

11-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Grislis, Egil (1996) "The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and the Fall of the Soviet Union," *Consensus*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol22/iss2/3>

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and the Fall of the Soviet Union

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While this study is primarily concerned with Christianity in Latvia after the Fall of the Soviet Union, it should not be overlooked that Christianity existed also before the Fall—and in several ways contributed to that Fall. This was not, however, visible in the very beginning, when the Soviet presence was most oppressive.

The freedom of the Baltic States was doomed by the secret agreement between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, dated 23 August 1939, consigning the Baltic area to Soviet possession. Accordingly, on 17 June 1940 Latvia was occupied by Soviet armed forces. The same fate met Lithuania and Estonia as well. The 22 June 1941 attack on the Soviet Union by Germany and its initial victories brought new occupants to the Baltic. But as World War II ended on 9 May 1945 (by Soviet account), the Baltic states remained firmly in Soviet possession.

While Mikhail S. Gorbachev can be credited with giving up the repressions practiced in the past, and introducing *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which soon became household words, the fact remains that he did not favour Baltic independence. Andrejs Urdze has evaluated correctly: "Apparently the process of liberation and democratization had to end at the borders of the Soviet Union."¹ Although subsequently the Baltic states would be lauded as "among the first and most ardent of the breakaway republics",² initially the West was not at all sympathetic and in fact denounced the Baltic struggle for freedom "as an unfortunate disturbance of peace and stability". But the events did not wait. The following brief outline may show the increasing intensity of the struggle for freedom, and thereby also supply a basic time frame for the subsequent study:

—April 1986: the Latvian Society of Writers openly criticized Soviet discrimination against the Latvian language and the falsification of Latvian history;

—February 1987: Gorbachev visited Riga, promised economic reforms and political liberalization, but sharply criticized Latvian national aspirations toward independence;

—14 June 1987: commemorating in mourning the first wave of deportations to Siberia in 1941, a crowd of about 5,000 gathered before the monument of Liberty in Riga, Latvia. Despite a permit for the demonstration, 11 people were arrested;

—23 August 1987: in a protest demonstration against the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1939, ca. 10,000 demonstrators gathered around the monument of Liberty;

—18 November 1987: in the commemoration of Latvia's declaration of independence in 1918, there were large demonstrations, followed by street fights and the arrest of ca. 200 people;

—14 June 1988: the commemoration of the victims of Stalinism brought out ca. 50,000 around the monument of Liberty;

—23 August 1988: again a nationwide and patriotic commemoration of the victims of Stalinism;

—29 September 1988: the National Lutheran Cathedral, 29 years as a concert hall (where benches had been turned around with their backs toward the former altar) was allowed for the use of Lutheran church services (and the benches were turned around once more, now to their original position);

—October 1988: in Latvia (as well as in Lithuania and Estonia) there was established a new political association, Tautas fronte (Popular Front), patriotic and democratic, but soon to be opposed by the Interfront or International Working People's Front, an association of Communists and their sympathizers; other political associations also soon emerged;

—25 December 1988: the celebration of Christmas was permitted for the first time since the Soviet occupations of 1940 and 1944;

—28 July 1989: Latvia declared sovereignty; while the meaning of the term was debated, the goal of complete independence was clear;

—23 August 1989: in protest against the Hitler–Stalin pact of 1939, a 600 km long human chain was formed from Tallin,

Estonia, through Riga, Latvia, to Vilnius, Lithuania; more than a million Balts participated;

—4-15 May 1990: the newly elected Latvian parliament met, elected a president, and declared independence, which, however, was to be gained gradually; Soviet officers in civilian clothing who tried to storm the parliament building, were repulsed by the local police force (including Latvian and Russian nationals, still marked with the insignia of the red star, hammer and sickle!);

—11-13 January 1991: OMON (Soviet Special Purpose Military Units) attacked a television station in Vilnius, Lithuania; from among a very large crowd of protesting and singing Lithuanians, fifteen were killed;

—13-20 January 1991: Riga's streets were filled with demonstrators for freedom, barricades were built, church services encouraged peace, faith, and freedom. In several attacks OMON troops killed six people; the funeral procession numbered more than 100,000 mourners;

—3 March 1991: referendum on Latvia's independence yielded 73.6% voting for independence (from a population where now only 52% are Latvians);

—19-21 August 1991: the radical Soviet uprising which included the arrest of Gorbachev echoed in Riga as Soviet hardliners sought to assume power by arresting members of the elected government;

—20 August 1991: the anti-Gorbachev uprising had collapsed, Soviet hardliners in Riga sought retreat and Latvia declared independence.

—31 August 1994: Boris Yeltzin withdrew all Russian troops from Latvia, but refused to include among them the "retired" officers and instructors, many of them estimated to be in their early thirties and therefore well below the ordinary retirement age.⁴

I

Although many of the subsequent generalizations may also apply to Latvia's Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, this research has been done with particular reference to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, for which source materials have been available in greater volume.

(1) 1988

Lutheran insights have been expressed most incisively by the Rev. Juris Rubenis, Dr. theol., pastor of the Martin Luther Church and professor of theology in Riga. As soon as it was possible Dr. Rubenis preached over the state radio, was heard on television, and spoke at many public gatherings. Fortunately, his key sermons were also published in the periodical literature of the time. Born 20 Dec. 1961, and ordained on 29 May 1982, he was and continues to be the most widely respected Lutheran clergyman in Latvia. In one of his sermons of 1988, also published in the U.S.A., Rubenis observed that as "the process of democratization" continues, it is time to speak about the as yet unsolved problems:

Some [Soviet] administrators have viewed the Church as a dispensable leftover of feudalism which must be helped to liquidate itself. But today, when such views begin to be outdated, the question of new, democratically shaped, mutual and longterm relationships moves into the foreground. Unfortunately, however, it is by no means easy to form new relationships. Rather often a genuine understanding of the Church, of Christianity, and of its role in the economic structuring of our society has been replaced by mere stereotypes and by platitudinous notions of "the general harmfulness of religion",—which somehow does not need to be substantiated.

As can be observed from Rubenis' later statements as well, his critical challenges were always followed up by insightful efforts to define the meaning of faith in a way which would be instructive even to secular audiences. Thus, for example, he stated:

The time has come to recognize that the Church continues to exist into the present not because it has known how to skilfully accommodate itself to each age. The opposite is true: history shows that each accommodation to the external circumstances has been detrimental to the Church. At the same time, the Church exists when it creatively pursues the so-called eternal problems, the questions of human existence.

Having made his initial point, Rubenis did not force his convictions on others, but allowed the listeners to absorb what had been heard, and then to make their own assessment:

Of course, each person has the right to maintain his own standpoint in regard to the meaning of human existence as offered by Christianity. Yet one should not overlook that the model of the Christian lifestyle has retained its attractiveness throughout the centuries not

because of its "offer of an illusion", but rather on the account of the experience of its effectiveness.

Then, inviting listeners to become acquainted with the Bible and at the same time acknowledging that some superficial definitions of "God" are indeed vacuous, Rubenis concluded by a challenge of the official Soviet practice—in 1988 a still dangerous undertaking. Rubenis pointed to

...the actions of blind officials whose motto has been: it does not matter how the young people will develop, as long as they do not attend church! (For example, during the high Church festivals the worship services which I conduct are regularly visited by teams of the so-called "catchers", who are teachers in a nearby school. And the student who has been seen in the church does not fare well!) I would like to believe that such activities will be soon outdated and will not ever return.⁵

The situation in occupied Latvia was anxiously observed by the Latvian community in the West; one tenth of Latvia's population had gone into exile in 1944–1945. A well-established Lutheran Church organization in various Western countries had by various means sought to supply physical and spiritual assistance. At this time a very bold step was taken by the Reverend Dr. Juris Cālītis (b. 12 December 1939, and ordained 14 August 1966). A Harvard graduate, pastor of one of the largest Latvian Lutheran congregations in exile (in Toronto), articulate and diplomatic, he had succeeded in obtaining a visa for a visit to occupied Latvia and in 1988 videotaped two interviews.⁶

The first interview had been with Juris Vidiņš, M.D., and Ivars Žukovskis, leaders of the Latvian dissident group "Helsinki '86"—so named after the human rights statement, endorsed in Helsinki, Finland, by all the world powers, but continually violated by the Soviet Union. These leaders knew that the interview would be distributed in the West and would sooner or later fall into Soviet hands as well. But they believed that the appropriate strategy at this time was not silence but bold speech, regardless of consequences. These were thoughtful, sensible, middle-aged men, not fanatics. They told of their efforts to edit a small political journal, *Auseklis* (in Latvian "Morning Star"), typewritten and therefore circulated in very limited numbers, but serving as a means to awaken at least some thinking. Briefly, here are some of their characteristic statements:

