

Overview of State of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia • Ukraine
in the Countries Where ITEM Serves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latvia • Lithuania
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Russia



Ukraine

Latvia



Lithuania



This Christmas season we are delighted to know that for the most countries of the former Soviet Union are still open to the Gospel and theological education. ITEM has seen such tremendous growth in its 10+ years of existence and it has sought to make the most of the opportunities to theological education there. We are very thankful to the Lord Jesus Christ for allowing us to be used as a tool for setting up and supporting Christian schools providing sound biblical teaching and finances.

It is imperative, however, to recognize that the doors of opportunity most probably will not stay open forever. In fact, in several countries of the former Soviet Union it has already become increasingly more difficult for Christian missions both to work and to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Be mindful of the events that transpired there in the last decade and how it affects the Church in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe and our ministry.

History Bits

Russia was originally a pagan nation, but adopted Christianity under Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988. Russia's baptism laid the foundations for the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1448, the Council of the Russian higher clergy elevated Bishop Iona of Ryazan to the cathedra of the Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia, independently of Constantinople, making the Russian Orthodox Church autocephalous. Since then the Russian national identity was so deeply rooted in Orthodox Christianity that the Reformation was never able to fully reach and take its root in Russia. The early years of the Soviet regime were particularly trying for the Church in Russia. A decree of 1918 separated the church from the state and school. As a result, all church organizations lost the powers of legal entity and the right to own property. Many church buildings and relics were destroyed. The Church also suffered atheistic infiltration as the newly uncovered KGB archives indicate: many bishops and high church officials were commissioned agents of the state. Sadly, many of them remain in power even today.

In the late 1980s, with attempts launched to restructure the country's economic and political system, major changes were made in the relationship between the state and the Church in the hope of revival. The millennium of Christianity in Russia in 1988 was celebrated on a grand scale. 1,610 new religious communities, most of them of the Orthodox belief, were registered in the country that year.

In 1990, a series of laws were passed on the freedom of religion, under which many of the existing restrictions were removed from religious communities, allowing them to step up their activities.

Today

Religion plays a prominent role in the public and spiritual life of today's Russia. It always has. The culture is permeated with Christian sayings and aphorisms. For example, the word Sunday literally means "Resurrection" and "Thank You" in Russian is derived from an old phrase "May God Save You". After the fall of Communism the spiritual void in people's hearts needed to be filled. The social and political conditions, such as collapse of the Communist ideals, newly found freedoms of democracy and globalization, appealing Western lifestyle and ideas, including Western evangelicalism – all contributed to the openness to the Gospel and theological education. Russia was welcoming outsiders who could help them establish churches and teach them theology.

Yet this is no longer the case. Socially, Russia has moved further away from the Center of Europe and is now becoming a Moscow-centered system, just like in the imperial czarist Russia. Politically, it has become a power to reckon with again, especially after Sep 11 and the oil crisis, which allowed Russia to gain power and influence it has not had since 1970's. Religious freedoms have been slowly but steadily restricted for all religious groups, except the Russian Orthodox Church, which is heavily favored by the state. For example, as of September 1, a new subject has been introduced in public schools, the Fundamentals of the Orthodox Culture, often taught by an Orthodox priest, yet Commission and other religious organizations can no longer work in public institutions, including schools, as before.

Some members of Russian Duma (Parliament) openly state that "sects are extremist groups which create mechanisms of psychological influence on people." They say that it is in the interest of national security to make laws stricter in the area of religious and non-profit activity. A recent law now impedes the foreign sponsorship of religious non-profit organizations and church groups. Literally this means that non-profits' bank accounts are now monitored by the state and must be independent from the Western influence. The work of foreign missionaries is getting more and more difficult. Fewer and fewer are able to get their religious worker visas. Some are being accused of being instigators or spies. Another law of 1997 dictates that a religious organization can legally register only after it has existed for 15 years. In many cases, the local authorities interpret this law in a very particular way that prohibits many legitimate organizations from registering. One prime example is the Salvation Army which is centrally registered with the Russian Federation, and yet in many regions it has not been permitted to function because it is viewed as a para-military organization. A recent addendum to the law of 1997 would even further restrict religious freedoms and the work of missionaries, if it is signed into law.

