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Church and State

in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia

GLIMPSES OF THE BALTIC REPUBLICS

Ralph L. Moellering

Conflicting judgments are heard about church-state relations in the Soviet Baltic Republics. Refugees who streamed into Canada and other Western countries while the Red Army was establishing control in 1944 are embittered by their personal losses and tend to look upon their homelands as territories dominated by alien Russians. Churchmen who fled have grieved over the Communist takeover and recount many tales of woe; in some instances, they doubt the authenticity of religious leaders who have been approved by the present government. Already during the Soviet occupation in 1940-41, it is claimed, militant atheists vented their spleen against believers. Prior to the Anglo-American alliance, it is asserted, the Lutheran church in Estonia was attacked with unrelenting fury.

According to a booklet published by the World Association of Estonians in 1944, religious communities were dispossessed of their property without compensation, clergymen were denounced as enemies of the people and the scum of society, while the League of Anti-Religious Fighters resorted to every available means to extirpate Christian convictions from the minds of the people. Early in 1949, *Newsweek* carried a dire report about the fate of churches behind the Iron Curtain. Other periodicals joined in deploring the persecution of the faithful.

Throughout the years since the Second World War, Captive Nations Sunday has been observed in some North American congregations, with prayers for the

deliverance of the oppressed. As late as July 1974, the Baltic Appeal Committee in Canada adopted a resolution calling for the immediate cessation of genocide and Russification in the Baltic states and the restoration of freedom and self-determination in all of the so-called 'autonomous Republics'.

According to the Norwegian Mission to Iron Curtain Countries, the KGB (Russian secret police) discovered the concealed printing press of the underground church in the city of Līgatne in Latvia on October 28, 1974. Six Protestant Christians were reported to have been arrested. The leader of this unregistered church is in a prison hospital in Kiev.

By contrast, government officials and Communist Party spokesmen maintain that Christian churches and Jewish synagogues are unmolested. Citizens are assured, so it is said, of the personal right to be either religious or irreligious. If Christian pastors have been restricted or punished in past years, it was presumably because they were political reactionaries whose pronouncements made them a menace to the evolving progressive social order. What is not mentioned is that the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which is compulsory learning from the earliest years in elementary schools through the most advanced philosophical studies in the universities, includes an affirmation of atheism and the exposure of religious tenets as unscientific illusions and incredible superstitions. While godless propaganda can be freely circulated, Christians are forbidden to disseminate literature or to defend their convictions in public gatherings.

In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, a number of church buildings are still visible which are closed or abandoned. In some instances, bookstores and souvenir shops have been attached to the idle, but imposing, structures.

In Gediminas Square, one finds that the snow-white building of the Art Gallery was formerly a cathedral dating back to 1387, and designed by the outstanding Lithuanian architect L. Stuoka-Gucevicius, in which there remain front and lateral facades adorned with representations of Biblical heroes. In Riga, the capital of Latvia, the Dom Cathedral -- a fantastic mixture of almost all styles of architecture, including Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and classical -- now serves as a concert hall and houses a museum of the city's history and navigation.

It was disconcerting, to say the least, to stumble upon one ecclesiastical edifice in the Lithuanian metropolis which is being used as an atheistic museum. The history of religion is portrayed in evolutionary forms from the primitive to modern times with naturalistic explanations. Artifacts, writings, paintings and religious symbols of all sorts are displayed to trace the supposed development from animism, totemism and ancient beliefs, through Judaism, New Testament Christianity, Byzantine orthodoxy and Islam to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the repudiation of supernaturalism by Marxism. At the end of this rather crude and superficial collection of materials, one is taken aback by the climactic conclusion emblazoned in large letters: "there is no God."

However, despite the disabilities it must endure, the church has not vanished from the scene. St. Anne's Church, a veritable symphony of Gothic splendor aspiring to the skies, together with a wise array of other churches in Vilnius, continue to be frequented by worshippers. Elderly women approach sacred shrines

with age-old piety. In Riga, the spacious St. Johannes Lutheran Church which I visited on a Sunday morning was sparsely attended. Only about 35 older men and women could be seen in each of two separate services. On the other hand, a joyous, overflow crowd celebrated mass at the Roman Catholic St. Jacob's Church, considerably smaller in size.

In Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, it was claimed that no churches had been lost by government decree. An Estonian-American told me that she observed a Baptist church completely filled for Sunday worship, while a Lutheran church in Tallinn with a lively minister was about two-thirds occupied. From a personal interview with Bishop Tooming, the recognized head of the Estonian Lutheran Church, I learned that some 142 congregations are being served by 97 pastors and 35 preachers. The 28 individuals in training for the ministry receive formal seminary-type instruction for only four days in each month; most of them must work at full time jobs to earn a livelihood. Church-state relations, the Bishop concedes, were bad up to 1953 (the Stalinist era).

In recent years, he maintains, the situation has become markedly and steadily more favorable. Congregations may be small, but they are not losing members. As might be expected, only the faithful -- only the sincere believers -- persevere because it requires fortitude and firm conviction to worship and profess Christ in contradistinction from the opinions and practices of the majority of irreligious inhabitants. Nevertheless, children no longer meet with discrimination in the schools when they identify themselves as Christians. Bishop Tooming's son, who is an engineer, and his daughter, who is a librarian, were permitted to pursue a higher education without encountering any obstacles. Unlike Finland or most parts of Western Europe, boys and girls who are baptized and confirmed stay with the church and remain actively involved.

While rejecting the godless ideology which is officially fostered in Party gatherings and in the educational system, this spokesman for Christianity is emphatic in insisting that the church must display its solidarity with the toiling masses and the wretched of the earth. Hence, in his judgment, the levelling process evident under Communism is preferable to the inequities associated with capitalism. Above all, Dr. Tooming professes to be vitally concerned about the church's responsibility in averting war and promoting detente. Members are encouraged to contribute to a church-sponsored peace fund.

Will the Moscow-dictated hard line that disparages all religion as inimical to human welfare ever be modified? Symptoms of change for the better are noticeable, according to this churchman. Eventually, he intimates, even friendly Marxist-Christian dialogue may be possible.

In earlier centuries, many of the prominent citizens of Tallinn were buried in the Dominican cloister which was founded around 1250 and built in stages from 1397 to 1520. When I visited this historic site, I was accompanied by an elderly man from Riga who attempted to translate the Russian inscriptions into German as I took notes in English. Although he was fascinated by the antiquity of the cloister and its interesting architecture, he told me bluntly that he was not a believer. What becomes recurrently obvious as one travels in either Western or Eastern Europe is the loss of commitment to traditional faith. Only in part can this be attributed to Communist hostility. In Marxist countries, just as much as in West

Germany, England and France, alienation from the church has been caused by the overwhelming influence of the whole modern secularization process. As material delights and cosmopolitan entertainment have become available in the industrialized nations, spiritual values seem to be eroded and ties with the institutional church are more frequently severed.

What is most disturbing to North American observers travelling in Eastern Europe is the depressing regimentation and the lack of personal liberties. Totalitarian restraints do not permit uninhibited freedom of movement or expression. The press is muzzled, except for dutifully printing the party line on every subject. As many documented reports emerging from the U.S.S.R. demonstrate, anti-Semitism and an anti-Christian bias continue to poison the atmosphere. The church is merely tolerated, never encouraged. If the clergy voice any criticism of existing socio-political structures, they remain liable to dismissal or punishment. Yet it is apparent that life in the Baltic Republics has improved immensely in the past twenty years, and religious leaders claim to see some bright spots appearing on the ecclesiastical horizon.

North American Christians should remember with prayerful concern their brothers and sisters in Christ who enjoy neither the affluence nor the spiritual opportunities which we take for granted. All the while we should realize that a denunciatory self-righteous attitude toward all socialist countries is neither helpful nor deserved.

Pastor Moellering visited the Baltic Republics in August, 1974. The above represents his personal reflections of his visit.