Of course, we do not know what will happen tomorrow. But today we are free, at least until we walk out of here... True, we cannot accomplish much. We cannot change the entire Soviet system. But one thing we can do: we can help people to begin to do their own thinking. We challenge the Soviet press releases. We point out the many lies, and we challenge people to compare on their own what is printed in the Soviet press—and what life is really like... I have also asked whether it is in accord with human dignity that on account of my speaking freely I now have to worry what will happen to my children if I am arrested... Yes, there is fear. To overcome fear, someone else's example is helpful. I observe that someone else has done it—so it *can* be done! Then follows a lengthy inward struggle. In my case, when I finally reached the decision and joined this group, I felt much better. I felt free. I do not know whether you can understand what it really means to be liberated, to be free. Then I no longer worried that I might be arrested and punished... Soviet authorities are afraid of Latvian nationalism. They have humiliated us beyond belief and are now afraid of an explosive reaction... They indeed could annihilate us, but they do not want the Western press to report it and to ridicule the Soviet Union. Oddly, our hope for survival rests on the fact that we are known to the authorities, who know that we are known in the West... We must proceed very cautiously, but proceed. We cannot gain everything at once. We must not ask for "all or nothing". We must move forward gradually, pressuring the authorities, taking the little freedoms we get, and always pressing for more, always a half-step ahead of them in our demands... The situation is precarious. Our only employer is the state. If the Soviet authorities so decide, we can be dismissed from work and kept from working—anywhere. And when you do not work, you do not have anything to eat... There are many threats, to us and to the members of our families. During the night, for example, there are telephone calls and threats mingled with vile obscenities. Sometimes on the street we are accosted by strangers who threaten and who curse, and who sometimes use their fists... We have survived so far. Creature comforts are not all that important. Both of us know by experience what deportation is like... No doubt, the Soviet regime will eventually fall. The real question is—when? I doubt that my generation will see it. At best my children... But a change is inevitable, be it sooner or later. Here the economic situation is decisive. Our economy is totally bankrupt and there are only two real choices as far as I can see—either a return to a hardline Stalinism, or more freedom... No, I do not object that you will distribute this videotape. I welcome that fact, since it is like this. If you would not know us, we would not be. We live and are not incarcerated, because it would be inconvenient for the Soviet regime. They would feel embarrassed [in Western eyes]... We thank you for talking with us.

The second interview, also in April 1988, was conducted with five Latvian Lutheran clergymen: Modris Plāte (b. 26 April 1951, ordained 16 May 1982), Andrējs Kavacs (b. 25 August 1941, ord. 16 May 1982), Juris Rubenis (b. 20 December 1961, ord. 29 May 1982), Artūrs Kaminskis (b. 10 May 1914, ord. 20 February 1949) and Jānis Vanags (b. 25 May 1958, ord. 27 January 1985, elected archbishop, 1993). All of them were vaguely known in the West as being the leaders of about two dozen dissidents in the Lutheran Church. Only Dr. Rubenis had been familiar through some of his writings. The interview disclosed—and later experience fully confirmed—that these were sincere and sophisticated churchmen who represented the mainstream of traditional Lutheranism at its best. Their movement (known as “Rebirth and Awakening”) was not divisive in essence, but sought to rebuild faith within spiritless structures. How such a situation had functioned may be described by two key ingredients.

First, according to the Lutheran Church constitution, ratified in 1928 in free Latvia, the church convention or synod granted full voting privileges to all Lutheran pastors. During the Stalin era in 1948 a new church constitution “upgraded” the terminology and spoke of a “general synod”. However, voting power was now limited to the archbishop, to district deans, to one pastor and one lay person from each district. Their selection enabled an almost total manipulation of all synodical decisions.

Second, in each of the Soviet republics there was a Council for Religious Affairs. Following the directive of the Central committee of the Communist Party, this Council assigned on “plenipotentiary” (in Latvian “pilnvarotais”) to each denomination. Theoretically the plenipotentiary’s duty was to oversee, in accord with the Constitution of the Soviet Union, that the state and the Church would work in their separate realms without interfering with each other. In practice the very opposite occurred. The plenipotentiary took an active part in the daily life of the Church, making all the decisions, even in the most insignificant matters.

Accordingly, while the Lutheran archbishop was theoretically “elected” by the synod, he was in reality chosen by the Communist Party. The more resilient ones, such as the late archbishop Dr. Jānis Matulis, often succeeded in defending the

authentic interests of the Church, and was widely respected by his faithful flock. His successor, Ēriks Mesters, was less successful.

The administrative council of the Church or the Consistory ordinarily followed the example of its archbishop. In 1988, with *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the air, but the Church still oriented to the practices of the past, wide dissatisfaction had reached a notable intensity. As Dr. Cālītis interviewed the already-noted five critics, their comments, despite restraint, indicate something of their deep concern for the viability of the Lutheran Church in its present administrative shape:

The Consistory speaks sincerely, but does not succeed in observing any of the real problems. Or, promises are made which are not fulfilled. During regional conferences and at the synod there is much discussion about the renovation of church building—but actually nothing is done...The Church is also part of our society. As the “stagnation” of the Brezhnev era afflicted the entire society, the Church was not exempt. However, as now there are widely voiced demands for openness and honesty, none of this is applied within the Church...The members of the Consistory, following the directives of the Soviet government, seem to be interested only in their travels abroad, where they speak much about global “peace”. But local problems are ignored, e.g., that pastors do not have Bibles for distribution, that there is need for ecclesial vestments and that we cannot even obtain printed confirmation certificates...Our criticisms have been called schismatic, and we have been singled out for some punishment. Two district deans have been summarily deposed, and the venerable rector of our Theological Seminary, Dr. Roberts Akmentiņš (b. 5 March 1909) has been dismissed along with three professors (Plāte, Rubenis, and Vanags)...When a given structure does not function, then a relatively healthy organism develops parallel structures. This has happened in our Church. Conscience told us that we simply cannot continue on our present course...The Church has lost all respect in the eyes of the secular society. We are seen as Pharisees who know how to accommodate themselves to the powers that be. Only now, when some government publications have viciously attacked us, there has arisen an awareness that the Church is not completely dead. We have received much moral support from honest secularists...It is time for the Church not to try to teach others, not to moralize in a glib way, but to begin with itself, and to confess its uncleanness and corruption. Truth is the only possible place where to make an authentically new beginning...Of course, we are being continuously watched [by the KGB]. In a way we are almost used to it. Still, a very uncomfortable feeling remains—as if someone had put his hand in your pocket...We have no choice,

since we cannot serve two masters. But there have come some very discreet offers. There have been suggestions that at this time silence and withdrawal are the better part of wisdom. After all, why struggle in a small, rural congregation when very likely there will soon come an offer from a prestigious congregation in Riga? When I was told this, I joined the movement. Of course, I knew that to reject the discreet offer would disappoint [the KGB], and that there would be consequences. But, truthfully, I had no choice. I could not sell out...Indeed, fear has been real. But so has been the discovery that in those dreaded moments one is not alone. Faith, after all, is not only a belief, but also an encounter...Every human being knows what fear is like. To be human is to have fear. However, the authentic self is discovered at the moment when one begins to wrestle with fear—also a deeply human act. And wherever fear is overcome, that territory which formerly belonged to fear is now conquered, and the realm of fear is diminished. In this struggle one begins to feel as a human being who belongs to Someone Higher.

The interview concluded with heartfelt expressions of appreciation to Dr. Cālītis and through him to the entire Latvian emigré branch of the Lutheran Church. While difficult to measure, the supportive concern of Latvian Lutherans from abroad appears to have played a significant role. The local courage of faith was then not expressed in loneliness and without outside support. This emigré assistance factor was also of some significance for the forthcoming Lutheran Church synod which finally took place on 11–12 April 1989.

(2) 1989

The year arrived with some hopes but also with great uncertainty. The Church had to come to terms with its own meaning. Risky as it was, responsibility needed definition.

In January 1989, Rubenis reflected on the political responsibility of the Church. The Church is not called to lead a revolution or to work out a new blueprint for society. But neither is the authentic role of the church to stay within its walls and to remain isolated. Appealing to the New Testament, Rubenis defined the Church as a liberator. Its task is "...to assist in the re-creation of a mature and spiritually balanced person, liberated from everything that is confining, and opening up a new perspective on life." In other words, the Church will not seek to "replace the government". At the same time, however, noted Rubenis, "...the Church is the conscience of the nation. And

as we know, particularly in critical situations, conscience is not silent. It is only a bad and a useless conscience which keeps silent." Of course, "the Church will influence society...But not by political means, but with the eternally unchanging message of Jesus Christ".⁷

In the meantime daily life was filled with uncertainties, fears, and even violence. The Soviet structures of oppression were still intact—the secret police continued to observe, the Soviet armed forces were still in the country, and military airplanes left their contrails over Riga. Therefore even minor acts of violence looked ominous. Yet while afraid to report them on their own initiative, newspapers accepted letters from their readers, when signed, e.g., this letter published in February:

[Soviet] soldiers visit private garden plots and state farm fields, dig out new potatoes and pull out everything what grows. At my garden, too, men stopped in shining uniforms with their wives and children, and pulled down apples and gathered berries. When I complained, they called me all sorts of names...[Signed] Anita Cazere.

