

“Rebirth and Renewal” in the Latvian Lutheran Church

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The recent upsurge of religious dissent in the Baltic republic of Latvia is a somewhat unexpected phenomenon. Unlike its fervently Catholic neighbour Lithuania, Latvia has never been renowned for its religious loyalties, although before the war the majority of the population (56 per cent) were Lutherans.¹ Since the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union in 1940, Latvia has not been a centre of religious protest — even in the Latvian Baptist Church, for example, the “unregistered” wing has hardly any members. The Latvian Lutheran Church in particular has always remained quiet, subdued and willing to cooperate with Soviet laws on religion. In the last few years, however, an unofficial revival movement has been growing up among the Latvian Lutheran clergy; in 1987 it developed into a religious rights movement, thus coming into open conflict with the Soviet authorities, as well as its own church leadership.

From Revival Movement to Religious Rights Movement

This group of clergymen probably began to take shape as early as 1983 under the influence of certain lecturers at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, most of whom also work as pastors in ordinary parishes. The seminary rector, Dr Roberts Akmentinš, was sympathetic to their aim of bringing new life into the church, but perhaps the most active personality was one of the lecturers, the Rev. Modris Plate. At 36, Plate is one of the youngest Lutheran deans and probably one of the best-known clergymen in Latvia. Although his father was a clergyman, he himself decided to study theology in his late twenties after already obtaining a degree in nuclear physics. As pastor of Kuldīga and Edole, he attracted young people and intellectuals from all over the republic to his services and encouraged young men to study for the ministry. The crisis that developed in the Latvian Lutheran Church in 1987 was precipitated by the problems of one

¹E. C. Duin, *Lutheranism under the Tsars and the Soviets* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1976), Vol. II, p. 766.

such student — Maris Ludviks.

Ludviks completed his theological studies in 1985 but was having difficulty in being ordained, as he had attracted the dislike of the Soviet authorities by his religious activities among young people. During his theological course, he had been sentenced to a short term of imprisonment for allegedly “speculating in cars” and now the Council for Religious Affairs was putting pressure on the Lutheran church leadership not to ordain him. In March 1986 the Latvian Archbishop Matulis had just died and his successor, Eriks Mesters, had not yet been consecrated. Ludviks took advantage of this “gap” by asking the Lithuanian Lutheran Bishop Kalvanas to ordain him. Kalvanas agreed to do so but would not allow him to work in Lithuania, although there are a few Latvian parishes there. On his return to Latvia, Ludviks was asked by the Lutheran parish of Rucava to be their pastor. Archbishop Mesters did not object, but the Commissioner for Religious Affairs in Latvia, Eduards Kokars-Trops, refused to give Ludviks a licence, even after the Rucava congregation complained to the Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow.

On 7 January 1987, the Latvian newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne* (Soviet Youth) published an article attacking Maris Ludviks as a former juvenile delinquent and black-marketeer, stating that he had “an overwhelming love of money and a pathological dislike of work”.² At this point, the Rev. Modris Plate decided to come to the defence of his friend Ludviks. Together with four other leading Lutheran clergymen, he visited the offices of *Padomju Jaunatne* and handed in a letter protesting at its publication of a “rude and tendentious” article. The five clergymen accused the newspaper of ignoring “the new way of thinking repeatedly pointed out by the leader of our state, M. Gorbachev” and asked that it should take into account “the climate of complete openness in our society”³ by publishing their letter. *Padomju Jaunatne* did not publish the letter; however, it did have certain consequences. At the end of the month the Latvian Council for Religious Affairs informed Archbishop Mesters and the Lutheran Consistory that the Kuldiga Soviet had requested Pastor Plate’s dismissal. If the Consistory did not dismiss him, he would be deprived of his licence by the Council for Religious Affairs. The Consistory asked the Commissioner for Religious Affairs to reconsider his decision, which in itself showed how greatly respected Plate was in the Lutheran Church. In the four years that he had spent as pastor of Kuldiga, the number of church members had

² J. Pipars, “Bada laika velns pat mušas ed”, *Padomju Jaunatne*, 7 January 1987, p. 4.

