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Editorial

The Baltic States came late into the Soviet Union and remained in many respects only partially assimilated. In Soviet times Russians referred to them as '*nasha zagranitsa*', 'our abroad'. Despite the best efforts of the Soviet repressive machinery, spiritual and intellectual vitality persisted. The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania played a very important role in the resistance to the Soviet system. In Latvia and Estonia Lutheranism was less closely identified with the nation, having historically been the Church of the German landowners. Mikko Ketola argues that the weakness of the Lutheran Church in Estonia helps to explain why atheist education was relatively successful there; but it is also true that in Soviet times Estonia was known for its fertility for unusual creeds and philosophies, and Luboš Bělka describes how Buddhism took root in that republic. Meanwhile in Latvia, the focus of our attention in this issue of *RSS*, the Lutheran Church developed its role in shaping and preserving national identity partly as a response to Soviet persecution.

One option for Christians under communism in Latvia was to 'keep lower than the grass'. Aivars Beimanis tells us that as a young believer he thought that 'faith was a private and intimate part of one's personality, one which it was not necessary to advertise'. However, like the other pastors whose life stories are recorded by Māra Zviedre in this issue of *RSS*, he found himself witnessing and working, reading and teaching 'between the lines', defending young believers against discrimination, helping congregations to rebuild their churches. 'Persecution acted as a cleansing force on the Church,' says Archbishop Jānis Vanags. 'All that was false, redundant, ballast, fell away. Those who continued practising faith were those for whom it was a question of life or death – the most important issue of all.'

'I think it was much easier to be a Christian then than now,' concludes the archbishop.

Over the near years since the end of communism the Churches in Eastern Europe have had to lose the sense of uniqueness which, for better or worse, communism bestowed on them. They have been coming to resemble their counterparts in the West. They are now able to involve themselves in all the areas of public life which are familiar to western Churches; but they are all now minority bodies in a pluralist and increasingly secular world, and facing new problems.

There is a nostalgia for certainty. 'I think that in contemporary circumstances our Church would gain a great deal if it were able to unite behind a clear doctrine on the major issues,' says Archbishop Vanags. 'Often when I attend a pastors' conference I have the feeling that I am at an ecumenical assembly rather than at a meeting of our Church.' There is a tendency to suspect that liberalism, seen as of recent western origin, is a cloak for indifference or even hypocrisy. 'Those who shunned the Church in the old days are now sitting in the front pews,' observes the archbishop. 'Some of them are genuine believers, but others, for example, think it might be good for their career prospects to show themselves among the Christians ... In English this is called

“inclusiveness”. In short, the Church is being secularised.’

In communist times the Churches were involved in a continual struggle for the resources with which to build and teach. They are still poor. ‘It is not an enjoyable experience to be the leader of a beggar Church, having constantly to ask for money to do the most basic things,’ says Archbishop Vanags. It is quite understandable that Churches in postcommunist countries should resent the unwanted interference of foreign Churches with their huge technical and financial resources, fearing that assistance offered from a position of strength is necessarily going to involve enforced compromise.

Metropolitan Daniel of Moldavia has noted that for Churches which have only recently gained their freedom the priority will naturally be the regeneration of their own distinctive personalities and the rediscovery of their own histories. This is one of the themes addressed by Valdis Tēraudkalns in his article in this issue of *RSS*, ‘Latvian Baptist Traditions in Transition’. The same consideration was decisive in securing the election of Jānis Vanags as archbishop in competition with an ostensibly better-qualified, but foreign, opponent.

One of the greatest challenges to the Churches, then, in Latvia as in the rest of the postcommunist world, is that of the new freedom and the pluralism it implies. Frans Hoppenbrouwers observes that during the years of persecution ‘Church structures and mentality adapted to a life under and against oppression. Now other qualities like cooperation, dialogue, openness, shared responsibility, consensus and the will to make compromises are needed, but the psychological structure of many a clergyman and layman is not yet prepared for that.’ Hoppenbrouwers finds that the Churches have had less impact than many expected on postcommunist society. He finds one reason for this in the fact that they have been ‘romancing freedom’. Romancing means ‘to add interesting but untrue details to the facts in telling a story; to exaggerate’. ‘When the Churches were aspiring towards freedom they romanced it, not knowing what it would really be like. Now that they are accusing it as their main opponent, they are still romancing it.’