The newspaper editorialized: "Our *glasnost* has not yet progressed to the point where we could dare to identify these soldiers by their units and location."⁸

Now in the month of February there are no new potatoes or edible berries! Accepting the letter as genuine, it must be assumed that the journalists had kept it from the preceding summer—but only in February dared to print it.

Something of the tenseness of the time may be perceived from the Good Friday sermon by Dr. Rubenis. There he made clear that the ancient text had strong contemporary relevance—a still dangerous venture. (In the past it would have been a near deadly venture. Thus when the Rev. Maksimilians Grīvāns (14 January 1901–8 July 1987), already a veteran of eight years in the Siberian labour camps, had written a fictionalized account of persecution in the Early Church, upon his return to Latvia the Soviet authorities charged him with the attempt "to blacken the name of Soviet Union", and sentenced him to eight more years in the Siberian labour camps.)⁹

The ancient crucifixion scene, in Rubenis' presentation, did not seem very far at all from Riga: "When we think today of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then, in addition to our subjective feelings, we also observe quite objectively: there are so many around Jesus who keep talking! How many different words, what large number of activities!"

Clearly, there are real parallels between then and now; the propaganda structures had much in common. And so had the specific approaches. Rubenis continued:

Thus at first speak those who accuse Jesus. These are always the more numerous. If we observe them carefully, we may note that these people are very much alike in all ages. They shout. . . In these shouts there is not even a single word about the cause of the crucifixion of Jesus. Why? They offer no explanation. Is not that always the case? Where there are no reasons, where there is no response to the "why?"—there it must be necessary to rely on loudness and on noise. On shouting.

Then from the general situation, Rubenis turned to the main participants. Here, too, there were similarities with Rubenis' world:

And who are they who demand the death of Jesus? If we look more carefully at these people, we observe that the demanders and the shouters are all those who do not have an inward peace. You know how that is. Shouting is done by the person who is afraid and torn by unrest. Because he feels: my life is empty and torn, meaningless. Nevertheless, I would have been able to carry on my meaningless existence so as even to deceive myself, except that now here comes One who can tear off my mask. . . In other words, it is the disclosure of their sin which these people cannot suffer. Therefore—away with Him!

But when sinners have rejected their Saviour, they cannot remain without a guide. They invariably choose as a guide a sinner worse than themselves:

...Barabbas is better!... And so there come requests. Indeed, what strange petitions—for a murderer. Reflecting on this situation we observe the inevitable law of life which is often visible. In the name of this law we are entitled to say to these petitioners: why are you now complaining about your life? Why are you complaining when in your life there is so much darkness, so much violence? Why are you complaining about the low level of morality?—*You, who are petitioning for a murderer!* Having requested a murderer, you must now live with him.

Prophetically, Rubenis did not allow his listeners to excuse themselves in self pity: Latvians have been not only sufferers, but also participants in the evil regime. Therefore Rubenis addressed the Latvian Soviet leaders as well. It was a sharp address:

...In the midst of all these shouting people there is also one who speaks. He speaks at length. This is Pilate. In his hands at that

time was concentrated an immense power: Pilate is the representative of the Roman occupation forces in Judea. Still, he did not have enough power. This man does not have enough courage and conviction of the heart. Thus it happens with Pilate as it had with the others: he is afraid. He is afraid about his position, afraid about his status. He is afraid whether he will succeed in sustaining a balance between the demands of Rome, far-away, and the present local population.

The irony, as Rubenis saw it, was immense. In the end it was the powerless Jesus Christ who had all the power. It is on account of his power that we know of the persecutors. Thus, Rubenis had spoken of murder with boldness. With insight he had also pointed out the source of the eternal truth. And in the end he had challenged the listener and the reader to seek salvation while it could still be found:

The shouters have remained recorded in the Holy Scripture not on account of who they were, but with Whom they were—that is, in the nearness to Jesus. And so it is also with us. On its own strength, our life evaporates and is lost. Only when a person has come near to the cross can he be transfigured and enlightened. Only then he becomes alive, only then he remains in eternity.

A few days later, an editorial entitled “Never On Our Knees” reflected the uncertainty of the political situation and offered a call to courage. The occasion was the flat refusal by Alfrēds Rubiks to grant permission for a commemoration of the deportations of 25 March 1949. Rubiks was the mayor of Riga, the head of the Latvian Communist Party, and a Soviet hard-liner. The editorial states: “I really do not wish to compare, but this response by the authorities leads me to think that such may also be their vote regarding repressions, if these were to come.” Yet the writer was not cowed, she signed the editorial: Elita Veidemane. Then she offered a warning: “Already now it is time to think how we shall vote in the Fall when we will elect the new city council...” Yet that was not the end of the story. Even without the permit, the demonstrations did occur. And Mayor Rubiks had participated, even with a memorial wreath. And so had the hardline Soviet Interfront people!¹¹

Still, it was an eerie situation, certainly unusual and different from what one might experience in the Western world. Such is the impression evoked by the next report:

“Skulls in the Courtyard”.—Several truckloads of gravel had been delivered to Public High School Nr. 5 and dumped in the back

yard. In distributing the gravel near a newly built fence there were found several human skulls and bone fragments. Announcing the location from which the gravel had been obtained, the news bulletin requested assistance from anyone who might have relevant information.¹²

Certainly these were not the only skeletons that had been unearthed. The approaching convocation or synod of the Lutheran Church could hardly avoid dealing with the past. A "break" was anticipated. It occurred during two intense days of reflection, 11–12 April 1989. Alfons Vecmanis, Dean of the Jelgava district, who wrote the official report of the proceedings of the synod, began by speaking about the "deep crisis" in the Church, "the beginning of the serious changes in society", and hence the need for "an altogether different, new approach".¹³ Present at the synod was also the new plenipotentiary in religious matters. His "correct, favourable and friendly conduct was a pleasant surprise." Moreover, in addition to other guests there were also Dr. Cālītis from Canada as well as the President of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exile, Dean Vilis Vārsbergs, and Dean Roberts Aboliņš, both from the U.S.A. Where but a short time ago the Latvian emigré population was officially maligned and vividly described in the vociferous tones of Communist propaganda, now their representatives received entrance visas and even authentic welcome. With patient skill, Dr. Cālītis video recorded the proceedings. It has been surmised that the awareness that one's public comments would be heard in the West and later reviewed in Latvia did have a significant influence on the outcome of the synod. It helped to break the grip of fear, and shamed consciences into generally avoiding security by subservience to the crumbling Soviet ideology. Archbishop Mesters' report was subsequently characterized as follows:

He spoke about the difficult circumstances in which the Consistory had to work during the last few years, about the financial problems, about the reduction of the assistance from the [Latvian Lutheran] Exile church, about the increase of the internal problems etc., as well as about the gains which had been reached despite the difficulties. During the debate which followed, it became clear that many participants in the synod were of the opinion that the report did not include the most essential and most pressing issues of the recent time.¹⁴

Finally there came the election, which following the 1928 constitution gave vote to all pastors. In closed balloting, Ē.

Mesters received 41 and Kārlis Gailītis 46 votes. Gailītis was to be the new archbishop, while Ē. Mesters became archbishop emeritus and has continued to serve as a pastor.¹⁵ It is also worth noting that the synod with a majority vote decided to invite Dr. Akmentiņš to return as the dean of the Theological Seminary (a position from which, on account of Communist demand, he had been relieved by Ē. Mester on 17 August 1988).¹⁶ The Rev. Sarmīte Fišere summed up the general sentiments: "It is high time to dust off the heritage of our fathers—the Book of books, the Bible. Those who have not seen it must be given the opportunity to get to know it."¹⁷

(3) 1990

Rebirth and renewal were now to begin on a large scale. And there was faithful hope as well as some progress. The following three brief quotations may characterize it:

Many church towers in Latvia are still silent. Bells have disappeared, stolen during the war, turned over to government authorities for melting down. Please respond, if you know the location of a discarded, hidden, or otherwise lost church bell. Church and cemetery bells must return to their rightful places and proclaim the truth for which they were made! Also a request is made to report where church bells are needed. The same request is also being made by the Consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia.¹⁸

Thousands of people gathered to watch the raising of the crosses on top of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral on April 23, [1990].