³ A. Beimanis, J. Rubenis, M. Plate, J. Vanags and A. Vaickovskis, *To the Editorial Board of Padomju Jaunatne*, 8 January 1987.

risen from 300 to 450 and the number of communicants from 400 to 1200. In 1986 Plate held the largest annual number of services in the Latvian Lutheran Church — 223. He instituted very popular Bible study courses, during which the congregation even learnt some New Testament Greek, and carried out liturgical reforms in the services. He renewed the old practice of singing responsorial psalms, held special matins and vespers services and organised vigils, processions and concerts of religious music. He had also renovated the church building and installed central heating. Plate's popularity as a clergyman and his influence among other clergymen had not endeared him to the Soviet authorities, however, and his defence of Ludviks now provided a pretext for getting rid of him. The Council for Religious Affairs renewed its demands for Plate's dismissal and on 18 March 1987 the Lutheran Consistory agreed to suspend him from his duties as pastor of Kuldiga and Edole.

The Consequences of Plate's Suspension

Strictly speaking, the Council for Religious Affairs did not need the Lutheran Consistory's agreement to dismiss Modris Plate. If his licence was revoked by the state, his religious activities as pastor became illegal. It was, however, typical of the Latvian Lutheran Consistory's attitude to the state that they felt they had to dismiss Plate although they themselves had insisted to Commissioner Kokars-Trops that there was no reason for his dismissal. Since the war the Lutheran hierarchy in Latvia had earnestly avoided any disputes with the state authorities and had become accustomed to yielding on such matters for the sake of peace and quiet. In this case, however, the result was the exact opposite — though it was not the state authorities who objected but a significant section of the Lutheran clergy.

On 31 March the Archbishop and Consistory received two open letters, one signed by 19 Lutheran clergymen, the other by five, protesting against the dismissal of Dean Modris Plate — “an example to us for years”. They emphasise that during his ministry as pastor of Kuldiga and Edole Plate “spared neither effort nor energy, nor even his own financial resources”. He had built up “confidence, trust and respect” among the parishioners and had tried to establish normal relations with the Soviet authorities.

We simply cannot understand how unsubstantiated complaints signed by local officials (and nowadays the press clearly shows that illegal actions are commonplace in local administration) could result in such a severe and kow-towing reaction by the

Consistory . . . Try to imagine how we feel when, before our very eyes, we see one of the best clergymen in Latvia being punished and transferred to another parish, so that all the activities he established in the parish of Kuldīga are disrupted. His only fault is consistent and uncompromising service rendered to God and dedicated to the future of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia. It is painful indeed to see such goings-on undermine our faith in the Consistory. If injustice and lies are to win the day in the case of Dean M. Plate, then we must ask: which of us will be the next victim?⁴

The protesting clergymen accused the Consistory of paying no attention to the "democratic restructuring"⁵ taking place all over the Soviet Union and asked that its "unreasonable decision" should be revoked and that the charges made against Plate by the Kuldīga Soviet should be investigated carefully.

In addition, a petition protesting against Plate's dismissal and asking that he be allowed to stay was signed by 350 Lutherans from Kuldīga.

The Lutheran hierarchy was unused to receiving such petitions. Open protests from the Lutheran clergy, especially letters which reappeared in *samizdat*, had been almost unknown in the past. In addition, the clergymen who signed the two letters included a number of individuals who held influential positions in the Latvian Church: the rector of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Dr Roberts Akmentinš, four theological lecturers (J. Rubenis, J. Vanags, A. Beimanis and R. Feldmanis) and three out of 15 deans (K. Zviedris of Madona, A. Kaminskis of Selpils and A. Beimanis of Grobina), as well as leading pastors from Riga and two other large towns, Liepāja and Jelgava. The strong feelings aroused by Plate's dismissal led many Lutheran clergymen to pray publicly for him during services.

