

Latvia: Living at the Crossroads, a Land in Between

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Thank you for inviting me to speak today on religion in a country on the other edge of Europe. I will focus on the Lutheran Church, but will start with a historic overview of Christianity in Latvia.

The origins of Christianity in Latvia

Lands on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea were among the last in Europe to be Christianised. Seen from the British perspective, these lands may seem to be a sluggish backwater of Europe, but in fact for millennia trading routes were active here, connecting East and West, North and South, through busy ports. The first sparse written records on the Baltic tribes can be found in Greek and Roman sources; later Vikings sailed up the rivers and established a trading route to Constantinople. Throughout subsequent centuries several powerful nations of Europe attempted to conquer or control these lands in order to gain full control of the Baltic Sea.

Living in a buffer-zone between big and powerful states and empires has shaped the mentality of the Baltic peoples, and has an impact on their attitude to religion and organised religion in particular.

The first sporadic influences of Christianity came to Latvia through short-lived Viking settlements in western Latvia and through Russian merchants travelling from the East along the river Daugava. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Germans organised mission and conquest in order to Christianise the tribes in Latvia; this was part of the Northern or Baltic Crusades, a military campaign carried out largely by the Teutonic Knights. Local tribes were defeated; the local people were forced to get baptised, and the land ended up in the hands of Germans. The

indigenous population were eventually forced into servitude.

The association of Christianity with a foreign and oppressive power has resurfaced in national sensibilities and public discourse from time to time until this day. Records from the thirteenth century tell of people who attempted to wash away their baptism. More often, however, the converted people kept their pagan practices alongside their obligations towards the church.

The Reformation

When the Lutheran reformation began in 1517, it very soon reached Livonian towns, populated mostly by Germans. Riga, the current capital of Latvia, was the local centre of the Reformation, and the first Lutheran congregations were established there in 1524. The movement later spread to other towns. Martin Luther himself had a correspondence with reformers and town officials in Livonia. In 'going Lutheran' town councils saw an opportunity to liberate themselves from the power and taxation of the Catholic Church and its military orders. First towns, then the countryside became Lutheran.

It took some time, however, for the Latvian peasant population to notice the changes. The introduction of the vernacular in worship was slow, since all the clergy were German and most of them did not speak fluent Latvian. The first religious printed texts in Latvian were published in the late sixteenth century. The Bible was translated in the 1680s. Those were turbulent times too. A German pastor, Ernst Glück, was commissioned to do the translation, and as that part of Latvia was under Swedish rule at the time, King Charles XI paid for the translation. Territories controlled by Poles were not far away and

Pastor Glück's family had a Polish orphan girl, Marta Skowrońska, as their maidservant. When some years later the Russians invaded, Pastor Glück went with the troops to Moscow and interpreted for them. Marta eventually married Peter the Great and became Catherine I, the first Empress of Russia. This episode illustrates how Latvian territories changed hands frequently; again and again different foreign troops marched through, fought or were stationed there. The south-east of current Latvia was under Polish rule for a longer period and underwent the Counter-Reformation; it remains Roman Catholic to this day.

The rest of Latvia remained predominantly Lutheran. However, a different ethos of Reformation Christianity reached the hearts and minds of the Latvian peasant population much later, in the eighteenth century, thanks to the Moravian Brethren movement, which had its roots in German Lutheran Pietism. This lay movement encouraged personal conversion and confession of faith as well as involvement in the ministry and mission of the church. In Latvia it gave a strong impetus to the education of the peasant population as well as forming secular associations and organisations, which later paved the way for the national awakening movement in the nineteenth century. Moravians ministered largely within the confines of the Lutheran Church.

Latvia in the Russian Empire

At the very end of the eighteenth century, all the territory of current Latvia became part of the Russian Empire, and in the following century the state strengthened its positions in the Baltic area, including promoting the Russian language and the Russian Orthodox Church. People were encouraged to convert to the sovereign's faith. There was a wave of conversions after the famine in 1847-48, when peasants were promised land if they converted. These promises proved to be empty and many people converted back to the Lutheran Church.

In the nineteenth century serfdom was abolished, which gave the Latvians freedom of movement and prospects of higher education. Those who had sufficient means went to study in Tartu, St Petersburg, other universities in Russia or in Germany. That was the time when an active process of nation-building began despite opposition from the Russian state and the ruling class of local German nobility. Romantic notions of a golden era in the past saw the birth of the narrative of an 'enlightened paganism' as the true Latvian identity, suppressed by the violent imposition of Christianity. At the same time there were Latvians studying theology, but most of them were not given jobs in Lutheran parishes in Latvia, as these were still controlled by German patrons.

The Latvian Lutheran Church

The twentieth century was a political and social rollercoaster for the people of the Baltic area. It began with a general strike and uprising in 1905, followed by a brutal suppression. Then the First World War and revolutions in Russia brought destruction and major changes in all spheres of life. Because the front line came to Latvia and stayed there for three years, about a third of the population fled as refugees to other parts of Russia. In exile, the first buds of an independent Latvian state took shape. Similar processes happened within the church. In 1917 in St Petersburg a decision was made to form one Latvian Lutheran Church comprising parishes from several Russian provinces, into which Latvian territory was previously divided.