These crosses had been destroyed by the Soviets as they turned the cathedral into a planetarium, an archival storage facility, and a cafe bar. The new crosses were a donation from a Latvian living in Germany.¹⁹

The returning of the membership cards to the Communist Party is now a daily event. The reasons for the return are various: some bashfully speak of ill health and family circumstances while others state openly: "I have been disappointed in the ideals of Communism", and "I think that the Party has discredited itself" [17 May 1990]²⁰

But the old regime had not as yet disappeared. On 14–15 May 1990, a group of Soviet military personnel and civilians attempted to storm the Latvian parliament building while the parliament was in session. Acts of violence had been advocated a day before in leaflets prepared by the hardline Interfront

organization. With some difficulties, the local police officers were able to repel the attackers. The events were reported alive on radio, and everywhere in Riga, stores and public buildings included, people were glued to their radio sets. Their faces tense, the worries were visible. A newspaper editorialized;

These are odd times. As if everything was peaceful—and yet not really. As if we were free—and yet not truly. As if everything was turning to the better—or just getting worse. Thank God that we are not so powerful as to be able to be foolish. Therefore we shall respond to provocations with steadfastness and peacefully. At the same time, thank God, we are strong enough not to allow ourselves to be broken up into small change. Therefore in matters where compromise is impossible, we must be unyielding.²¹

With slight delay a different comment arrived from Moscow. On 14 May 1990, president Gorbachev had issued a decree in which he declared that “the attempt to renew the independence of Latvia is illegal”. With an appeal to the Constitution of the Soviet Union, “paragraphs 164 and 168”, Gorbachev ordered the state prosecutor’s office “to see to it that the Constitution and the Laws of the country would be strictly obeyed”.²² However, the threats were not followed by deeds; it seemed that progress toward full freedom would continue. Still, it was an eerie situation. The country was occupied, Soviet soldiers were everywhere, to visit Latvia a Soviet visa was required, and, of course, the KGB was present. All the repressive structures which had operated so effectively in the past now stood silent—but they were intact. Anyone who sided with the protesters, the renewers, indeed the rebels, could be marked for subsequent deportation or annihilation. Many people were deeply concerned, even afraid—but many more had conquered their fears.

In this precarious situation arrangements had been made for one of those characteristically Baltic song festivals. Choirs, numbering over 30,000 singers, would converge on Riga from all over the country. There would be joint and also individual performances—and parades. Moreover, visitors from all over Latvia as well as from the West would arrive in large numbers. And so it happened—the festival took place. Especially enthusiastic applause was reserved for emigré Latvian choirs from Sydney, Australia, and Toronto, Canada, as well as from other Western cities, including German choirs from West Germany. The entire event was a statement for independence and

in opposition to Soviet occupation. In a remarkably effective manner, it aroused and consolidated the entire nation.

In the midst of this, 30 June–12 July 1990, the Lutheran Church had a share, albeit a somewhat modest one. Jointly the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exile had organized a large scale religious retreat, somewhat similar to the German *Kirchentagen*. More than 400 Latvians from North America initially gathered in Stockholm, Sweden. From there a Swedish passenger ship brought them to Riga and anchored in Riga Harbour. The requirement for the Soviet entrance visas created a measure of uncertainty; several of the church leaders had been refused visas in the past. But this time the Soviets were cooperative. Nevertheless, as the visitors from North America left the passenger ship in the morning and returned at night, they had to proceed through Soviet customs. The Russian speaking customs officials were generally courteous, but at times searched through one's belongings. At night a Soviet navy ship anchored close and kept a bright spotlight on the passenger ship: there was no doubt about being under surveillance! The retreat program consisted of an opening worship service in the National Lutheran Cathedral—which was absolutely crowded. For an entire week there followed daily Bible studies; I had the privilege to lecture on the Gospel of St. Mark. Other lecturers dealt with various religious topics which were geared to Latvian needs, and therefore dealt with renewal, with faith and courage, and life in a democratic society. There were also workshops on Sunday School teaching and counselling, as well as concerts of church music. While not generating the same amount of interest as the more familiar medium of the song festival, the *Kirchentagen* too, may be considered a success. The Church had re-entered public life, and had done it well.

In the meantime the process of gradual change continued, and was marked both by courage and creativity. The local congregations sought ways to make their existence known, which they needed to accomplish with very limited resources. Physical renovation and restoration went along with attempts to establish Sunday schools, church choirs, and to open up church buildings which the Soviets had used as storage facilities or various clubs. The most active Lutheran congregation in Riga, the Martin Luther Church under the leadership of pastor Rubenis, prepared a news bulletin of twelve pages and printed 300

copies. The first issue, dated June/July 1990, explained that the purpose of this publication is

to enable the development of a free Christian consciousness of one's co-responsibility for everything that takes place in this house of God, and to invite our assistance, participation, ideas, suggestions, projects and initiative—all ever so necessary for the revival of congregational life after the long incarceration of the Church.²³

Yet the dark shadow of the past was still over the country. Newspapers reported the locations where Soviet executions had occurred. Some of the victims were exhumed for proper burial. New memorial monuments were quickly erected; but there also were reports of desecration of such places by the use of high powered explosives. The ubiquitous statues of Lenin still stood in every town and city. The *Chicago Latvian Newsletter* summed up well:

Thus, Latvia today is a nation in limbo. Its government no longer considers itself Soviet, but is not yet totally independent either. Its land is still occupied by Soviet troops and its industry is still controlled by Moscow. But the new government is in charge of local affairs, and is totally revamping the old bureaucracy. Latvia doesn't recognize the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Latvia. Moscow doesn't recognize the legitimacy of the Latvian declaration of independence.²⁴

(4) 1991

After the relative quiet before the storm there came the year of 1991. The storm began in Lithuania. In Vilnius, the capital, Soviet armed forces on 12–13 January sought to occupy a television station. A large but peaceful Lithuanian crowd, singing Catholic hymns, stood in their way. Suddenly the tanks rolled forward and automatic weapons were fired into the crowd. There were cries, some fled, many stood their ground, flags waved; soon enough fourteen Lithuanians were dead. Then followed a funeral procession, led by Catholic clergy, with many wreaths and many national flags. The scenes were dramatic and moving, and had been filmed by courageous international and local correspondents. The whole world could see repression in action.

Latvians, now forewarned, rushed to Riga by the thousands. Large cement blocks and huge logs were quickly placed before public buildings and blocked the centre of the city. Soviet

tanks would not have free access. In the meantime the people of Riga prepared food for their fellow countrymen and protectors. Campfires burned throughout the city to keep warm. Churches were open as shelters and first aid stations as well as places of worship. In these very intense movements, the Church had a very direct share. One Sunday, 13 January, all Latvian churches offered intercessory prayers for the Lithuanians, as well as prayers for Latvian freedom. In the afternoon of 13 January the Popular Front had organized a large demonstration for the freedom of Latvia. Juris Rubenis, the prophet of Latvian independence, spoke to an immense crowd, gathered at the river Daugava. The address had a key theme which set the entire event in an appropriate context: "We have come from the houses of God". Then he continued: "How can a nation confront a numerical superiority, and evil, and betrayal, and fear?—We can accomplish it only by standing here as a Christian nation." He also noted that in life there are moments where all realistic options appear to have come to an end. Indeed, to Latvians, 13 January seemed to be just such a moment. Then Rubenis observed and challenged:

The road to freedom cannot be walked in proud, self-assuring egotism and conceit, but only in painful awareness of and open acknowledgment of one's faults—and then through an inward rebirth. We have come from the houses of God. Let us not walk too far away from them. Indeed, on this sombre occasion I invite you to gather regularly in our houses of God for our common prayers. And there let us also pray for our enemies. Let us never forget that they, too, are human beings, although misguided by different ideas, perhaps even evil—but still human. If they forget their humanity, let us not forget it. We have come from houses of God. Please, friends, let us not forget it: we have come from houses of God!²⁵

When peace returned, there were five dead, caught in cross-fire or by stray bullets. The OMON (Special Purpose Military Units) had in the night of 20 January organized a reckless shootout in the centre of the city. One of their victims, Andris Slapiņš, was there with his film camera. However, the event had been filmed and Soviet behaviour could be seen internationally. The guilty, of course, were neither charged nor punished. That was Soviet style, and while suffered since 1945, it now truly outraged the population of Latvia. It should be underscored, once more, that while in their own country only

a small majority of 52%, in the referendum on Latvian independence held in February/March, 76.3% had accepted the Latvian vision. Also in the bleak January days on the barricades with Latvians there had been also Russians and other nationals.

The uprising against Gorbachev in Moscow on 19 August had its repercussions in Riga. With the assistance of the already present Soviet military forces, the hardliners took over the government and claimed to establish the old order. Intimidations and threats of repressions circulated as Soviet helicopters flew over Riga, disgorging propaganda leaflets. But fortunately for Latvia, the attempt to overthrow Gorbachev collapsed quickly. In this tense situation Latvia declared its independence on 20 August. The official recognition of independence from the U.S.A. came on 2 September and from the crumbling remains of the Soviet Union on 6 September.