Modris Plate was also admired by Christians of other denominations. The Baptist activist Janis Rožkalns, who had just been released from a labour camp during the amnesties of spring 1987, signed the Kuldīga parishioners' petition for Plate's restoration and later visited Archbishop Mesters to ask if the appeals by clergy and laity on Plate's behalf would be taken into account before the Consistory confirmed his dismissal on 1 May. According to Rožkalns, the Archbishop replied that this would not be possible. He wished to thank those who had come to Plate's defence, which showed "that Dean Plate is honoured and loved by all, and that makes me happy. But there are

⁴ 19 Lutheran clergymen, *Letter to the Archbishop and Consistory*, 31 March 1987, p. 1.

⁵ 5 Lutheran clergymen, *Letter to the Archbishop*, 31 March 1987, p. 1.

authorities which we cannot ignore.”⁶

At the end of April the Kuldiga District Soviet repeated its accusations against Plate — that he was “inciting unrest” in the congregation and “provoking conflict” with the state authorities (in that he had once asked a representative of the Soviet, who would not identify herself, to leave a church meeting). Deputy chairwoman Barinova also stated that if foreign radio stations did not stop broadcasting about Plate, he would be subjected to attacks in the Soviet press. The Kuldiga parish council criticised the behaviour of the local Soviet as it was “in complete contradiction to the new policy of openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*)”, which they and their pastor supported.

The Consistory’s confirmation of M. Plate’s dismissal on 5 May was greeted with surprise and shock by the Kuldiga parish council, because of the Consistory’s failure to discuss their petition. They stated that they did not want another pastor. Dean Modris Plate himself stated that he would ignore the Consistory’s decision, as it was unchristian, could harm the congregation and was an unprincipled submission to the state. He would go on holding services in Kuldiga. He reproached Archbishop Mesters for being afraid to repeat in public what he had said in private — that he had nothing to rebuke Plate for in the religious sphere — and expressed his disapproval of the Consistory for basing their decisions on telephone calls from organisations outside the church.

Further protests against the Consistory’s decision followed. Twenty-two Lutheran clergymen called for a general Synod to discuss the question. The Latvian human rights group “Helsinki ’86” issued an appeal to signatory states of the Helsinki Agreement, drawing attention to the Soviet State’s unjust treatment of Modris Plate and Maris Ludviks, whose “crime” was “refusal to collaborate with the KGB and a wish to fulfil their pastoral duties conscientiously”. The five members of the Helsinki ’86 group considered that the Soviet authorities were demonstrating their “gross violation of freedom of religion” in thus “subjecting clergymen and ordinary Christians they dislike to discrimination, intimidation and isolation”.⁷

Archbishop Mesters and the Lutheran Consistory can only have become more nervous after such expressions of support for Plate. The Helsinki ’86 group has openly called for national and political rights for Latvia and an end to the “forcible occupation” of the country by the USSR. Their adoption of the dissident Lutheran clergymen’s cause could not have been welcome to the Consistory. However it may have

⁶ J. Rožkalns, *An Open Letter to Latvian Society*, 29 April 1987, p. 3.

⁷ “Helsinki ’86” Group, *Helsinki luguma parakstitaju valstu valdibam: iesniegums*, 14 May 1987, p. 2.

influenced the Consistory's offer to Plate on 3 June — that he should remain pastor of Kuldīga on certain conditions: if he “calmed down” the congregation, put an end to his “conflict” with the local Soviet, stopped defending Maris Ludviks and “unconditionally obeyed” the Archbishop. Modris Plate felt he could not agree to such conditions.

By now the question of Maris Ludviks was almost irrelevant. Ludviks, who was still being refused a licence to work as a pastor in Latvia, and was receiving no support from the Consistory, was already beginning to think of emigrating — and was being encouraged in this by the state authorities. The basic conflict between Plate and the Archbishop and Consistory was now over the question of dissent as such. The Consistory, faced with open opposition from its own clergy, was quite uncertain how it should deal with it. The reaction of the church leaders was governed above all by apprehensiveness about the state's reaction to such dissent among the clergy, in a church where previously it had hardly existed. Unfortunately the Consistory's instinctive response to the existence of dissent was not to start a dialogue with Plate and his supporters but to persist in punishing Plate and to announce that further protests would not be considered.

