emerging but they are not the cause of them. Since new forms of religiosity are symptoms of social tension, a study of NRMs and the challenges they bring can help to trace changes and tensions in the whole society.

As we have observed, the social tensions which emerge in connection with the activities of NRMs are not religiously based. The conflicts between NRMs and the rest of society and, likewise, the internal controversies between new religious groups must be understood as the result of clashes between different sets of values. In order to avoid this, researchers recommend governments to begin genuine and meaningful communication with members of NRMs and to come to a consensus about basic values. The communication is an important means of avoiding socially destructive tendencies that may develop within an NRM or in the attitude of the general society towards NRMs. It is the well-founded supposition that NRMs which have become a danger to the life and health of their members or to the society in general have developed in isolation after society had turned its back on them. The NRM which isolates itself from society may be particularly inclined to violence.

A society which is experiencing economic difficulties and cultural and moral disorientation and which also lacks traditions of tolerance easily embraces intolerant attitudes and modes of behaviour. A government should take steps to introduce and finance educational, religious studies programmes to provide society with a background about NRMs. By taking steps to promote a broad understanding of all religious traditions, a government can prevent the social instability caused by intolerant behaviour.

In order to create appropriate social policy, it is essential for a government to develop a precise method of determining which specific NRM poses a threat to its members or to society in general and which one merely advocates the peaceful exercise of a given set of beliefs. NRMs are, to a great extent, connected with the processes of globalisation and the internationalisation of culture; nevertheless, they are diverse in their teachings, orientation, organisation and operation. It is observed that there is a tendency to overlook the differences of each NRM. This gives rise to an attribution of one group's misleads to all movements, thus creating collective stereotypes concerning NRMs.

Thus, in order to establish a policy that both respects the European Convention on Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), a government must evaluate the means of preventing the development of extremist tendencies among certain NRMs. However, we do recommend avoiding using the term
“religious extremism”, because it does not indicate the reasons behind the extremist activity. Researchers have noted that, in fact, the basis for extremist activity does not necessarily rest on one foundational motivation but results from a combination of factors: political, economic, ethnic, psychological and religious motives.

References

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Santrauka
Daugpilio universiteto tyrejai prisidėjo prie lyginamosios subkultūrinių grupių analizės Centrinėje ir Rytų Europoje dviem būdais: analizuodami teosofinių grupių socialinę adaptaciją, kuri yra jų santykio su didesnija visuomenės dalimi kokybės garantas, taip pat nustatydami teosofinių grupių kultūrines, švietimo, politines veiklas orientuojančias vertębes. Tyrimėtojai apibrėžė teosofinių grupių vertybių modelį, kuris padeda suprasti, kaip šios subkultūrinės grupės kuria savo doktrinas ir jas pritaiko savo veiklose bei socialinės adaptacijos procesuose; taip pat atskleidė grupių formavimosi ekonominius, socialinius ir politinius faktorius.


Raktažodžiai: subkultūrinės grupės, teosofinės grupės, naujieji religiniai judėjimai, vertybės ir religiniai įsitikinimai, socialinė adaptacija.