

# Baltic Protestantism

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The history of Baltic Protestantism is closely linked with the political and cultural history of the Baltic region which differs greatly from that of Russia itself. The term "Baltic" has various meanings depending on the context in which it is used. "Baltic peoples" applies to only some of the peoples inhabiting the territory to the north-east of the *mare balticum*, namely the Lithuanians and Latvians. It formerly applied also to the Prussians who were later absorbed into other nations. It did not include Kurs and Livs, peoples related to the Finns who likewise disappeared as nationalities. The significance of these peoples can be gauged from the existence of the former States and provinces of Prussia, Kurland and Livonia. The Estonians in the northern Baltic region are not "Baltic peoples" but belong to the Finno-Ugrian ethnic group together with Finns and Hungarians. The term "Baltic" acquires a different meaning in a political context. Under the old Russian Empire the "Baltic provinces" referred to the provinces of Kurland, Livonia and Estonia. But after the First World War the Baltic States denoted Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The present-day Baltic Soviet republics comprise Estonia and Latvia, whose borders have been reduced compared to 1939, and Lithuania, whose borders have been extended. Since the 19th century the term "Balts" has been used in a restricted sense and refers to the German minority [known as Baltic Germans. *Ed.*] who dominated the life of Kurland, Livonia and Estonia until 1918.

"Baltic church history" denotes the church history of the former Baltic provinces which later became the States of Estonia and Latvia. Lithuania's church history, however, is not included since unlike Estonia and Latvia, which shared a common though not identical history, Lithuania developed in a different direction both under the Polish-Lithuanian Empire and in the period of Russian rule up to 1918 and thereafter. Cultural and ecclesiastical links developed between the Holy Roman Empire and the Latvian and Estonian territories in the 13th century when the latter were awarded as a fief to the Order of Teutonic Knights by the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire. Lithuania, on the other hand, was incorporated into Slavic

Catholic culture, determined by Poland. During the counter-Reformation the reformed Lutheran congregations in Lithuania became small minority groups. This is still true today in the Soviet republic of Lithuania where out of a population of 3.3 million or so, there are still 20,000 Lutherans. In Estonia (which belonged to Sweden from 1561), Livonia (which after a short period of Polish rule also belonged to Sweden from 1621) and the Duchy of Kurland, developments took a different turn after the dissolution of the Order of Teutonic Knights. Lutheranism was able to maintain its hold and these provinces remained predominantly Lutheran after their incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1721 (i.e. Estonia and Livonia) and 1795 (i.e. Kurland). These areas were inhabited by Estonians, Latvians, a German minority, a small number of Swedes on the Estonian islands, and an increasing number of Russians. Nevertheless some aspects of the history of Protestantism in these areas do in fact resemble Lithuanian church history. In both cases there were mixed nationalities, church life was transformed after 1918 into an institutional church under the direction of the national majorities, national minorities were expelled from the area, and the life of the churches became subject to marxist-atheist ordinances after the Soviet takeover.

The Estonians and Latvians lived for centuries in social obscurity. The indigenous peoples formed the peasant population and in the towns worked as labourers or artisans. The German nobility and bourgeoisie were the political, social and religious leaders. The Estonians and Latvians did not acquire national consciousness until the 19th century, although their languages had been used in schools and churches since the Reformation. For example, included among the first notable Estonian and Latvian manuscripts are translations made by Germans of the catechism and Biblical texts. As in Swedish-dominated Finland, to obtain higher education involved adopting the culture of the ruling minority. Only as nationalism spread through Europe and a consciously Estonian and Latvian intelligentsia emerged did German culture cease to dominate.

The growth of national consciousness also affected church life. In the rapidly growing Herrnhut Societies [connected with the Moravian Brethren] the Latvians and above all Estonians created a democratic independent organization over against the official church, which was frequently referred to as the "*Herrenkirche*" ("Masters' church"). When the Herrnhut movement lost its impetus there was conflict within the Lutheran Church over the appointment of pastors. Congregations refused to accept German pastors and demanded a pastor of their own nationality. Before these conflicts, by the middle of the 19th century there had been large scale conversions: 70,000-90,000 Estonians and Latvians left the Lutheran Church and became Orthodox, spurred on by political and social discontent. Since then there has been a strong Estonian group alongside the Russian Orthodox in Estonia.