The “Rebirth and Renewal” Group

On 14 June, Modris Plate and 14 of the leading Lutherans who had been supporting him founded a formal group entitled “Rebirth and Renewal”, whose declared aim was “to defend openly the right of Latvians to lead a Christian life”. The members came from the same group of clergymen and theological lecturers who had been working for the renewal of the Latvian Lutheran Church for some years and had been trying to persuade the higher Lutheran clergy to adopt a more independent stance towards the state. Once again they included the seminary rector, Dr R. Akmentiņš, and two deans besides Plate. Among the five theological lecturers involved was the lawyer Janis Karkls, the only layman in the “Rebirth and Renewal” group, which is very much concerned with the law. In their founding document they urge the Archbishop and Consistory to ask the Council for Religious Affairs to “discuss, evaluate and eventually revise a few points in the Law on Religious Associations in the Latvian SSR that are no longer relevant to the real situation and that hamper the functioning of democratic processes in the church.”⁸ These “few points” include the issue of alternatives to military service for religious believers, religious instruction for children, legal rights for the church, the possibility of

⁸“Garīdznieku grupas ‘Adzimšanas un atjaunošanas’ dokumenti Nr. 1”, 14 June 1987, *Auseklis* No. 1, September 1987 (Stockholm, October 1987), p. 83.

religious radio and television programmes, the publication of more religious literature and the authorisation of religious activities in hospitals and old people's homes.

As the founders of the "Rebirth and Renewal" group themselves state, one of the main reasons for its formation was their wish to end the decline of their church and to renew its appeal to Latvians. Lutheran church membership has declined greatly from the pre-war figure of just over a million to about 350,000 in 1980.⁹ This is the official figure, but according to the "Rebirth and Renewal" group, only about 25,000 are regular churchgoers. Although a number of churches have been closed by the Soviet authorities (in 1940 there were 311 Lutheran parishes, compared with 214 in 1980),¹⁰ what the church really lacks is clergymen. Before the war there were 280 Lutheran pastors in Latvia; by 1945, due to the numbers deported by the Soviet authorities and those who fled or were deported westwards, there were only 66 pastors left. By the 1960s, when some pastors had returned from Stalinist camps, there were 110 working in parishes.¹¹ Because of the low quota of students permitted on the Lutheran theological courses, in 1980 there were about 100. At the same time, the submissive attitude of the Lutheran hierarchy to the Soviet authorities did not help to give the church a positive image among the Latvians. Maris Ludviks mentions the negative effect produced by the Lutheran Church's "thanksgiving services for the Great October Revolution", which to many people showed that the church was as hypocritical as the rest of society. The "Rebirth and Renewal" movement wanted to demonstrate "the truthfulness and credibility of the church in our society" by aiming at "Christian witness in a multitude of forms". This would include petitioning "the Church and government agencies in order to clarify and resolve questions affecting Christian life".¹²

The rise of "Rebirth and Renewal" within the Latvian Lutheran Church was not merely a religious phenomenon, however, but formed part of the national revival which was taking place in Latvia in 1986-88. The hopes aroused by Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy had led to an unprecedented expression of dissent and discussion of national issues in a republic where the native Latvian population fears the suppression of its own language and culture. This has given rise to "unofficial" groups of all kinds — not only the Helsinki '86 group, but also groups for the defence of the environment and national-religious youth groups, most of which are interested in greater national autonomy and a more truthful portrayal of history.

⁹ Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour* (London, 1982), p. 120.

¹⁰ Duin, *op. cit.*, p. 766; Beeson, *op. cit.* p. 120.

¹¹ Duin, *op. cit.*, pp. 834, 867-68.

¹² *The Basic Tenets of the Christian Rebirth and Renewal Movement*, September 1987.

Thousands of people took part in demonstrations organised by the Helsinki '86 group on 14 June 1987, to commemorate the Latvians deported to camps by Stalin, and on 23 August, to protest at the annexation of Latvia by the USSR in 1940 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Members of "Rebirth and Renewal" took part in these demonstrations and obviously had close links with Helsinki '86, though they have designated their own group as religious not political. However, they clearly feel a need to identify with the concerns of Latvian society. At the same time the Helsinki '86 group and the new Latvian *samizdat* journal *Auseklis* (Morning Star) have included religious freedom in their national-political aims. *Auseklis* published some of the documents issued by "Rebirth and Renewal" as well as an article entitled "The Latvian Lutheran Church at the Crossroads?"

