

REFLECTIONS IN THE "INVISIBLE" RELIGION OF YOUTH: THE CASE OF LATVIA

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Latvia is one of three Baltic countries situated on the East coast of the Baltic Sea. After the 50-year occupation beginning with the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact, it regained independence when the Soviet Union collapsed. It has a unique mixture of religious traditions. The preponderant share of believers is found in the Evangelical Lutheran, the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox branches of Christianity. In addition to these three, there are viable groups of Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Russian Old Believers and Jews. During the Soviet Occupation all of these religious organisations experienced various rates of decline and atrophy. While much blame for the decline of religious practice and belief can be placed at the doorstep of organised and militant Soviet atheism, not all of its inroads and seeming victories are the result of its own actions and policies, but rather, can be found in the peculiar mix of Latvian history and the world-wide process of urbanisation and modernisation.

Religion in Latvia had never been deeply interwoven with nationality. There are several explanations for this. The lack of a homogenous religion among Latvians prevented the deep rooting of such an associative bonding. While three quarters of Latvia's territory was predominantly Lutheran, the south-eastern portion, the area of Latgale, was almost exclusively Roman Catholic, thanks to historical links with Lithuania and Poland.

Historical Background

The historical legacy of the way Christianity was first established left its mark on the consciousness of the nation. Twelfth century German crusaders successfully conquered the Latvian tribes and imposed Christianity with the help of the sword. These Conquerors imported a complicated and alien Christian ideology, judicial and political systems. Crusaders became the new masters and landlords of the Latvian territories and they ruled many centuries thereafter with the help of a German or Germanised clergy. Christianization was superficial with the peasant population continuing to adhere to their beliefs in local gods and deities. At another crucial period of history the Lutheran clergy passed up the chance to national support. The movement of national awakening which set in motion the rapid growth of Latvian cultural consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century did not attract notable religious figures except in the case of Catholic clergy in Latgale. The reason for this difference was the contrasting relationship of the Lutheran and the Catholic clergy with the peasant population. After the Reformation, clergy in the now Lutheran regions of the country continued to follow the traditional practice of aristocratic self-isolation from the indigenous peasant population. The situation was different in Catholic Latgale, where the Jesuit Counterreformation managed to fuse Catholicism with local indigenous religious beliefs. P. Einhorn, Lutheran general superintendent of the Kurland region of Latvia in the middle of the seventeenth century, reported that

Latvian peasant held to Catholicism. Although the priests had gone for a while, they

remembered them, and if they heard of the death of a priest, they cried bitterly. If asked why they did that, they could not give any good reason. No one ever mentioned that the Catholic priests had been opposed to their pagan beliefs. But they did mention the many religious holidays they had had in Catholic times, they also mentioned that in time of war, soldiers treated the subjects of Catholic priests well. Thirdly, the Catholic priests were well-to-do people and did not make any material demands on the peasants. (Quoted in Dunsdorfs and Spekke, 1964: 376)

In Latgale, the Catholic clergy had gained much sympathy from the people for their active leadership in the creation of a new Latvian-Latgalian political elite in the 19th century. The Lutheran clergy, on the other hand, were more sympathetic to the interests of the German landholding elite than to the stirrings of Latvian cultural nationalism.

During the two decades of the period of independence (1918-1940), the two main churches generally became integrated into national life. This new bonding was seriously checked by the deportation to Siberia and subsequent flight of clergymen and tens of thousands of the most prominent and active citizens and members of congregations to the West. The strict imposition of anti-religious laws by Communist rulers seriously damaged the interaction between organised religions and the nation. Nevertheless, a certain contrast developed between the anaemic Lutheran church and the more vital Catholic church. It seems probable, that the early historical bonding of the Catholic church with the people allowed for much greater Christian self-identification during trying times. The Lutherans, on the other hand, lost their Christian identity to a greater degree, replacing it with a mixture of paranormal and occult ideas and beliefs akin to the folk religion of earlier centuries.

Latvia had to a great extent been isolated from Europe, but, nevertheless, the secularisation which was imposed on it by the Soviets, parallels a trend toward secularisation that was developing in Europe. Secularisation theory posits that the importance and the role of religion declines with modernisation. Religious beliefs weaken and religious practices such as church attendance and prayer are abandoned when education undermines the intellectual basis of religion and the welfare state replaces the charitable functions of the church. Religion is seen as an anachronistic throwback to the pre-modern era, and churches as physical artefacts of a dying and outdated culture. With the highly notable exception of Ireland, most European countries have followed this trend toward secularisation. (Alston, 1975) In terms of religious belief and behaviours, Europeans have become less overtly religious. But what about Latvia?