The 1917 February Revolution stimulated those forces in the Baltic provinces which called for a free Latvia and a free Estonia. This was also true in Lithuania. The reorganization of the Lutheran Church after 1918 was affected by political and national aspirations. The churches were placed under the leadership of Estonian and Latvian nationals. After considerable conflict, national majorities and minorities came together in a common church in the early 1920s. The minorities were granted self-determination in national dioceses, as in Lithuania and Estonia, while in Latvia a German bishopric was formed for the 60,000 German Lutherans. Although there continued to be conflict, even spectacular incidents such as the seizure of the cathedrals in Tallinn (Reval) and Riga, which had been in the hands of German parishes, were not able to destroy the organizational structure of the churches. Problems arising from nationality were not resolved by the churches in the short period of political independence (1918-40) and if a *modus vivendi* was achieved it was due to the moderation of those involved.

The danger of isolation became evident to church leaders in the Baltic States after 1918. They realized that churches in small nations like theirs that had no linguistic ties with a wider family of languages, were in danger of developing a theological nationalism as well as a nationalist theology. The churches were thus faced with the task of forming new links with the outside world. The advance of Catholicism in the Baltic States after the First World War made the need for maintaining such contacts even clearer. During the period of church reorganization Archbishop Söderblom from the Swedish Lutheran Church was able to help liberate the Estonian and Latvian Churches from German dominance. He consecrated two bishops, first an Estonian and then a Latvian; and in Lithuania he offered to help lead the Lutheran Church out of its internal conflicts.

After 1918 the Lutheran Church in the Baltic States managed to train a new generation of pastors to replace the heavy losses suffered during the First World War. This came to an end on the outbreak of war in 1939 when an agreement reached between Germany and the Soviet Union placed the Baltic States in the sphere of Soviet influence. The German minority in the Baltic States was resettled; the Swedish minority in Estonia subsequently left the country. Thus the bitter struggle between the nationalities was over and the Lutheran Churches became indigenous. During the Soviet takeover the population and the churches in the Baltic States suffered great losses. Soviet policy on religion and culture led to many arrests, deportations and a succession of other harsh measures. Following the German occupation (from 1941) the population suffered further heavy losses with the renewed advance of Soviet troops in 1944. Many Lutherans, including a great many pastors and both bishops, fled to

the West with the retreating German troops. Since then Estonian and Latvian Churches have been established in exile.

After such severe losses and disruption to church life, the reconstruction of the churches following the Soviet takeover was difficult: theological colleges had been dissolved, no training centres existed and charitable work was forbidden. The churches lost their status as organizations and became "religious associations" without the right of legal personality. Many who had previously stood on the fringe of church life left it completely, not so much as a result of atheist propaganda but because of political and economic pressures. The decline in church life was reflected in the reduced number of baptisms, confirmations, church weddings and funerals. These one-time national churches became local churches.

Nevertheless, during the first few years after 1945 the Baltic churches were able to benefit from concessions granted to the churches in the Soviet Union during the war and from the reorganization of the Lutheran Church before the war. The first steps were taken towards the reconstruction of church life, albeit within the framework of restrictive Soviet policy: two bishops were appointed – Archbishop Turs in Latvia and Archbishop Kiiivit in Estonia. Later, during the anti-religious campaign launched by Khrushchev in 1959 the Lutheran churches, like other denominations in the Soviet Union, were severely affected. The number of Estonians who now consider themselves Protestants in a broad sense is estimated at 250,000, and there are about the same number in Latvia. In addition, there are approximately 100,000 people in each of the republics who consciously profess to be Lutherans at this time. In Lithuania, including the Memel region (now called Klaipeda), roughly 10 per cent of the population (i.e. 200,000) were Protestants in 1939. Border changes, flight and resettlement have played a part in reducing the number of Lutherans to 20,000. Apart from Lithuanian congregations, a smaller number of Latvian congregations have survived in Lithuania. In addition there are still some Reformed churches. After 1945 it took longer for the small remnant of scattered Lutherans in Lithuania to achieve organizational unity than it did in Latvia and Estonia: only in 1955 did the first synod of Lithuanian Lutherans meet and elect a leader (this office subsequently became the episcopate).