But even socially, Western-style Christianity has become much less attractive. People are getting tired of easy believism coupled with little follow-up and discipleship. They need someone who is there to stay long haul and invest their lives in the culture. Commitment is the key word here.

Religious groups

The majority of Russia's population has no religious affiliation due to the antireligious ideology of the Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox Church has about 60 million adherents; the numbers have grown rapidly since the end of Soviet rule. There are also large communities of Old Believers, a group that broke with the Orthodox Church in the 17th cent. Other religions include other Christian churches, various sects of Islam, Lamaist Buddhism, Judaism, and neopaganism. Partly in reaction to proselytizing by Protestant evangelicals, Mormons, and others, a 1997 Russian law granted superior status to the Russian Orthodox Church (and other older Russian religions). Statistically, the majority of believers belong to the Orthodox Christian denomination. With nearly 5,000 religious associations and over 5,000 churches, the Russian Orthodox Church accounts for over a half of the total number registered in Russia. Next in numbers come Moslem associations, over 1,000, Baptists, 450, Seventh Day Adventists, 120, Evangelicals, 120, Old Believers, over 200, Roman Catholics, 200, Krishnaites, 68, Buddhists, 80, Judaists, 50, and Unified Evangelical Lutherans, 39. Some statisticians estimate the percentage of believers at 40 per cent of the entire Russian Federation. Close to 9,000 communities belonging to over 40 confessions had been officially registered in the country.

The nineteen million Muslims, the second largest religious community in Russia, have over 800 parishes and mosques. Buddhism is widespread in the Far East. The Russian Federation has 42 Jewish communities, with three synagogues in Moscow. The two million Protestants have 1,150 communities; of these about 60% is Charismatic. Around 15,000 religious organizations are currently active in Russia, although only less than two-thirds of them are registered. Protestants have gained the most churchgoers since the Iron Curtain fell and they remain the most faithful in attendance of all Russian believers.

Religious Freedom

Believers of Christian confessions other than the Russian Orthodox Church are increasingly discriminated against in Russia. There is also an increase in the negative attitude towards Muslims in Russia.

The government earmarks substantial sums to the Russian Orthodox Church while other confessions are denied financial aid. Money to build religious edifices is allocated from the federal and local budgets overwhelmingly to the Russian Orthodox Church. Today we see that the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church drives around in Mercedes and is provided with a federal security service at the expense of taxpayers. According to the constitution, Russia is a secular state, where all religious groups are equal before the law. Yet the rights of religious groups are regularly violated. The authorities frequently create obstacles for many of these groups to rent out or buy premises to practice their faith. Lately, visas have also been denied to an unusually large number of foreign religious representatives. There has been a tendency to forbid joint prayer with foreigners of the same confession. Only in the past few months, many foreign representatives of various confessions have been denied entry in Russia.

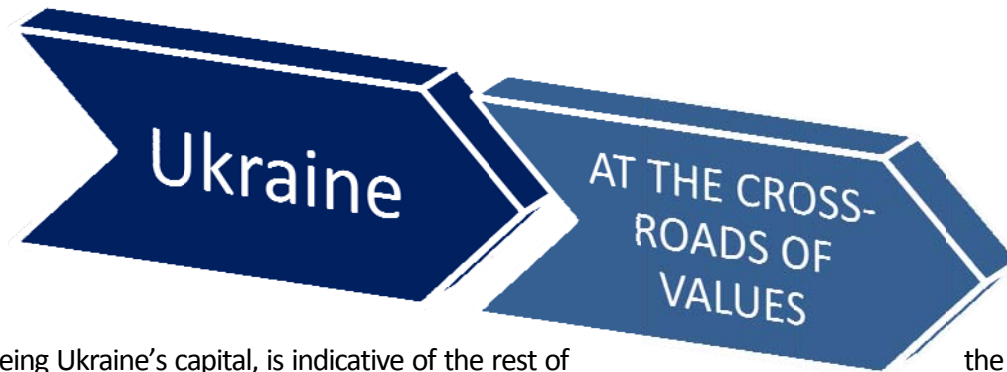
There is also an emerging sign of growing religious intolerance, Baptist churches and synagogues have been vandalized in Russia in recent years. Hate crimes increased and the country now numbers over 50,000 skinheads.