(5) 1992-1994

In an interview, Līga Kauliņa, a student of psychology and theology at the University of Latvia, summed up the contemporary situation with insight:

At the moment we find ourselves in the midst of a curious process. Its main characteristic is the so-called "let-loose" syndrome. My generation grew up in an age of absolute spiritual poverty; now it is searching in all possible directions for non-materialistic ideas. The older generation somewhat hides this quest, since they—even though it was under duress—had claimed to support Marxism. ...Our society is obviously not ready for a creative self evaluation. So we look to each other, hoping to be lifted up above the confused crowd. In this situation my [Lutheran] Church has been of immense help. It has served as a bridge between the torn spirituality of my generation and the spiritual unity and fullness of the New Testament. My Church has offered authority without authoritarianism and solid strength without oppression. At the same time this healing process has been concrete, guided by strong personalities—good theologians and pastors—who under persecution and in suffering had found their own spiritual wholeness. Now they are able to share it with others.²⁶

But the presence of such reliable pastors is by no means to be taken for granted. On one level statistics tell a gruesome story; the Soviet-appointed Archbishop Gustavs Turss reported after World War II: "Totally destroyed: 42 Lutheran

churches, heavily damaged: 88, others have received some damage and will require expensive repairs. War has not touched only 60 churches. Since late 1946, 106 pastors serve in 305 congregations.”²⁷ A report, released in 1994, without reporting on church buildings, indicates loss in congregations and gain in pastoral services: “In Latvia there are some 272 congregations, served by approximately 135 men and women. The church has about 100,000 members. The number of fully ordained pastors in Latvia is about 70, including about 20 retired. The rest are theological students serving in parishes or persons without full pastoral status and education.”²⁸

But between these two sets of statistics there is a third one. Beginning with 1940, the Soviet government directly executed or deported to Siberia ca. 70 pastors (ordinarily with 10 year sentences at hard labour which many did not survive).²⁹ Moreover, on a still deeper level, the daily pressures, the humiliation, and the sheer human desire for survival account for the fact that there were some pastors who collaborated with the KGB in various ways. Hence the mission of the now liberated Lutheran Church included the delicate and difficult task of calling to repentance while at the same time recruiting a new generation of future pastors.

It must be stated with a measure of satisfaction that in Latvia there has never been a shortage of religiously-concerned people who have wanted to serve as pastors. But their aspirations could not always be fulfilled due to circumstance, well reflected by the Faculty of Theology. This Lutheran Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia in Riga had been opened on 4 February 1920, taking up the service which before World War I had been provided by the University of Dorpat in Estonia. The Soviet occupants in 1940 immediately closed the Faculty of Theology and destroyed its entire library. In addition, within a year they had deported to Siberia professors Ludvigs Adamovičs (23 September 1884 – 4 August 1943) and Edgars Rumba (30 May 1904 – 1 October 1943); both perished in the labour camps. After the re-occupation of Latvia in 1944/95 further deportations followed. Professor Alberts Freijš (21 April 1903 – 22 November 1986) was imprisoned for 8 years near Irkutsk, and for two more years detained near Moscow. Lecturer Artūrs Silke (15 June 1908 – 22 October 1965) was sentenced to eight years at hard labour in Siberia, and afterwards not allowed to return to Latvia for four more years.

Several faculty members had sought refuge in the West, others had died of natural causes. Yet with a remaining academic nucleus, assisted by several scholarly pastors, the Lutheran Church established the so-called Theological Courses as soon as the Soviet government permitted it in 1969. This institution was later transformed into a Theological Seminary.³⁰ By 1989 there had graduated 52 students. Then archbishop K. Gailītis initiated the renewal of the Theological Faculty. The rector of the University of Latvia, Dr. Juris Zakis, warmly welcomed this proposal and on 25 January 1990, the Faculty of Theology was re-established. Dr. Roberts Akmentiņš continued to serve as its Dean (till his death on 13 May 1994). He was succeeded by Dean Vilis Vārsbergs (b. 1 June 1929, ord. 14 May 1957) from Chicago IL, U.S.A., the outgoing president of the Latvian Ev. Lutheran Church in America.³¹

Thirty students from the Theological Seminary were transferred to the Faculty of Theology. Each year 30 new students would be admitted into the four-year program, leading to a Bachelor of Theology degree. The degrees of Master and Doctor of Theology would be obtained by further study. Due to a shortage of faculty members, Latvian theologians living in the West continued to offer their services for shorter or longer periods of time. A working library of more than 12,000 volumes was quickly gathered through the efforts of generous donors. English or German became a required part of the program. The Faculty of Theology was initially housed in a parsonage and an educational building of St. Pavils' Lutheran Church (ordinarily heated only from end of November till end of March, in 1994 totally without warm water and for two and a half weeks even without electricity due to a shortage of funds). In August 1994, the Faculty of Theology was relocated to the main university complex (Raiņa bulvārī19, Riga). Despite the already mentioned as well as other hardships, the dedication of both faculty members and students has accounted for a diligent and devout atmosphere. On 2 July 1993, the Faculty celebrated the graduation of thirteen students. In 1994 there were nineteen graduates.³²

The cooperation between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad (previously named "in Exile") has been formalized by the establishment of a Coordination Commission, which first met 12–16

February 1990, and has been chaired by Dean, now Archbishop of the church Abroad, Elmārs Ernsts Rozītis (b. 30 March 1948, ord. 13 May 1973, consecrated 1 May 1994). In principle, there is an agreement that the two churches are to be one; the administrative groundwork, while in preparation, has by no means been completed.³³

Yet already at this time it can be noted that the close connections with the West, even with the Latvian community dispersed from Sweden to Australia, have had an ongoing impact on the Church in Latvia. At the same time, it appears that the material support has been far greater than an over-all theological influence. With individual exceptions, the Church in Latvia continues to live with its own great spiritual resources. And in a negative way, the impact of the Soviet shadow, although now visibly receding, is still far more decisive than any influence from the West. Consequently, the conservative religious outlook remains predominant.

II

(1) Development of Conservative Lutheranism

While before World War II it was possible to speak of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia as the major religious presence, and its life in relationship to its German Lutheran spiritual and cultural heritage,³⁴ this is no longer the case today. Latvians now constitute only about 52% of the total population. The remaining 48%, most of them brought in from various parts of the former Soviet Union, have greatly enlarged the already present Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches. As a result, the contemporary ecclesial character of Latvia is complex. On the one hand the religious West is represented in a watershed situation as Lutheranism exists alongside an almost equally-sized Roman Catholic Church—incidentally, “the farthest northern country with an ethnically compact Roman Catholic Church”.³⁵ Hence the capital city of Riga is the residence of the archbishops of the Evangelical Lutheran, the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Churches. All three churches influence and are influenced by a population which was once culturally Lutheran, then exposed to the assaults by Soviet atheism, and now is slowly learning

to breathe freely in a democratic setting. As the result, it is clear that "the uniformity of the past has come to an end not only in economics and politics, but also in spirituality".³⁶ Of course, it might well be that some day Latvian Lutheranism will return to a liberalism of pre-World War II days. But at the present this is not the case. Here the following factors have played a significant role.

(a) As already suggested, in comparing Lutheranism of the West and of Latvia, one of the reasons for its distinctive conservatism is "the strong impact of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, which has entered through Catholic and Orthodox literature, through mixed marriages, and the non-Lutheran roots" of many church members.³⁷

(b) The well-funded and executed missionary ventures by the various Western and Oriental religious sects, hitherto unknown in Latvia, have further accented the need for internal consolidation. In a Western perspective, offered by an emigré Latvian theologian who has returned permanently to his homeland, pluralism represents "the normal development of religious life. Religious life in a free and democratic society enables the presence of various religions." And so it may well be—except that from the indigenous point of view pluralism appears like another threat on the life of the "historical churches" (as Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox Churches have been traditionally labelled), and hence merely a milder version of the once vicious attacks by Soviet atheism.

(c) Most important, experience proved that atheist propaganda was best resisted by conservative entrenchment. Juris Rubenis recalled: "In the aggressive milieu the Church had to be on guard and to protect its identity it developed an idiosyncratic theology and ecclesial praxis. As is known, the outward dangers create a conservative Church since it is only in such a form that it is possible to survive persecutions and the general cultural instability."³⁹

This was true both on an individual and a collective level. The less open one was to friendship and social encounter with others—and the more self-sufficiently oriented to one's own inner resources—the less opportunities there were for KGB informers to uproot or even to destroy one's existence. The late patriarchal dean of the Faculty of Theology, Dr. Roberts Akmentiņš, recalled the lament of a visiting Latvian church official

from the U.S.A.: "Roberts, I hardly know anything about you at all." Dr. Akmentiņš, had replied: "And I like it this way, indeed, I like it this way." Responding to my puzzled look, Dean Akmentiņš explained: "In those days [during the Soviet occupation] the less we knew about each other, the less the KGB could find out about us." After all, the interrogations most clergymen had experienced by the KGB had been unpleasant affairs. (Even as late as 1990, my first return visit since I had escaped in 1944, the "Hotel Latvia" in Riga had listening devices in every room and it took three days to receive KGB permission to visit my sister's grave outside Riga. I even had to supply the license plate number of the car which would take me there! It has been generally estimated that in occupied Latvia there was one KGB informer for every thirty people.)