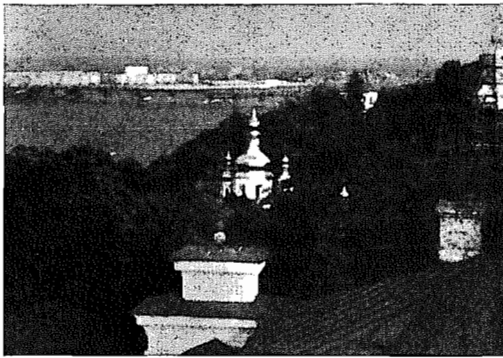
Statistics must be approached with the utmost caution since often they are affected by the conflict between militant atheism and the Church's struggle for survival. If the Church cited figures which showed its real strength this would provoke intensified atheist activity, while statistics on religion produced by the atheists tend to portray atheist successes and to emphasize the continuing decline in religious activities. The existence of churches and active pastors on the one hand, and, on the other, the repeated atheist appeals to the faithful to abandon their religion, the

number of atheist publications and their circulation levels, are far more informative about the relationship between Church and State in the three Baltic Soviet republics than unreliable statistics.

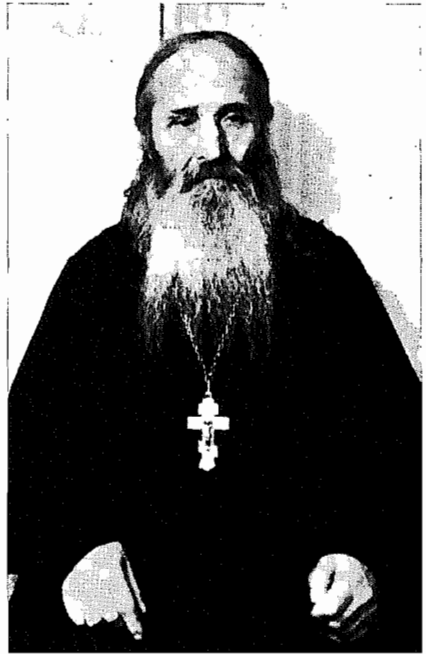
From the second half of the 19th century free churches, especially Baptist groups, have flourished among the Estonians and Latvians. Riga and Tallinn (Reval) became centres for the formation of free churches, including Methodist congregations which still exist in Estonia. The total number of free church members remains small, but developments after the Second World War changed the relationship between Lutheranism and the free church movement. The former national (Lutheran) churches have diminished while the membership of the free churches has not changed significantly. Consequently the importance of the free churches has increased. A considerable number of Russians, Belorussians and Ukrainians have settled in the Baltic republics, and apart from those who are Orthodox, they include Russian Evangelical Christians and Baptists, who are once again broadening the spectrum of Baltic Protestantism as far as nationality is concerned.

The continuing steady influx of Slavs into the Baltic republics has had a considerable effect on the population as a whole. Riga, the capital of Latvia, like many other areas and industrial centres, has become a mixed Latvian-Russian city. The proportion of Lithuanians, and especially Latvians and Estonians in their own lands, is continuing to fall and consequently their national culture is being eroded. Those who try to resist the Slavic influence turn to the religious and intellectual foundations of their national history, since religion and nationality, even for those whose Lutheranism is negligible, are intimately connected.

Before 1918 the Baltic Lutheran Church helped mould the Lutheran Church in Russia. Tartu (in Estonia) was the main centre of Lutheran theological work and church development in the whole of the Russian Empire. Although this came to an end after 1918, there are still today in the USSR some Lutheran congregations which for decades have had no organizational cohesion. Changes are now beginning to take place which are helping the Baltic Lutheran churches to look beyond their own borders. Since 1976-7, thanks to efforts made in the Soviet Union and with the assistance of the Lutheran World Federation, both the Latvian and Estonian Lutheran Churches have made contact with individual Lutheran congregations in other parts of the Soviet Union. A Latvian pastor has been made responsible for contact with German Lutherans in Kazakhstan and Kirgiziya, while a pastor from the Estonian Lutheran Church is establishing contact with Estonian, Finnish and German Lutherans in the Leningrad area. One Finnish congregation attached to the Estonian church is located in Pushkin, 30 km. from Leningrad, and there is another in Petrozavodsk. The church in Pushkin also holds services for Estonians and Germans. This assistance from the Estonian and