Open Still

Despite of all these reports and setbacks, Russia is still open to Christianity and theological education. The Russian culture holds education in highest esteem and that is precisely what Reformed faith and the mission of ITEM is about: equipping reliable Christian leaders in sound biblical doctrine – this requires high level of education, theological depth, and long term commitment. It also lays a foundation for the future of the nation because we are investing into the lives of future Christian leaders who will apply it in their lives and will in turn teach others the biblical doctrines of truth.

God is at work in Russia just as He was a thousand years ago. He is involved in the culture with deepest Christian roots. God never fails to be present to His people, with or without our help. Yet, He invites us to join faithfully in His work that will bear its fruit in this generation and in generations to come.

(In researching for this article the following sources were consulted: Library of Congress Country Studies, Open Book Systems, RussianEmbassy.org, www.christianitytoday.com,, Nezavisimaya Gazeta., news.bbc.co.uk: country profiles, washingtonpost.com.)



Intro

Kiev, being Ukraine's capital, is indicative of the rest of the country. In a piercing description someone has observed that the decrepit concrete of its massive housing blocks humbly admits the failure of communism; the cross-topped, golden onion domes of its monasteries and churches tell of ancient traditions and staying power of national beliefs; the brassy new casinos and strip-bars boldly announce that the free market has liberated once-repressed vices. Today, more than a decade after Ukraine declared independence from a splintering Soviet Union, Kiev is a cross between Chicago of the 1920's and Rome of the Avignon Papacy – replete with ruthless gangsters and hard-eyed cops, scheming clergymen and angry churchgoers, nouveau-riche businessmen and struggling workers, corrupt officials and simple citizens. This curious jumble is mixed with nostalgia for security that the Soviet era provided and a sense that the future is up for grabs.

History Bits

The word "Ukraine" means borderland, and for centuries Kiev was the capital of a buffer state on the edge of the Russian and Soviet empires. A legend says that the Apostle Andrew sailed up the Dnieper from the Black Sea and preached to the tribesmen, predicting a powerful, holy city where he erected a cross– the site where the Church of St. Andrew now stands. Another legend has it that at the end of the 9th century, the relics of Pope St. Martin, exiled to the territory of today's Ukraine by the Greek Emperor of Constantinople (654–655), were retrieved by brothers from Macedonia, Saints Cyril and Methodius, while passing through "borderland" on their mission to the Khazars of today's Russia. They lay the foundation of Christianity in Ukraine by creating an alphabet, known as "Cyrillic" which enabled the local population to worship God in Slavonic, then the common language.

As with most Europeans, Ukrainians were originally a pagan nation of idol worshippers. In 988, Prince Vladimir the Great of Kiev accepted Orthodox Christianity and brought the entire country under the influence of the Byzantine Empire. The period was characterized by mass baptisms and conversions to Christianity. The introduction of the Orthodox Christianity to Ukraine came at a time when understanding of the Scriptures was limited. They accepted the god of Christianity but still clung to many of their pagan traditions, resulting in a syncretistic merging of the two. For instance, characteristics of Perun, a Pagan god of war, thunder and lightning, found their way into the Biblical character of Ilya (Elijah). Thunder and lightning were said to be caused by the rumbling of the wheels of his chariot as it hurtled across the skies heralding Ilya's approach.

In later centuries, pieces of Ukraine were devoured by the Russian, Polish, and Austro-Hungarian empires. However, most of the territory remained with the Byzantine Patriarch's Eastern Orthodoxy following the great East-West Schism (1054). While most ethnic Ukrainians remained Orthodox, since 1598 the Eastern Rite Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church claimed significant membership in Western Ukraine. Roman Catholicism is predominantly practiced by non-Ukrainian minorities, like Poles and Hungarians. These

parishes remain mostly empty after the WWII due to the fact that much of the Polish population was killed in the war and interethnic violence caused forcible evacuations and deportations.