The Reaction of the Lutheran Consistory and the State Authorities

The Lutheran Consistory, however, had no wish to identify itself with dissent — especially national or political dissent. The links of "Rebirth and Renewal" with such dissent deterred Archbishop Mesters, Dean Berzinš and other conservative members of the Consistory from trying to find a compromise with the non-conformist clergymen. Instead they decided to take severe measures against them. On 29 July, Modris Plate lost his post of dean and theological lecturer, as well as that of pastor. On 27 August, Dr Roberts Akmentinš was dismissed as rector of the Lutheran Theological seminary and Rev. Aivars Beimanis was deprived of his position as dean. Peteris Cielava, recently appointed to the Consistory, was dismissed from it. Janis Priednieks, pastor of Valmiera, was also removed from his parish.

The Consistory's action was followed by two protest letters from members of "Rebirth and Renewal" to the Latvian Christian community throughout the world and the Lutheran World Federation. Both letters strongly condemn the Consistory's dismissal of the clergymen concerned, who are described as "decent and morally upright pastors" whose greatest fault was "striving to serve God, the Church and their parishes without compromise and with a good conscience". Archbishop Mesters and the Lutheran leadership are criticised for punishing pastors who "took seriously the words of Christ as the Truth", while ignoring the behaviour of unworthy clergymen who hold few services and "fail to look after their congregation".¹³ The authors also deplore the Consistory's

¹³"Rebirth and Renewal" Movement, *Pazinojums (Document No. 2)*, 3 September 1987.

unfriendly attitude to the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement, which is trying to promote discussion of "urgent church problems" and to "renew the Church's integrity and credibility in the eyes of the people". The two letters accuse the Lutheran leadership of deliberately misrepresenting the movement as "harmful" and of ignoring protests sent to them "which are evidently consigned immediately to the waste-paper bin". Such protests included a petition by 45 students and lecturers of the Theological Seminary against the dismissal of Dr Akmentinš.

The signatories to the two documents had decided to appeal to world public opinion, "calling things by their real names at last",¹⁴ since internal complaints had been useless. Otherwise they would feel like accomplices of the church leadership, whose behaviour they describe as "criminally contrary to the interests of our church". They ask all Christians to pray that "the Spirit of Truth may triumph in our Church".

On Sunday 6 September, the 16 clergymen involved in "Rebirth and Renewal" read out these documents in all the forty parishes they served, calling for the revocation of the "unchristian and unlawful decisions" taken by the Consistory.

Precautions were taken by the Consistory to avoid further public protests by the clergy concerning the dismissal of Plate, Akmentinš and Beimanis. Theological courses at the seminary were temporarily suspended and a clergy conference in Riga, planned for October, was cancelled. Increasingly irritated by Rev. Plate's defiance and his refusal to leave Kuldiga, the Consistory attempted to appoint another clergyman, Ivars Murovskis, in his place. However, on his arrival in Kuldiga, Murovskis was told by the parish council that they still regarded Plate as their pastor and considered the Consistory's decision unjust. Dean Janis Berzinš, a well-known opponent of Plate's views, tried unsuccessfully to set up a rival Lutheran congregation in Kuldiga. The Consistory also attempted to replace Plate as dean with Rev. Arijs Viksnis, who was not in charge of any parishes in Kuldiga district and was therefore ineligible for the post according to church regulations.