*Left* The Kiev Monastery of the Caves, one of the great religious centres of the Russian Orthodox Church.  
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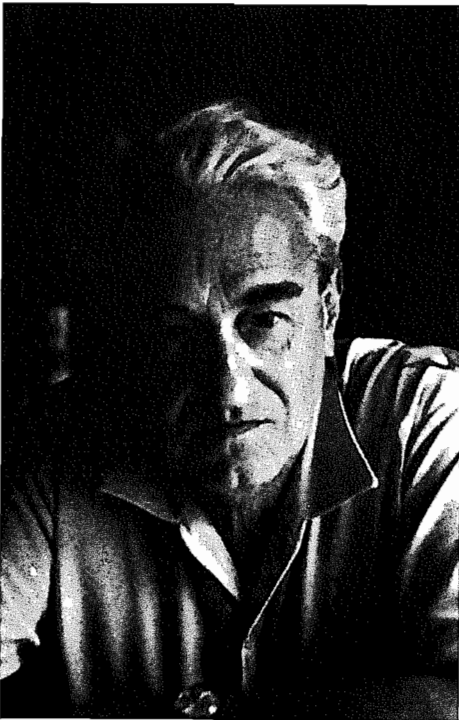
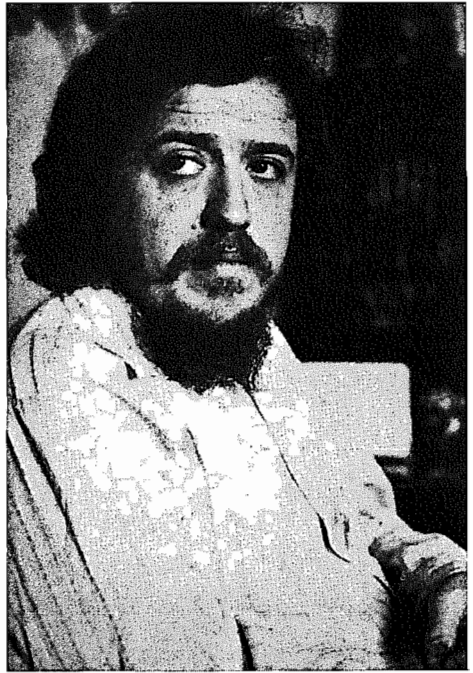


*Right* Titular abbot Akhila, once a member of the community at the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. He and a group of monks from the monastery are now campaigning to have the monastery re-opened (see document pp. 257-8).  
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*Left* Within the precincts of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. In 1929 this monastery was closed. During the war some of the monks were able to return, but in 1961 they were again expelled. Today it is treated as a museum by the Soviet authorities.  
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*Right* Dr Vaclav Benda, a Roman Catholic and former assistant professor of philosophy, who was named in February 1979 as a new spokesman for Charter 77. He is the author of a document printed on pp. 249-51. (© Palach Press.)



*Left* Jerzy Turowicz, editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, is the author of an important article (printed in this issue of *RCL* pp. 252-7) which was banned by the Polish censors. (© Keston College.)

Latvian Lutheran Churches cannot be taken as a sign that the Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union will be reorganized. What is significant, however, is that apparently small and weak churches are looking beyond their own immediate interests.

The medieval Teutonic knights considered that they were living on the "most extreme frontier" as the "bulwark of Christianity". For centuries the River Narva and Lake Peipus formed the boundary with the East which was considered heretical if not totally pagan. Later the Baltic region became – politically – a part of that East. The bulwark, the land bordering Rome and the West on the one hand, and Moscow and the Byzantine East on the other, became a kind of halfway-house, which retained its old ties and defensive attitudes. Whether this region can become a bridge between East and West, and whether Baltic Protestantism has anything significant to say to both West and East remains an open question.

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