On a collective level, the defensive conservative stance of the church was generally observed by the Soviet scholars of atheism as well. In a textbook entitled *Scientific Atheism*, and formerly required reading for all university students, we are informed that in actual fact it is inevitable that in the midst of a changing society the Church would undergo change as well:

Therefore the process of the modernization of religion occurs throughout all history. Yet modernism entails serious danger for religion. It shakes the foundation of the religious world view—the conviction that religion is "given by god", totally complete and independent of social changes. Therefore modernism is opposed by *religious conservatism*—a principle of protection, in the end nothing more than a defense of the indestructibility of religion and Church, and a countermove against the changes which emerge in the ideological and practical working of the religious organizations.⁴⁰

(d) While in rather quickly changing circumstances it might be expected that the absence of Soviet antireligious political pressure and atheistic propaganda would notably soften the conservatism of the Church, a significant factor has aided the preservation of a conservative position—the presence of a new generation of converts. Professor Leons G. Taivāns has observed that "...a typical student of theology today is a neophyte—person who has only recently grasped the foundations of Christianity, become a participant in the life of a local congregation, and now is fervently preparing for spiritual maturity and service...." Admittedly, such a situation is not

without its own problems. Taivāns is aware that "unfortunately neophytes are often selfrighteous and intolerant of divergent religious views, which often results in tensions among students."⁴¹ Something similar may also have to be said about the church at large, and the relationship between the three "historic churches". While ecumenically correct and personally gracious, their missionary situation vis-à-vis a still large unchurched population has placed them in an inevitably competitive spirit. On occasion less mature officials of lower rank have engaged in bitter denunciations.⁴²

(2) Temptations at oversimplification

At best Latvian Lutheran conservatism has meant a joyous returning to the eternal truths of the Bible, and an appreciative respect for Lutheran theology and ecclesial traditions. Such mature conservatism has not been unwilling to innovate, particularly in the realm of liturgy, and to dialogue with more liberal Latvians from the West. But on many occasions Latvian conservatism exists in a significantly intolerant shape. There, particularly by the vociferous language, it appears to echo the style of Soviet propaganda. It is most noticeable in the oversimplified conflict between truth and falsehood, in the suspicious comments regarding North America, and in reference to the ordination of women.

(a) The powerful affirmations by the founding fathers of Communism continue to echo throughout the various Soviet statements on atheism. In the process the initial oversimplification between "truth" and "falsehood" also was maintained. Most curiously, all this had been accomplished in the name of science, subjecting the latter to the same oversimplified true/false generalizations. Typically, P. Kolonitzky proclaimed: "Religion is a direct opposite to science. Science is founded on knowledge, on an ever deeper penetration into the secrets of nature, but religion consists of blind faith" (*Marxist Philosophical Materialism as a Theoretical Weapon in the Struggle Against Religion*).⁴³

If the Western experience of pluralism may have been a strong supporter of ecumenism—or at the very least taught tolerance for public discourse—Soviet upbringing appears to have left a legacy of intolerance in the hearts of many. Often enough

a search for a *via media* or the attempt at a compromise is quickly and loudly judged as a lack of authentic principles, hence as a model of unbelief.

(b) Similarly, in the midst of a definite admiration for North American efficiency and wealth (which at times includes totally unrealistic visions that dollars just wait to be scooped up) there are also continuing statements of suspicion and disdain. The present growth in Latvia of the "mafia" and street violence is viewed by many as an American phenomenon, now imported into a country which previously knew order. Especially in personal conversations with younger students, there at times resound echoes of what in the Soviet days was the common propaganda wisdom. For example, P. Kashirin had stated:

In no other country are there as many religious organizations as in America. There exist hundreds of religious "teachings" under all sorts of labels. The explanation for the fact that there exists a completely savage darkness is to be sought beyond the creativity and cleverness of American church workers. The essential reason for the vivid blossoming of such darkness is to be sought in those gigantic upheavals which are experienced by the imperialistic world, which the progress of history has destined to their inevitable destruction.⁴⁴

And such were not merely the occasional outbursts of an emotional party theorist. This was the precisely drawn party line, asserted repeatedly and loudly. Thus P. Pavjolkina instructed:

The American life-style, based upon the capitalist idea of private property and the chasing after business, after money, leads to an increase of criminal acts. The entire American system and life-style nurtures gangsters and robbers, since in America success is not determined by work, but by capital and money, regardless in the manner in which these have been obtained (*Religious Deceptions and Their Ill Effects*).⁴⁵

But in the end the point is to connect Americanism with religious pluralism, and to offer a scathing denunciation of both: "In the United States of America there are more sects than anywhere else in the world, yet at the same time in that country criminal behaviour is also developed further than anywhere else in the world" (*The Sects and Their Reactionary Essence*).⁴⁶

While the majority of people living in Latvia have rejected the Soviet life-style and its theoretical claims, a minority of

hardline Stalinists remains. At times it appears subdued, but on occasion full of hope and even belligerence. Although the one time ubiquitous statues of Lenin have been removed, on 1 May fresh flowers tend to be left in commemoration at the sites where the monuments once stood. Each year on 9 May when the Soviet Union traditionally celebrated the victorious end of World War II, a large crowd has gathered at the bulky Soviet erected memorial of the "liberation" of Riga in 1944. There have been speeches in Russian and Latvian, the traditional shouting of Communist slogans, and the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Here the members of the hardline Interfront feel at home. Such occasions may very well serve as reminders to the West that Communism, while economically bankrupt and politically out of power, need not be viewed as totally dead. The Soviet Union has fallen, but many of its ideals survive and continue to cast their long shadow.

(c) Both political and religious influences may have worked together to influence the recently arisen Latvian Lutheran opposition to the ordination of women. In various settings previously, but now recently in a statement published in Latvia, the Rev. Māris Ķirsons (from Toronto, Canada) has pointed out that under the Soviet regime, Latvians had been exposed to a patriarchal discrimination against women as institutionalized by the Soviets.⁴⁷ With similar results—although opposite in content—may be viewed the repeated Soviet claims that religion is always guilty of discrimination against women. Thus V. Prokofjev argued:

As one of the worst prejudices one must regard the religious conviction which regards women, in comparison to men, as creatures of a lower order. Religion fails to recognize women as equal members of society. There is not one religion which does not seek to implant a prejudice of condescension in regard to women, which does not proclaim the inequality of women in comparison to men. . . . Convincing women of their weakness and worthlessness, religion creates in them a lack of confidence in their own ability, teaches them to be slavishly subservient, consigns them to a status of eternal dependence in family and society, and thereby consigns them to inactivity. . . . Religion's regard of women as a limited creature who is not equal to man, serves the interests of the exploiters, who make use of the subservient status of women, in order to exploit them more successfully (*Religion—the Enemy of Science and Progress*).⁴⁸

Even though officially opposed, the subordination of women was a reality in the former Soviet Union. Inefficient economy

had retarded the development of equal gender roles in public life, while in the meantime it was accomplished to a large degree in the more successful capitalistic West. Latvia's unfortunate existence in the Soviet orbit resulted in a similarly backward existence and outlook regarding the status of women.⁴⁹

Moreover, the opposition against the ordination of women has increased on religious grounds as well. At the decisive synod of the Lutheran Church which may be seen as the point of liberation from direct Soviet interference (held 11–12 April 1989) women's ordination was discussed on the second day. Kārlis Gailītis had just been elected archbishop; he favoured the ordination of women. When a vote was taken, 46 pastors voted for, and 21 pastors against it.⁵⁰ After the accidental death of archbishop Gailītis (22 November 1992), his successor, Jānis Vanags (consecrated 29 August 1993) recalled his views soon after the election: he had been known to oppose the ordination of women; his election meant also the endorsement of his position. But then he softened his stand: "Nevertheless, I have had no intention to place any obstacles in the way of the service of these women pastors, already ordained by other archbishops of our Church, who have, before God, taken upon themselves this responsibility."⁵¹

Some of Vanags' clergymen have lacked this diplomatic restraint. Thus Aleksanders Bite has asserted: "Therefore 'the priesthood of women' is the Devil's dearest and most effective weapon for the destruction and annihilation of the Church of Christ."⁵² Kaspars Dimiteris has written: "For a woman to be a priest is a sin!"⁵³ While in the last analysis the sources of such opposition and its motivation can only be surmised but not proven, as we must halt at the doors of the sacredness of personal conviction, the effects may be seen as far-reaching. The cooperation with (if not the financial support by) Latvian Lutherans in the West will certainly become more difficult. At the same time the conflict of conviction may also have some salutary contribution: Latvians in the West may thereby be reminded that although they are their brothers' and sisters' supporters, they are not their consciences.

(3) Reflections on a Terrorized Morality

In a way terror can be measured—even statistically. Latvia's first encounter with Communism in 1940–41 supplied the

occasion to report what had happened in a year's time to a nation of two million people:

Deported to Siberia in cattle cars to labour camps:

6,447 men—most of them died during the first winter

5,307 women

3,332 children younger than 16 years of age

From the above 15,081 persons, 291 children were younger than 12 months and 315 people older than 70 years of age.

Also deported were 13,000 officers and enlisted men who had been forcefully detained in the armed forces after the Soviet take-over.