In the 16th century, small groups of Anabaptists appeared in Western Ukraine, but the influence of the Reformation in Ukraine remained marginal. Protestantism arrived in Ukraine together with German immigrants in the 18-19th centuries. They were initially granted religious freedom by the Russian Imperial authorities, unlike the native population. While some were Roman Catholic, the majority were either Evangelical (Lutheran) or Mennonite (Anabaptist). Of the 200,000 or so Germans in 1900, about 90% were Lutheran. Lutheranism went into a major decline during the World Wars as Germans left the region but there are still small remnants today near Odessa and Kiev.

In 1924, Ukraine came under the Soviet rule. Initially the Soviets allowed and encouraged the Autocephalous Orthodox Church (formed in the 1920's) but soon suppressed it and only the Russian Orthodox Church was permitted to survive, since it was easier to control one state-sanctioned religion than to permit the existence of many. In addition, the Russian Church proved useful in rallying people against the Nazis, and the power of Kiev's religious heritage was impossible to deny. Even the upraised sword of the statue of victory on the monument to the Great Patriotic War (WWII) could not be taller than the tallest tower of Percherska Lavra, a medieval monastery, on the hills overlooking the Dnieper.

In 1988, with the millennium anniversary of Christianity in Ukraine, there was a drastic shift in the Soviet attitude towards religion coinciding with the Perestroika. The Soviet Government publicly apologized for oppression of religion and promised to return all property to the rightful owners. As a result thousands of closed religious buildings in all areas of the USSR were being returned to their original owners, and squabbles among different religious groups grew into violence but subsided somewhat after the Russian Orthodox Church raised its Ukrainian Exarchate to the status of an autonomous church in 1990. This left three major Ukrainian Orthodox church bodies coexisting and often competing: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate), formed in 1991, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. However, the differences are purely political rather than doctrinal and Orthodox Christianity remains the main religion of Ukraine today.

Although antipathy among the three main groups remains virulent, the split may ultimately benefit Ukraine. After all, it has undercut efforts to establish a state religion that would play into the hands of the country's hard-line nationalists. But unification remains unlikely. At a time when many Ukrainians are trapped between the failed promises of Marxist utopianism and harsh realities of Western materialism, the Orthodox Church is in a position to offer the best aspects of tradition. But the church's internal strife undermines faith in that tradition and undercuts its ability to help alleviate the spiritual anxiety and economic suffering brought on by the painful transition to a democratic, free-market society.

To make matters worse, during the Soviet times many high-ranking priests provided information to the KGB. Nevertheless, this carries little weight in a society that has not forgotten that opposition to the old regime could mean death or imprisonment or the cutting off of one's livelihood. There was an understanding among people that they believed what they believed privately, but that they would say and do what they had to say and do in order to survive. Perhaps because of this, many believers are removed from the struggles of orthodox leadership.

Today

Today many Ukrainians own a Bible, but few read it and most struggle to understand it, since little effort has been made to explain its message. In addition, Communist atheism has had a strong effect on the people of Ukraine: at universities, besides an enormous number of ideological subjects, there was also a mandatory course on 'scientific atheism.' The subject was designed to prove that there was no God. Anyone who wanted to reach success in their career was forced to pronounce themselves an atheist. Religion was seen as the most serious obstacle to building Communism. For many, this led them to believe that though there is a god, he is more readily found in other religious circles than their own.

Religions in numbers

The Russian Orthodox Church has some 6,500 parishes, according to the State Committee on Religious Affairs. The Kiev Patriarchate claims 1,300, and the Autocephalous Church about 1,200. Besides Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, there are Ukrainian Catholics, Protestants and Jews as well as a number of minority religious groups. A recent poll revealed the following numbers of people associating themselves with a

particular group: Ukrainian Orthodox (Kiev Patriarchate) - 19%, Orthodox (with no particular jurisdiction) - 16%, Ukrainian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) - 9%, Ukrainian Greek Catholic - 6%, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox 1.7%, Protestant 6.6%, Jewish 0.9%, Jehovah Witnesses 2.3%, Muslim 0.5%, none 38%, (2004 est.). Average church attendance for Catholics is 10% and is even less for the Orthodox.



Information on the numbers of officially registered religious communities taken from official statistics of the State Committee of Ukraine on Religious Affairs.