Sociological approach

An initial study of the religiosity of Latvian high-school students was launched by the Theological Faculty of the University of Latvia in the fall of 1996, using the methodology already tested by sociologists at the University of Uppsala. The point of the study was to determine not what scientists think the religious convictions of the people are, but what the people themselves actually think. A total of 763 students completed the questionnaire for the pilot study. To measure the student's views on paranormal phenomena, there were 11 statements in the questionnaire. The interviewees could choose from five alternatives: "Totally agree," "Partly agree," "Partly disagree," "Totally disagree," "Don't know." The questions regarding religious ideas can be characterised as questions concerning superstition, reincarnation, psychokinesis, astrology, belief in the existence of UFO's, spiritism, telepathy, and precognition

or clairvoyance.

These statements are, of course to Christian dogma, and maybe not even religious. Then the question is, how do students see their religious identity? Do they consider themselves to be religious? How do young people answer the traditional religious question regarding belief in a supernatural power? Has the youth left a traditional religious orientation in favour of the field of the paranormal? Further, how does the religious orientation of Latvian youth compare to that of youth in other Western countries?

Sixty six percent of young Americans think that there is a personal God. In Sweden and Denmark the corresponding figure is 19 percent, but in Latvia, 64 percent. Twenty-six percent of Americans and 39 percent of Danes and Swedes believe in some sort of spiritual life force. (Cf. Smith, 1989: Tab.1) However, no respondents to the survey of Latvian youth stated that they believed in an impersonal divine force. The response, "I don't know," was typical (35 percent). Is the personal God that 64 percent professed to believe in an earlier response to be understood in Christian terms? There was an evident difference between the response from youth in the Catholic region of Latgale as compared to the Lutheran regions of Latvia. Forty-two percent of Latgalians identified themselves as "religious and confessing Christians" while only two percent of the students from the Lutheran rural region identified themselves as Christians. Thirty percent of inhabitants of cosmopolitan and multi-confessional city of Riga stated that they belong to Christian religion. The situation where the urbanised region of Riga is more religious than rural Lutheran portion seem atypical for Northern Europe. In Sweden of the youth in "Bible-belt" rural areas (Varnamo) 77 percent chose the response, "I am a religious and confessing Christian." In the more urbanised regions (Falun, Pitea, Stockholm) only 9, 3, and 12 percent respectively chose this response.

One can assume that the majority of students responding to the survey in the Lutheran regions of Latvia (62 percent) and 23 percent of the youth in Catholic Latgale accept a non-Christian God. However, their statements in this regard do not confirm this speculation. Only two percent in the Catholic region, three percent in multi-confessional Riga and two percent in the Lutheran rural region responded affirmatively to the statement "I belong to a non-Christian religion." Evidently, the rest are confessing a kind of "invisible religion."

"Invisible religion"

According to factor analysis proposed by M. Truzzi (Truzzi, 1974:246) the eleven statements in the questionnaire fall into three dimensions. The first dimension contains items that would typically characterise the occult. These include the following statements: "There are human beings who can establish contact with spirits of the deceased," "There are human beings who can foretell the future," "In dreams you can foresee what will happen in the future," "One can get premonitory signs of what will happen in the future," "There are people who can read other people's minds," and "There are human beings who are able to move objects by mental force. In other words, this dimension contains statements concerning phenomena related to spiritism, clairvoyance, telepathy and psychokinesis.

The second dimension centres around the statements concerning reincarnation, belief in UFO's and spiritism. ("When you die, you are born again after some time in a different body." "There are extra-terrestrial beings who sometimes visit Planet Earth, e.g. UFO's, and "There are dead

people who can come back as ghosts.") Since these are all categories about getting in touch with living individuals on this planet, this dimension is called the encounter dimension.

Research done in Sweden revealed an evident difference ($p > 0.05$) between youth from the "Bible-belt" city of Värnamo and from other more urban areas, in the respect that the "Bible-belt" youth agreed to a lesser extent with the statements on paranormal issues than did the others. The special ideological environment in which the "Bible-belt" youth were brought up may be a reason for the fact that these students are less inclined to believe in paranormal phenomena. Put differently, these young people are not as open to the diversity on the ideological market. This is not the case in Latvia. Eighty-eight percent of the Latvian "Bible-belt" (the Catholic region of Latgale) students gave affirmative answers to at least one of the statements having to do with the occult dimension (the highest rating from seven statements was selected. The corresponding figure in Sweden was 55 percent and in France, 42 percent. (Cf. Boy, Daniel and Michelat, Gui, 1986: 175-204).