The state authorities took their own measures against "Rebirth and Renewal". At one point Plate was threatened with call-up for renewed military training. At the end of September the Kuldiga parish council was summoned by the District Soviet and told that Plate could no longer act as a clergyman because he was a CIA agent. Earlier, they were told, he would have been sent away beyond the Urals, but this was being made more difficult by the present "democratisation"

¹⁴"Rebirth and Renewal" Movement, *Atklata vestule latviešu kristīgajai sabiedrībai pasaule, latviešu Ev. Lut. Baznīcai, pasaules lateranu federācijai*, 3 September 1987.

policy. Plate and the other members of "Rebirth and Renewal" were also subjected to attacks in the press. In an article "Pharisees without Masks" in *Padomju Jaunatne* (18 September 1987), "Rebirth and Renewal" is condemned for calling itself non-political when its aim is to change the law (although this is the Law on Religious Associations). Modris Plate and other clergymen are accused of enriching themselves by means of "rewards" from the West, of being nationalists and of having links with reactionary exiles. In addition they are said to be using black magic, freemasonry and karate to advance their cause. The newspaper also reveals the "secret plans" of theological lecturer Juris Rubenis to "bring about the fall of the Soviet system" by "dispelling the last Soviet myth" — Marxist-Leninist ideology.¹⁵

The parishioners of Kuldiga wrote to the paper to demand an apology. The gifts that Plate, like many other clergymen, received from Lutherans abroad "are used to maintain our Church and are not a reward for some service." The believers denied that Plate had ever "incited anyone to restore the bourgeois system" as the newspapers claimed: *Padomju Jaunatne* itself was betraying "a wish to restore Stalinism" by its methods of denunciation.¹⁶ In November 1987, representatives of the Kuldiga congregation visited the offices of *Padomju Jaunatne* to ask for an investigation into the allegations the newspaper had made against Plate. The editor, A. Cirvilis, refused to consider this, nor would he publish any reply to protests received about the article, as he claimed this could be "used" by Radio Free Europe.

Although the members of "Rebirth and Renewal" continued to urge the Archbishop to reconsider the dismissal of Plate, Akmentinš and Beimānis, and to agree to a serious dialogue with the clergy on the church's real problems, Archbishop Mesters still refused to do so. When visited in November by parishioners from Kuldiga, he insisted that if Plate wanted to continue working as a Lutheran pastor he must leave the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement and condemn its activities. When the "Rebirth and Renewal" group themselves visited him, he advised them to "arm themselves with patience", stating that the Consistory had been obliged to submit to "certain pressures" although he himself had not agreed with its decision. The "Rebirth and Renewal" group at this point apparently threatened to stop holding services in registered church buildings if the Consistory did not change its attitude.

The Archbishop and Consistory were now under pressure from three sides — from the "Rebirth and Renewal" clergymen and their supporters, from the Soviet authorities and from Lutherans abroad.

¹⁵ "Farizeji bez maskam", *Padomju Jaunatne*, 18 September 1987, p. 4.

¹⁶ The Kuldiga congregation, *Padomju Jaunatnes redakcijai*.

The Commissioner for Religious Affairs in Latvia, Eduards Kokars-Trops, was still describing the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement as "divisive, irresponsible and socially harmful" and condemning its contacts with "anti-Soviet and nationalistic" groups in Latvia, as well as "hostile and anti-Soviet ideological and ecclesiastical centres"¹⁷ in the West. The Council for Religious Affairs was threatening to deprive a number of the clergymen involved in the movement of their licences.

At the same time, Lutheran centres abroad, which had come to know of the dispute in Latvia, were making enquiries of the Archbishop and Consistory. During the Archbishop's trips to West Germany and the USA in 1987, embarrassing questions were asked by Latvian Lutheran émigrés. The General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Dr Gunnar Staalsett, visited Archbishop Mesters in Riga to discuss the matter.

The Significance of Glasnost'

The importance of the *glasnost'* policy in this situation should not be underestimated. As a result of the Soviet authorities' hints of forthcoming reforms in the laws on religion, the "Rebirth and Renewal" groups joined with Russian Orthodox and Lithuanian Catholic religious dissidents in issuing a series of suggestions for such changes in a letter to Mr Gorbachev on 11 September. These suggestions, which included a change in the Constitution to allow religious "propaganda" and presentation of the religious viewpoint in the Soviet media, probably went far beyond those actually being contemplated by the Soviet government. The members of the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement have constantly stressed their support for "openness", "restructuring" and "democratisation" as a justification for their actions. In a letter to the Archbishop on 24 September they denied that their requests to reexamine the laws on religion in the Latvian SSR could be condemned:

We have relied upon the decree of 30 June 1987, which calls for discussion by the whole nation of important national questions, and also upon the reality of the far-reaching democratisation now taking place in our land. We trust that the Soviet authorities are not being hypocritical towards the people.¹⁸

They refer to articles in *Literaturnaya gazeta* and *Moscow News* which discussed a possible reexamination of the laws on religion. At the

¹⁷Eduards Kokars-Trops, *Directive*, 23 November 1987.