Almost 6,000 perished in court-ordered executions as well as in wilful ones; many were lost without a trace. Total loss during the first year of Soviet occupation was about 34,000 people. Often spouses had been separated, or children separated from their parents and from each other. The grief of not knowing about loved ones does not readily yield to statistical accounting.⁵⁴

Then in 1944 the Soviet armed forces were again at the borders of Latvia. As the war ended, Soviet terror came in full force. In addition to numerous executions, ca. 350,000 men, women and children were again deported to slave labour camps. The statistics this time are not precise, but it seems that at least one third perished. Those who lived, continued to live in terror.

Leons G. Taivāns was the son of a Lutheran pastor in Riga. These are his recollections of childhood: "The times were fearful. I well recall the chilling atmosphere, the fear, evoked by the memory of those unforgettable mornings." And what were those mornings all about? Taivāns explains:

The residents of Mežaparks [or Forest Park, a well to do suburb of Riga] quickly shared the news about the people who had been arrested during the previous night. For the most part these were members of the old intelligentsia and of the middle class. During the day at their former homes there arrived trucks, filled with soldiers. The belongings of the arrested were confiscated and loaded on the trucks.

We had to keep moving from one residence to another as trustworthy people informed my father that "an action" was again to take place. At that particular time the deportations were mainly a matter of filling quotas. Arrested were the people who happened to be caught. In this setting of fear I became aware of father's

daring intercessions for the church members who had been “forced into exile.” It became perfectly clear even to us children that father referred to the people who had been taken away at night. There were many such intercessions. And despite all the careful changing of residences, father had to spend many nights with the KGB, being interrogated.⁵⁵

And how did Pastor Taivāns survive such pressures? Apparently he eventually ceased responding to the repetitious questions by the KGB. He remained silent and prayed and prayed.

Now it should not be imagined that such was the experience only of the families of pastors. Everyone lived in uncertainty and fear, including even trusted Communists. The recollections of Andrējs Pantelējevs may well be characteristic. [Eventually, in free Latvia, he became a member of parliament. His mother was a Latvian, his father a Russian. During the Soviet regime at the time of receiving his passport Andrējs had declared his nationality as Latvian and was severely scolded by a Soviet official.] Later Pantelējevs wrote: “I did not go to church at Christmas, because in political matters my parents were very careful. But on one occasion, I remember that my cousin, my mother, and I went rather fearfully to the [Lutheran] church...What I remember is the very anxious preparation and the equally apprehensive return.” Pantelējevs than speaks of Christmas as “the forbidden fruit”!⁵⁶

Nevertheless, in the midst of such difficulties church work was continued. Haralds Kalniņš, subsequently the bishop for all the German Lutheran Churches in the Soviet Union recalls: “Church work was carefully supervised. Observers from the KGB were present at each church service. [On my travels] I was detained rather often and could continue on my way only after communications with Moscow.” In addition to his wider duties Pastor Kalniņš had also served locally, and recalls how he had begun to rejuvenate the Latvian Lutheran congregation in Garkalne, just outside Riga. When due to Kalniņš’ efforts electricity was installed in the church, the Soviet authorities were outraged: for six months he was forbidden to work as a pastor. As a result, “church life in Garkalne came to a halt”.⁵⁷

This was a time when active participation of lay people in church life, as well as nominal attendance, tended to be interpreted as an anti-Soviet activity. When children were baptized, it was often enough in another parish, so that the parents

would not be recognized. High school graduates would not be admitted to the university if their diploma contained the censure of “social immaturity” (meaning church attendance). And while after the 1953 death of Joseph Stalin large scale deportations no longer took place, the lives of individuals continued to be strictly controlled by threats of dismissal from their jobs and by imprisonment. Even to speak Latvian in public—and that in a region officially labelled the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic—would often enough evoke brutal denunciations in Russian.

While these events of course belong to the past, their traumatic memory inevitably reaches into the present. There is often vivid and detailed recall in conversations among friends and in printed memoirs. Many Latvians attribute the contemporary problems of Latvian society to these traumatic, demoralizing experiences, believing that atheist propaganda and brutality had caused deep scars which have not as yet healed. Thus reports Aida Prēdele, a Latvian journalist and a pastor: “During the night of September (1991) thieves had broken into the [Lutheran] church of Dobele. They damaged the oakwood door, defiled the sanctuary and the church organ. As the only available treasure they carried away a purple altar cover.” The local police searched diligently but in vain. A few days later they had luck:

A young lady gained attention in the town of Dobele on account of her rather unusual garb—a purple skirt with yellow fringes and a cross on the stomach. Eerie? Indeed eerie. When the lady was arrested by the local police, she pretended not to understand what they wanted from her: after all, in a free country everyone can make a dress of any material they want.

Moreover, Pastor Prēdele thinks that disregard for ecclesial property and hence for moral probity is wide:

No, it is not the lack of education or the ignorance of how to shop in an expensive department store that distinguishes us from civilized Europe. And not even this when an editor of a newspaper upon reading the words “St. Matthew’s Gospel”, asks: “What does that mean?” No, this is not the most outrageous situation. And not even when an alcoholic steals the candleholders from a church. The most outrageous moment begins when otherwise normal people—educated, intelligent, even creative people—can make a dress from an altar cover, place on their dinner table the candleholders from a church and give to their friends for a present a stolen Bible. Then

I am plagued by a question: Should the times become still worse, with greater difficulties for survival—what else would we steal, what else will we sell and buy?

One can still find purchasers of altar paintings, and of communion vessels, of old crucifixes, of Bibles and of icons. These are not bought by ignorant people—but by the educated who know the origins of such objects. I happen to know of a book collector who owns many old and exquisitely bound Bibles, which have come directly from the altars of Latvian churches. Even worse—there are “believers” who are prepared for a small sum of money to purchase from a thief an icon in order to decorate the wall of an honourable citizen’s apartment. Such are we Latvians. We report as a great miracle those rare occasions when a family returns an ecclesial object which has chanced to come in its possession...All this attests to the dreadful process of moral decay.⁵⁸

It should be noted that such an outcry of moral indignation comes from within Latvia itself. There are other outcries as well. They attest that all sense of morality has not been lost. And whether or not they balance the negative observations, they at least indicate that the church has not lost its sight. Nor is it possible, of course, to establish a clear causal connection between Soviet abuses and the contemporary decay in morality—but only to note that such is the conviction of many church people in that situation.

Thus the [Lutheran] principal of Riga’s *Christian School*, the dedicated and the efficient Vera Volgemute, offers the following evaluation: “The spiritual vacuum of half a century has not stimulated the refinement of morality. The codex of Soviet ethics existed without a divine endorsement, it rested on human wilfulness and not the divine will.” Volgemute is quite explicit in attributing to the Soviet legacy the “all too many abortions, abandoned children, children who are unloved and are being mercilessly abused by their parents, and the catastrophic number of divorces.”⁵⁹ And these are not merely individual outcries of some overly sensitive people. The general moral portrait is bleak indeed. Marika Vidiņa, an experienced television producer and now a wise clergywoman, looks less for causes than for understanding the present plight which she portrays graphically:

Family relationships in our congregations pose the most difficult problems. Can we tell a child who attends a Sunday school but at home is ridiculed by his alcoholic father, that he should “obey his

father"? And what are we to say to a wife who begins to attend church services, is initially ridiculed by her husband as a "heavenly bride"—but subsequently threatened with divorce?

Pastor Vidīņa concludes with a question which is already a comment: "Literally, sex and pornography are attacking us from every newspaper stand and video store. How is it possible now, when there is so little love here, to show—and not merely to talk about it—that love is the fulfilment of everything?" Pastor Aija Zvirbule records even more tersely, "Latvian society is a society of broken down marriages."⁶⁰

When the forces of evil are perceived that directly, a conservative theological perspective is prepared to see that behind the present evil there are not only influences but also an immediate Destroyer. Pastor Guntis Dišlers puts it this way:

Satan sits in a corner and unobtrusively, although vigilantly, observes all humans. All are asleep and the master has no need to be concerned. Suddenly, however, one has dared to raise his head! One of those who otherwise belong to him!... There, where someone is ready and dares to say "yes" to God, darkness is immediately present and is ready to annihilate the harbinger of light.⁶¹

Of course, in the sophisticated West there are satanic cults and perverted devotees. But generally speaking, in the West Satan has had to work underground, without public acknowledgment and recognition. In Eastern Europe all this has been different. For half a century Latvian Christians have experienced the public display and even celebration of evil. Latvian Lutheran liberal theology of the pre-World War II period did not supply the categories for the interpretation of such demonic behaviour. Now Lutherans have reached back to their biblical and conservative roots. More than naive portrayals of Satan, the power of the demonic having been felt in society, is now seriously discussed. With journalistic precision, Aida Prēdele observes: "People who have lost paradise, always find hell."⁶²

Conclusion:

Popular protest and individual voices of ecclesial opposition converged by 1989 and found expression in the synod of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, held on 11–12 April. By clear vote, the archbishop was forced into retirement; Kārlis Gailītis, the newly elected successor, courageously proceeded

to free the church from Soviet domination. Here physical renovation of church buildings, the reclaiming of previously nationalized properties, and quick transformation of a small theological seminary into a Faculty of Theology of the University of Latvia, occurred at the same time as churches began to be filled with both the curious and the new converts. Sunday schools were established as new teachers had to be rapidly trained; secular choirs became church choirs. While bookstores eagerly accepted newly printed religious literature, the voluminous atheistic propaganda disappeared from display almost overnight.