In this context, Churches East and West need to take seriously the business of learning from each other.

David Durston visited Latvia with the aim of discovering what the Churches in Great Britain and Latvia might have to teach each other in the specific area of bringing people to Christ. The interesting new insights he gained show that this kind of enterprise is of great value. Churches in the West clearly have something to teach those in Latvia about how to communicate with people brought up by television and advertising on the secular values of a modern market economy. On the other hand, Churches in the West can no longer assume a basic familiarity with Christianity among the population; this, however, is a reality with which the Churches in Latvia have had to live for decades. Here they have something to teach us.

In the postcommunist countries, says Tēraudkalns, ‘we are living in a liberating time when in the midst of creative and sometimes desperate tensions a new community is slowly emerging – the open society. Time will show whether an open Church, ready to take the risk of living with others and for others, will take its place in this society. Living in freedom is a dangerous responsibility, but it is the way in which we can live a fully Christian – that is, fully human – life.’

Notes on Contributors

Ringolds Balodis was born in Riga in 1966 and is a member of the Latvian Lutheran Church. He graduated in law in 1994. Since 1996 he has been director of the Department for Associations and Religious Affairs at the Latvian Ministry of Justice, and since 1997 assistant in the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia. His published works include a book on church-state relations and over 40 articles on religious subjects. In 1991 he was Karate champion of the Latvian Republic.

Luboš Bělka, born in 1958, is a senior lecturer at the Institute for the Study of Religions of the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. His main research interest is northern Buddhism, particularly the process of the restoration of that religion in Buryatia.

David Durston undertook research with the Grubb Institute into the local church in the community, before becoming vicar of St Paul's, West Bromwich, and later adult education officer of Lichfield Diocese. Since 1992 he has been chancellor of Salisbury Cathedral. He visited Latvia in 1994 to lead part of the first national lay education course there for 50 years, and in 1997 undertook the study visit to Latvia on which this report is based.

Nikandrs Gills is a researcher at the Academic Centre for the Study of Religions at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia.

Matthew Heise, the grandson of German immigrants from Russia, is studying at the Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St Louis. He was a missionary in Russia for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod from 1994 to 1996. While there he helped to set up the Brotherhood of St Serafim, an Orthodox-based initiative to help the homeless in Moscow, and since then has visited Russia every year to monitor its progress.

Frans Hoppenbrouwers, born in 1962, is a church historian working part-time for the relief organisation *Communicantes* in the Netherlands. *Communicantes* sponsors catechetical and pastoral projects and theological exchange programmes for the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches of Central and Eastern Europe.

Mikko Ketola is working for a doctorate in church history at the University of Helsinki. His dissertation *The Nationality Question in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, 1918–1939* is due to be published in spring 2000 by the Finnish Society for Church History. He has written articles on the religious situation in Ukraine since 1989 and on the history of the Estonian Orthodox Church in the twentieth century.

Solveiga Krūmiņa-Kopkova is the director of the Academic Centre for the Study of Religions at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia.

Valdis Tēraudkalns, a minister of the Latvian Baptist Church, has an MA in Theological Studies from Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary in the USA and is studying for a doctorate at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Latvia. He is a lecturer at the Academy of Culture in Riga and general secretary of the Latvian Bible Society.

Māra Zviedre was born in Riga in 1960 and has been active since her youth in the Latvian Lutheran Church. She attends the Jesus Church in Riga and edits the church newsletter. She works in the Diaconal Centre of the Lutheran Church where her main responsibility is translating educational materials from English and German.