¹⁸"Rebirth and Renewal" Movement, *Document No. 4*, 24 September 1987.

same time, the reaction of the Soviet authorities to the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement and to the general increase in dissent in Latvia was much milder than it would have been a few years earlier. Even the leader of the Helsinki '86 group, Linards Grantins, was given only a six-month sentence and then "encouraged" to emigrate; in December two members of "Rebirth and Renewal" — Maris Ludviks and Janis Karkls — also emigrated with the permission of the authorities, like Janis Rozkalns and certain other Latvian dissidents. A number of Latvian prisoners of conscience had been released in 1987, as part of a general policy in the USSR. Although a number of people had been arrested or beaten up after the demonstrations in June and August, none had been detained for long or put on trial. The authorities, faced with an unexpected upsurge of popular dissent in a republic which was probably thought to have outgrown it, were apparently unsure of how to proceed, most likely for fear of provoking a stronger reaction. A national demonstration on 18 November (the former independence day) was avoided by the militia blocking off the centre of Riga for the day; however in March 1988 an "official" demonstration led by the Latvian Writers' Union in memory of Stalin's victims was permitted at the national cemetery.

A decision to permit such concessions to dissenting groups may well have been taken over the New Year, as the official attitude to "Rebirth and Renewal" also changed at the beginning of the year. At a meeting of the Lutheran Consistory on 26 January 1988, Modris Plate was allowed to resume his duties as pastor in the Kuldiga parish,¹⁹ though he was not restored to his position as dean or theological lecturer. The Consistory's "stern reprimand" to Dr Roberts Akmentins was withdrawn: he is apparently to be allowed to lecture at the Lutheran seminary, although he was not restored to the position of rector. On 9 February, Modris Plate was given back his state licence by Commissioner Kokars-Trops, who spoke to him in a surprisingly friendly manner, free of the usual warnings and threats. He asked for an explanation of the aims of "Rebirth and Renewal" and claimed that changes in the laws on religion were being considered, hinting for example that churches might be allowed to run charitable institutions such as old people's homes. (Similar statements have been made to leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church recently.)

However, no such changes in the law have been announced so far and these overtures by the authorities to "Rebirth and Renewal" may simply be an attempt to split the Lutheran Church in Latvia, especially as the Commissioner permitted himself some surprisingly critical remarks about the "conservative attitudes" of Archbishop Mesters. The Commissioner's indication that a Lutheran journal might be

¹⁹Archbishop Eriks Mesters, *Letter to Dr Gunnar Staalsett*, 8 February 1988.

permitted could be an attempt to combat the new Latvian *samizdat* journal *Auseklis*, in which "Rebirth and Renewal" has published documents. The attitude of the authorities towards "Rebirth and Renewal" may yet also be affected by its members' links with nationalist dissent — for example, by the participation of Modris Plate and two other clergymen from "Rebirth and Renewal" in the funeral service of the well-known Latvian nationalist Gunnars Astra, recently released from prison.

Although it seems clear that the authorities are contemplating some change in the laws on religion, it is almost impossible to tell what changes will finally be permitted. In Latvia, an interesting indication of change may be the Consistory's appointment of the Rev. Uldis Saveljevs, pastor of the New St Gertrude Church in Rīga and a sympathiser with "Rebirth and Renewal", as "pastor of the youth movement" of the Lutheran Church in Latvia. Under the present law, a church youth movement is illegal. If it is to be officially tolerated, significant changes in the law may be contemplated. Any such changes in Latvia will certainly owe a great deal to the existence of the "Rebirth and Renewal" movement.