Paganism

There has been a new surge of neo-paganism in the past 15 years with Ukraine's new found nationalism and independence. Some say a thousand years ago, Christianity was forced upon Ukrainians, and they now

need to go back to their roots, their old way of life and their old gods. A new study completed in 2005 took a close look at the resurgence of neo-paganism (a.k.a Ukrainian Native Faith). The author of the study, Adrian Ivakhiv, says that pagan traditions and folk customs have never really disappeared. The Christianization adapted to existing practices, resulting in syncretism. There are many neo-pagan groups in Ukraine that are focusing on ethnic nationalism. Most of the groups are accepting a set of writings called

the Book of Veles as their scripture, seen as embodying the historical memory of the Ukrainian people, its “covenant” with its gods, its ancestors, and its land. Considering growing nationalism, coupled with the disillusionment of materialism and dissatisfaction with the organized church, neo-paganism is likely to continue to grow.

Protestantism

Protestantism, which has had some presence in Ukraine since at least the 16th century, was preached mostly by foreign visitors and settlers. While this situation has changed somewhat in recent decades, Protestants in today's Ukraine remain a relatively small minority.

It grew rapidly during the liberal reforms of Alexander II, Tsar of Russia, in the 1860's. Shortly thereafter, however, the authorities started to restrict Protestant proselytism of Orthodox Christians, routinely preventing prayer meetings and other activities. During the Soviet period Protestantism, together with Orthodox Christianity, was persecuted, but the 1980's marked the start of another major expansion of Protestantism in Ukraine.

Today, the largest Protestant groups in Ukraine include Baptists (All-Ukrainian Union of the Association of Evangelical Baptists), Pentecostals (All-Ukrainian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith-Pentecostals) and Seventh-day Adventists (Ukrainian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists). Of note is Hillsong Baptist church in Kiev. One of the most prominent Protestants in modern Ukraine is its pastor Oleksander Turchinov, who after the Orange Revolution is the head of the Security Bureau of Ukraine (KGB's successor). Despite the rapid growth and aggressive missionary activities, today Protestants in Ukraine remain a small minority in a largely Orthodox country.

Protestantism could have played a significant role in identifying Ukraine's national heritage, but the Ukrainian movement of the 16th and 17th centuries did not take a reformist course, as it was intent on creating a national church. It feared breaking with church tradition. Protestant movements, particularly the Socinians, Anti-Trinitarians, and Reformists, quickly lost influence. The Adventist, Baptist, and other movements, disseminated in Ukraine in the 19th century, did not become national religious options for several reasons: (1) overly simplified denominational religious practices; (2) subordination of national living to the religious; and (3) sectarianism. Perhaps this explains why not a single Protestant denomination acted as an agent of ethnic creation or integration in Ukraine. The multiplicity of sects facilitated the national disintegration and spiritual disorganization of Ukraine.

Religious Intolerance

All four large traditional churches continue to vigorously oppose state acceptance of new religious movements, seeking to block their official registration, foreign missionary programs, and local evangelical activities. Since 1995, Ukraine, on paper, protects new movements against the suppression desired by the dominant churches, but some regional and local authorities have been pressured by powerful religious bodies and have illegally restricted or suppressed activities of other religious groups. Officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, who administer religious policy, are the most visible supporters of full-tolerance perspective. However, parliamentary parties of the left and far right seem to be defenders of the traditional churches and exhibit a non-tolerance or limited tolerance perspective.

Ukrainian security agencies have a limited toleration toward nontraditional religions. The old Soviet KGB perspective that foreign missionaries are agents of foreign security agencies, and that membership in nontraditional and especially new religious movements is sufficient grounds to initiate security surveillance, has been carried over into the SBU. There have been quite a few instances of local violation of national policy and laws. A troubling example of this is Decree #0109 of the Cabinet of Ministers, dated 26 March 2001. The State Committee for Religious Affairs was ordered to “improve the mechanism for countering the penetration and growth of destructive religions that cause damage to the State and its citizenry.” These “destructive religions” are not identified in the decree, leaving the directive open to various interpretations. There have been examples of city officials forbidding the renting of meeting halls to Protestants. Directors of local movie theaters and clubs were forced to break contracts. Another example of such opposition is the emergence of a new association of representatives in the Ukrainian Parliament entitled: "For the Advocacy of Canonical and Traditional Faiths in Ukraine." Its objective is to advance the interests of traditional churches.