The continuous political instability, which peaked twice in 1991 with attempts of internal Soviet takeover, left no doubt that religious renewal was risky and that public witness of one's faith may again have disastrous consequences. In such a climate conservative convictions dominated. Increasing political and economic stability, however, did not immediately assure the re-establishment of normal church life. In fact, as the initial enthusiasm for freedom ebbed due to economic difficulties, church attendance also slacked. A notable measure of ongoing chaos in church life thus offers a continuous challenge.

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Latvian and German are translated by Egil Grislis.

¹ Andrejs Urdze, *Das Ende des Sowjetkolonialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991) 10.

² *Time*, 144, 44 (July 24, 1994) 29.

³ Urdze, *Das Ende*, 9.

⁴ Klemens Ludwig, *Das Baltikum: Estland, Lettland, Litauen*, 3rd ed. (München: C.H. Beck, 1992). Marianna Butenschön, *Estland, Lettland, Litauen: Das Baltikum auf dem langen Weg in die Freiheit* (München and Zürich: R. Pipter, 1992). Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 2nd ed.). Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1990* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, expanded and updated edition). Erich von Nolte, "Riga, Januar 1991", *Liber Annalis Instituti Baltici Acta Baltica*, 28 (1990) 327-332. Andrējs Plakāns, "Latvia's Return to Independence", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 22.3 (Fall 1991) 259-265.

⁵ *Ceļa Biedrs* [Lincoln, NE, U.S.A.], 8[324] (October 1988) 123-124.

- 6 April 1988, transcribed and translated by Egil Grislis.
- 7 *Atmoda* [Riga, Latvia], 3 (23 January 1989) 3.
- 8 *Atmoda*, 7 (20 February 1989) 3.
- 9 Edgars Ķiploks, *Taisnības dēļ vajātie: Latviešu mācītāji ciešanu ceļā* (Lincoln, NE: Latviešu Ev. Luteriskā baznīca Amerikā, 1993) 97.
- 10 *Swehtdeenās Rihts* [Riga, Latvia. Subsequently abbreviated as *SR*, 1[1020] (26 March 1989) 1.
- 11 *Atmoda*, 13 (3 April 1989) 1.
- 12 *Atmoda*, 15(17 April 1989) 3.
- 13 *Latvijas Evaņģēliski Luteriskās Baznīcas Kalendārs 1990* (Riga: Latvijas Ev. Luteriskās Baznīcas Konsistorija, 1989) 86.
- 14 Ibid. 88.
- 15 Ibid. 89.
- 16 Ibid. 90.
- 17 Ibid. 91.
- 18 *SR*, 4[1403] (18 February 1990) 7.
- 19 *Atmoda*, 7[67] (30 April 1990) 6.
- 20 *Rīgas Ziņas* [Riga, Latvia], 17 May 1990.
- 21 *Atmoda*, 19 [79] (15 May 1990) 2.
- 22 *Latvijas Jaunatne* [Riga, Latvia], 1 (June–July 1990) 1.
- 23 *Rīgas Lutera Draudzes Ziņas* [Riga, Latvia], 1 (June–July 1990) 1.
- 24 10, 6 (July–August 1990) 3.
- 25 *Ceļa Biedrs*, 3[349] (March 1991) 44–45.
- 26 Personal interview in Riga, Latvia, 29 May 1992.
- 27 Richards Zariņš, “Gustava Tursa 100 gadu atcerei,” *Ceļa Biedrs*, 6[342] (July–August 1990) 90.
- 28 Juris Čālītis, “Report to the Annual Meeting, 17 June 1994,” (Baltic Special Interests Conference, Toronto, Canada) 6.
- 29 Cf. Edgars Ķiploks, *Taisnības dēļ vajātie*, 234–235.
- 30 *SR*, 3[1042] (4 February 1990) 5.
- 31 *Latvijas vēsture* [Riga, Latvia], 1[12] (1994) 3–10.
- 32 *Laiks* [Brooklyn, N.Y.], 18 August 1990, 5. *Ceļa Biedrs*, 2[348] (February 1991) 24–26 and 8[374] (October 1993) 127. *SR*, 19[1176] (24 July 1994) 5.
- 33 Elmārs E. Rozītis, “Aus der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Lettlands,” Günther Schultz, ed. *Kirche im Osten: Studien zur osteuropäischen Kirchengeschichte und Kirchenkunde* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 109. Elmārs E. Rozītis, “Par Latvijas Evaņģēliski Luteriskās Baznīcas vienību,” *Latvijas Evaņģēliski Luteriskās Baznīcas Gadagrāmatta 1993. gadam* (Riga: Svētdienas Rīts, 1992) 157–160. Elmārs E. Rozītis, “Vienotā Latvijas Baznīca,” *Latvijas Evaņģēliski Luteriskās Baznīcas Gadagrāmatta 1994. gadam* (Riga: Svētdienas Rīts, 1993) 123–127.

- 34 Egil Grislis, "The Quest for a Prophetic Piety," *Lutheran Forum*, 15.3 (1981) 20–24.
- 35 Leons G. Taivāns, *SR*, 8[1109] (10 January 1993) 4. According to the statistics supplied by Visvaldis V. Live, Latvian Lutherans have 282 locations for worship, Roman Catholics 191, Orthodox 99 and Old Believers 55. There are also relatively small Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal churches. *Laiks* (Brooklyn, N.Y.), 3 November 1993, 7. Counting in terms of major religious communities, Anatol Lieven has noted: "In 1991 there were in Latvia 210 Lutheran Communities, 186 Catholic, 90 Orthodox and 65 Old Believers" *The Baltic Revolution*, 367.
- 36 *SR*, 16[1100] (13 September 1992) 8.
- 37 *SR*, 1[1109] (10 January 1993) 4.
- 38 *SR*, 19[1079] (13 October 1991) 5.
- 39 "Luterism pēckomūnistiskajā sabiedrībā," *Cēļš*, 1(45), (1994) 103.
- 40 *Zinātniskais ateisms* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 1976) 93.
- 41 *SR*, 8[1068] (28 April 1991) 2.
- 42 Cf. the observation by Jānis Pavlovskis that "Luther founded a church which lacks spiritual power and which therefore cannot give to its members anything more than any other secular organization." *Katoļu kalendārs 1994*, Jānis Broks, ed. (Riga: Rīgas metropolijas kūrīja, 1993) 53.
- 43 *Marksistiskais filozofiskais materiālisms teoretiskais ierocis cīņā pret reliģiju* Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1954) 36. In the Soviet Union, however, it was also possible to observe a development from initial opposition to a dialogue, cf. Wallace Daniel, "Religion and Science: The Evolution of the soviet Debate," *Christian Century* (29 January 1992) 98–100. This debate did not penetrate the more conservative Latvian Communist setting.
- 44 *Reliģiskās ideoloģijas reakcionārā būtība* (Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1954) 15.
- 45 *Reliģiskie māņi un to kaitīgums* (Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1953) 29.
- 46 *Sektas un to reakcionārā būtība* (Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1954) 44.
- 47 *Diena* 108[898] (10 May 1994) 8.
- 48 *Reliģija–zinātnes un progresa ienaidniece* (Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1954) 48.
- 49 This generalization applies to all three Baltic states, cf. Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 32–34.
- 50 *Latvijas Evaņģēliski Luteriskās Baznīcas Kalendārs 1990* (ftn. 13), 90.
- 51 *SR*, 6[1114] (14 February 1993) 7.
- 52 *Mantojums: Luteriska Mantojuma Fonda mēnešraksts* [Riga, Latvia] 3 (March 1994) 21.

- 53 *Diena* 118[908] (21 May 1994) 5. Cf. Erika Lanka, " 'Eine freiwillige Sklaverei: 'Die Befreite Frau in Lettland" (Andrejs Urdze, *Das Ende des Sowjetkolonialismus*, 119-126.
- 54 *Atmoda*, 12 (27 March 1989) 4.
- 55 *SR*, 16[1056] (9 September 1990) 4.
- 56 *SR*, 24[1084] (22 December 1991) 4.
- 57 *SR*, 17[1101] (27 September 1992) 3.
- 58 *SR*, 24[1084] (22 December 1991) 1.
- 59 *SR*, 9[1093] (10 May 1992) 4.
- 60 Ibid. 8.
- 61 *SR*, 7[1091] (5 April 1992) 1.
- 62 *SR*, 7[1067] (14 April 1991) 2.