The sociological data could be interpreted as follows: the fusion of pre-Christian folk-beliefs with Catholicism managed to create a stable religion in the region, but 50 years of Communist attack on religion retarded this development as compared to neighbouring European countries. Put differently, the niche of theological education in people's consciousness was filled with paranormal ideas, which were as similar to ancient folk beliefs. While 88 percent of students in the Catholic region responded positively to questions regarding the occult, 81 of students from cosmopolitan Riga indicated belief in such ideas, but 92 percent of students in traditionally Lutheran cities. A similar pattern appears in the answers to the questions concerning the "encounter dimension". In the Catholic region, the positive response is 53 percent; in Riga, 57 percent, and in the Lutheran region, 61 percent. The Swedish average rate of positive response is 32 percent; the French, 29 percent

Astrology is a popular hobby in Sweden. According to a pilot study conducted by Ulf Sjödin at the University of Uppsala, nine out of ten students read horoscopes to some extent. More than half of the respondents read horoscopes often or always. But reading horoscopes does not measure belief in them. From the Scandinavian point of view, a reasonable explanation of the interest in horoscopes could be that the individual sees the world as fairly safe and the reading of horoscopes is merely positive feedback for an already optimistic out-look on the world. The Latvian context for such interest is quite different.

Sixty-four students out of a hundred actually believe in horoscopes in Catholic region, of Latvia, 78 percent in the Lutheran region and 63 percent in Riga. Horoscopes could be considered as a kind of psychological encouragement in the economically insecure post-Communist society, but there is a possible religious explanation as well. The inadequate religious instruction of the traditionally religious society of the Catholic region led to a new amalgam of Christian beliefs with non-Christian beliefs. One of the crucial features of the Western branches of Christianity is their permanent innovation, leading to "paradigm change." Even isolated from outer world, the Christian mind was looking for available elements to accommodate Christianity to the surrounding limited social and cultural milieu. For example, a Catholic priest from Latgale informed the author that his parishioners had asked him to celebrate solemn Mass using the red liturgical colour on every Soviet First of May.

During Soviet times not only religious instruction was prohibited, but interest in the occult was

also not tolerated. Consequently, many people associated astrology with the manifestation and proof of the omnipotence of the Christian God. The religious landscape of Latvia after six years of independence is a peculiar mix of Tridentine overtones in Church worship, observance of outdated Catholic holidays, novenas, and fasting. In Lutheran regions, the vacuum in the religious mind has been filled with paranormal perceptions because of the traditional ambivalence of Latvians toward the Lutheran Church, on the one hand, and contact with "modern" West-European, post-Christian trends, on the other. For this reason, the positive response to questions related to the dimension of astrology is considerably higher in the Lutheran region than in the Catholic one.

Morality, ethics and society.

The high rate of criminality in Latvia caused by the difficult economic conditions and unemployment prompted the study to examine the role religion plays in promoting morality. Durkheim argued that by establishing a supernatural judge of personal behaviour, religion encourages people to follow high and rigid moral standards and thus acts as an effective agenda of social control (Phadraig, 1986) Attitudes about sin are both the product of one's religious orientation and a strong predictor of attitudes towards socio-moral issues. Measures of personal morality were employed already in 1985 in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey as well as in Ireland and in the European Value surveys. Using BSA data, Johnson and Wood, in line with Durkheim's prediction, that religious people were more moral than atheists. (Johnson and Wood, 1986; Johnson, 1988) Similarly, Mols found in Australia that high standards of personal morality were concentrated among those actively involved in traditional religion. (Mols, 1972)

In the Latvian study an item that would probe reasons behind moral judgements was introduced into the questionnaire: "Do you consider that sin is an out-of-date term, expressing unsolved psychological/medical problems?" One of five Latvian students gave positive answer to the question, whereas one out of ten Latvians stated they were convinced atheists. Moreover, there is a mysterious gap of 19 percent between those not accepting the liberal interpretation of sin and those affirming their Christian identity (36 percent). The corpus of Latvian pre-Christian religious texts "Dainas" makes no mention of this Jewish-Christian religious term. My hypothesis is that the relict Jewish-Christian morality is pre-Soviet remnant of earlier Christianity, but its possible motivation can be non-Christian perceptions, borrowed from New Religious Cults, at least in part.

Burnham (Burnham, 1981) has argued that American religious convictions have profoundly affected the political system by helping to suppress the formation of a Socialist movement. Rather than being allied with the elite against the masses, Burnham argues that religion in America was both a socially integrating and attractive alternative to socialism for the working class. The opposite situation existed in pre-war Latvia, where Christianity was an element of the establishment, while the genuine "religion" of the masses was socialism or militant nationalism with totalitarian overtones. Today sociological research shows that the Roman-Catholics are ready to participate in public life in order to harmonise society with Christian principles. Protestants are quite reserved in this respect. At the same time, 25 percent of students think that society is an evil which should be avoided in every possible way. This "sacramental" figure of 19-25 percent seems to be the potential of "invisible youth religion" whose future impact on society is difficult to predict.

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