At the local level, regional committees of religious affairs have refused entry to representatives of many religious organizations and to foreign missionaries. There are cases where Americans were barred from missionary activity. Attitudes of the local government often determine the fate of this or that congregation, rather than the law. The absence of a clear state policy regarding religions and churches and the arbitrariness of local power structures that flout existing legislation, balking at granting registration rights or construction permits for church buildings, make life difficult for many congregations.

Furthermore, to counteract missionary activity, Orthodox priests were known to have asserted in their sermons that “the devil himself” is incarnated in the person of a missionary: “Coming to humanity in the image of an ‘angel of light,’ extraterrestrial teacher/missionary imparts ‘wisdom’ that in the end leads a person to commune with Satan.” Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Filaret compares the belief of a person of any faith other than Orthodoxy to atheism. “Recently,” he says, “it has become unfashionable to contradict God. Therefore, other creeds—false, though externally respectable—have intertwined themselves with true faith in God.”

Evangelism

While Ukraine's spiritual climate has been dominated by the Orthodox Church, the Protestants maintained a solid testimony throughout the long years of persecution under the Communist government, coupled with a dedication to be Christ's people by life or death.

Historically, Ukraine has been the "Bible belt" for this part of the world. Momentous spiritual and cultural changes have usually begun in Ukraine and spread eastward. One way God's unique work in Ukraine reveals itself is in the growth of the Church. Churches are being started at a rate greater than 150 per year. The Baptist Union alone baptized 12,000 new converts last year. Another sign of God's work in Ukraine is the zeal of the new believers and their willingness to study the Word. Individuals who hear the gospel are very receptive. The new converts recognize that they may not know spiritual truths deeply, yet are eager to share the Good News.

God is working in Ukraine in remarkable ways. People want to know about the God their government tried so hard to hide. They are finding the truth in Jesus Christ. The growth is so rapid that there are not

enough trained church leaders to handle these groups of new believers. The most significant need of the evangelical church in the former Soviet Union is the training of pastors and leaders for these new local churches. This is particularly where the work of ITEM is so crucially needed.

What's Next?

The Orthodox Church does not see as much dominance as in other countries of the former USSR. As a result, there is religious stability and minor religious groups experience less persecution than in other Soviet countries. This means that adherents of other religions enjoy a favorable religious climate. All in all, more than seventy religious denominations have sprouted in Ukraine since the collapse of communism. The future is optimistic. Ukraine has always been open to diverse influences because of its location at the crossroads of East and West and North and South, where various cultural and religious worlds intersect.

Notably the foreign missions bring the Word of God to Ukraine at a time when it lacks its own such opportunities by its traditional faiths and churches. Yet missionaries do not always take into account the existing thousand-year Christian tradition. The activity of Christian missionaries need not focus on the creation of their own organizational structures in Ukraine but in supporting the evangelical efforts of traditional faiths and aiding them in sound biblical teaching, catechizing, and preparation of cadres of church leaders and missionaries.

It is vital to stress that the enemy has used many means throughout the ages to keep the people from understanding their need for the gospel and sound life-transforming theology. The need for sharing the truth and skills in this wonderful country has never been greater. Hopefully, understanding how the enemy has blinded people in this country will also help us to do a better job in sharing the light.

Freedom has proved to be a mixed blessing for Ukrainian believers, with more ambiguities and complexities than perhaps anyone imagined in the exciting days of the early 1990's. Bible colleges have replaced many of the plank benches of the old days; new church buildings stand in prominent locations in some towns; thousands of children annually attend church summer camps; Christian doctors offer free medical clinics in remote villages; and believing musicians perform on the radio. All of these are signs of healthy changes that nevertheless are still going through a lengthy, even painful process of absorption and validation. It will take time, resources and much faithful training to prepare the emerging Christian leadership for the challenges of today's Church in Ukraine.