The Republic of Latvia was proclaimed a week after the end of the First World War and the new church structure was created too. The Lutheran Church, trying to break away from the German system, chose to forge new links to Nordic churches and the office of Bishop was introduced. The first Latvian Bishop, Kārlis Irbe, was consecrated by the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom in 1922. In 1919 The University of Latvia was formed,

with a Theology Department where women studied along with men.

The Lutheran Church of Latvia aspired to be the Latvian Church, the 'National Church', although constitutionally it never was. When part of the German landowners' property was nationalised, their patronage ceased and more Latvian pastors could take posts and make changes to parish life, reaching out to the citizens of the new Latvian state.

Congregations of German people were given a certain autonomy: they had their own Bishop, and the Latvian Bishop was given the title of Archbishop.

The Soviet period

Twenty-two years of an independent state and church was a very active and dynamic period, full of enthusiasm and hope as well as struggles and adjustments. It came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939 the Baltic German population left for Germany, the Soviet Army invaded in 1940, the Nazis invaded in 1941, and the Soviet Army returned in 1944. During this period Latvia lost one third of its population: they were killed, sent to Siberia or other concentration camps, or fled as refugees to the West. The church was a target of the Soviet atheistic regime, and in a few years the Lutheran Church had lost more than half of its clergy. In subsequent years clergy and laypeople exercised their ministry under the harsh conditions of Soviet terror, oppression and control. Extra taxation was imposed on churches and clergy, and religious education as well as the publication of religious books were banned. Only in the 1960s, after a long struggle with the Soviet authorities, was the church allowed to open a theological seminary.

Contacts with churches in other countries were strictly controlled by the KGB. Thus the church in Latvia was very isolated and its educated pastors were largely self-taught. In a situation of shortage of pastors a pragmatic decision was made to ordain women; the first three were ordained in 1975. A year earlier the first woman had been ordained in

the other branch of the church too: in the Latvian Lutheran Church in Exile, which was established by Latvian refugees after the Second World War. During the years of the Cold War the Church in Exile regarded itself as the voice of the Latvian Lutherans in the free world as well as of those who were silenced under the Soviet regime. When representatives of both churches met at big assemblies, like those of the LWF or WCC, they publicly opposed each other. However, quite often they had informal private conversations and exchanged information afterwards. These relationships were based on old friendships and trust, because quite a number of representatives of the two churches had studied or worked together before the War.

Post-Soviet Latvia

Both churches were actively involved in the national independence movement, and when Latvia regained its independence in 1991, there were high hopes for an eventual reunification of the Lutheran Church. A joint hymnbook and yearbook were published, and the Theology Department at the University of Latvia was reestablished by their joint efforts. However, the tide started turning when after the death of Archbishop Kārlis Gailītis in a car accident in late 1992 a new Archbishop, Jānis Vanags, was elected, who was more conservative and did not support the ordination of women. The Lutheran Church of Latvia forged close links with the LCMS in the USA and in 1997 established a Lutheran seminary where women were not admitted to the programme for the education of pastors. At the same time, the church distanced itself from the University Department of Theology, branding it liberal and not fit for educating faithful servants of the church.

During the past 20 years the church's Constitution has been gradually amended towards the increased centralisation of financial resources as well as towards expanding and strengthening the power of

Bishops. One of the latest and most controversial amendments was made in 2016, stating that ordination in the church can be sought by male candidates only. This had a negative impact on relationships with the big Lutheran churches in Western Europe as well as the sister church in the diaspora. After Latvia had regained its freedom, The Latvian Lutheran Church in Exile had renamed itself The Latvian Lutheran Church Abroad and was adjusting to a changing demographic. After Latvia joined EU in 2004 and following the financial crisis in 2007 a significant number of Latvians emigrated to the West, and there was a smaller number of former expatriates or exiles who returned to Latvia.

A territorial agreement between the two churches, stating that one church operates in Latvia and the other abroad, was breached when the Church of Latvia established a congregation in Dublin in 2007. The Church Abroad reciprocated and formed a congregation in Riga. Now the two churches lead a parallel existence both in Latvia and abroad. The home church increasingly orientates itself towards the East and the so-called 'traditional values' of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, while the diaspora church tries to reassert links to so-called 'European values' and the Western European mainstream Protestant traditions and heritage. For example, in 2015 the Porvoo agreement was signed by the church abroad and not by the home church.

In the twenty-first century both Latvian Lutheran churches operate in secular settings. Generally Latvians are more religious than, for example, Estonians. However, their spirituality contains a very strong connection to nature and to the land, and to some pagan sentiments. In addition, there is a deeply ingrained distrust of official and hierarchical structures including those of the church. Among the majority of ordinary members there is no strong sense of ownership, responsibility or commitment towards the nationwide or even worldwide church and its future. Instead people focus

on the preservation of their little patch or corner, be it a church building in the country or individual spiritual practices like meditation.

To a large extent each of the churches has lost touch with its potential constituency, and their jostling does not help. Their greatest challenge is to find a new (transformed, re-formed) positive and affirming identity based on a meaningful and thorough Lutheran theology and to reach out to the wider Latvian society both in Latvia and the diaspora. This would also include good and mutually enriching ecumenical relations.

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