Sources used: www.nationmaster.com; History of Christianity in Ukraine from Wikipedia; Ukraine: Christians in Conflict by Joseph R. Gregory, 2006; www.encyclopediaofukraine.com; Religion and the Churches in Modern Ukraine (Kyiv: Svit znan', 2001); www.send.org/ukraine; International Religious Freedom Report, 12/1, Winter 2004; Ivakhiv, Adrian, In Search of Deeper Identities: Neopaganism and "Native Faith" in Contemporary Ukraine, 2005 8(3):7-38; www.risu.org.ua; ICSA E-Newsletter, 5/1, Feb. 2006; www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/



Overview

Latvia may look small on the map, but its culture is rich and multi-dimensional. The people here are very proud of the way it is. For Latvians, culture is the most efficient way of expressing themselves and ensuring their existence. It does not mean that Latvia lives in the past, cherishing only its history and memories. Latvia is a modern country that values the best past and present have to offer. The capital of Latvia, Riga, is sometimes referred to as 'little Paris.' Riga is a full-fledged European city with fascinating cultural life, high educational standards and thoughtful spirituality. Since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Latvia has made great progress in reforming its government and economy.

Latvian people, officially known as the Letts, first inhabited the Latvian region in the 9th century A.D. During the 13th century the Germans reached Latvia and began Christian conversions. From the 1200's to the 1600's, parts of Latvia were controlled by the Order of Teutonic Knights, Poland, and then Sweden. Sweden lost power to the Russians in 1621 and by 1795 the entire Latvian region was a part of the Russian empire.

Serfdom was eliminated by the Russians, which allowed the Letts to work for their independence. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Latvia declared their nation a democratic republic. Communist troops then invaded Latvia but Allied troops forced them to retreat in 1920. In 1939, Latvia signed a treaty of mutual-assistance with the Soviet Union. Soviet troops occupied Latvia in 1940, and subsequent elections held under Soviet auspices resulted in the absorption of Latvia into the USSR as a constituent republic. Latvian campaigns for democracy and independence did not begin again until October 1988, with the formation of the Popular Front of Latvia. Latvians finally won independence in August 1991 after the bloody collapse of the Soviet Union.

After independence, Latvia sought to limit citizenship in favor of Latvians and other Balts over ethnic Russians and other minorities. About a quarter of the population is Russian-speaking and the rights of this section of society have been a thorny issue since independence. In 1998, the laws were eased, granting citizenship to all children born in Latvia after Aug. 21, 1991, and making it easier for Russian-speakers to become naturalized. At the same time government reforms introduced in 2004 to restrict the use of the Russian language in schools remain controversial. Legislation on Latvian language and citizenship has tightened; candidates who fail a Latvian language test three times are denied citizenship. About a fifth of all residents remained noncitizens in 2005, unable to vote or obtain passports.

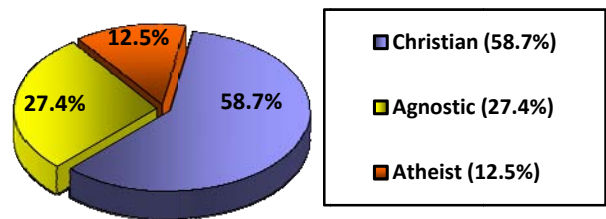
Slightly more than half of the population consists of Letts and the closely related Latgalians (both widely known as Latvians). About a third are Russian; other minorities included Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Polish. Latvian is the official language; Lithuanian, Russian, and other languages are also spoken. The

predominant religions are Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, and the Russian Orthodoxy. In the 10 years since independence Latvia has made a rapid transformation to embrace the free market and membership in the EU.

Religion in Numbers

Christianity spread through Latvia from the 9th through 12th centuries. Russian Orthodoxy is dominant in the east and Roman Catholicism in the west while most people in the cities are Lutheran. There are also small communities of other faiths, such as Baptist, Old Believers, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jewish, and Reformed. As of April 2006, the Board of Religious Affairs had registered 1,174 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (303), Roman Catholic (250), Orthodox (118), Baptist (93), Old Believer, Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (50), Jehovah's Witnesses (13), Methodist (13), Jewish (13), Buddhist (4), Muslim (15), Hare Krishna (11), Mormons (4), Reformed (2) and more than 100 other congregations. Interest in religion increased markedly since the restoration of independence; however, a large percentage of adherents do not regularly practice their faith. A significant portion of the population is atheist.

Major Religious Affiliations



In 1935, before Latvia's occupation, official statistics indicated a fairly broad spectrum of religious traditions. Evangelical Lutheranism was the single most widespread creed, claiming the attachment of 55.2% of the population and 68.3% of ethnic Latvians. Roman Catholicism was the second most popular choice, preferred by 24.5% of the population. The Orthodox Church of Latvia had a following of 9% of the population, with its greatest concentration among Russians. Old Believers constitute 5.5% of the population. The rest of the pre-World War II population was scattered among an array of Protestant denominations, and Jews.

World War II and a half-century of Soviet occupation and persecution of believers fundamentally changed the religious spectrum. During communist rule, every effort was made to curtail the influence of religion. All potential avenues of contact with the population were cut off. Schools, media, books, and workplaces were all off-limits to religious organizations. Even charity work was forbidden. Indeed, the family itself was not at liberty to guide children into active church work until the age of eighteen. Thus, no Sunday schools, religious choirs, or camps were open to young people. Religious publications, with a few exceptions, were limited to yearbooks and song sheets for Sunday services. Regular churchgoers were subject to various pressures, including harassment at work and "comradely" visits by local atheists. Anyone with career ambitions had to forgo visible links with religion. Lutheran church rapidly declined but Roman Catholics gained strength. The state even successfully preempted the most important church ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals by secular ceremonies.

Most Latvian Jews were annihilated by the Nazis during World War II. After the war, a number of Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union settled in Latvia but many obstacles and Stalinist antireligious campaigns kept the population from reviving religious activity. Most former Latvian synagogues were confiscated and no centers of rabbinical education existed in the Soviet Union. By 1991, only five Jewish congregations remained.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church, with an estimated 600,000 members in 1956, was affected most adversely. An internal document from March 18, 1987, stated active membership had shrunk to 25,000. For centuries Latvian attachment to Lutheranism was rather tepid, in part because this religion had been brought by the Baltic barons and German clergy. During Latvia's earlier independence period (1920-40), efforts were made to "Latvianize" the church. Original Latvian hymns were composed, Latvian clergy became predominant, and the New Testament was translated into modern Latvian. During the tribulations of World War II, Latvians intensified their religiosity, but at the same time the Lutheran Church suffered serious losses. Many of the most religious and talented individuals and clergy fled as refugees to the West or were deported to Siberia. A large number of church buildings were demolished by war action. Despite hardship, Latvian Lutherans provided help to their brethren in other Soviet republics. Lutheran clergy were trained in Latvia for Lithuania.

In 1987, the Lutheran Church experienced a revival pioneered by a group of young, rebellious, and very well-educated clergy who formed the organization called Rebirth and Renewal. With the advent of political plurality, the Lutheran Church was able to expand its role and its activities. Church buildings were refurbished, demolished churches were renewed, Sunday schools were opened, religious education was provided in day schools, and the media reported sermons and religious discussions. For several years after the liberation of church activities, religion became extremely fashionable. Part of this boom, as acknowledged by the Lutheran clergy, was a rebellion against authorities that coincided with the general political effervescence.

The Roman Catholic Church had a much closer historical bonding with its flock, being a regional (Latingale) religion. During the period of national revival through the latter part of the 19th century, the clergy were among the leaders of enlightenment. During the years of communist occupation, the greater commitment demanded by the Roman Catholic Church helped maintain a higher degree of solidarity against atheist incursions. Confession was a useful method for monitoring the mood of the population and organizing initiatives to counter and prevent serious cleavages or even surreptitious activities by the communist leadership. Latvia's Roman Catholic Church received a great moral boost in February 1983 when Bishop Julijans Vaivods, a persistent opponent to oppression, was made a cardinal, the first appointment in the history of Latvia and the first within the Soviet Union. He sent Latvian clergy and trained Soviet nationals as priests to minister in the USSR.

The Roman Catholic Church also went through a process of renewal, but its changes were not as marked since it maintained a strong presence in the population even under the most adverse conditions. Catholics even expanded their sphere of influence by gaining congregations in cities and eastern Latvia. In 1991, the Roman Catholics performed twice as many baptisms than in 1985. Among the Roman Catholics baptized in 1991, only 40 percent had been born in families in which the parents had married in church.

The pre-World War II independent Orthodox Church of Latvia was subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate after the war, and its new clergy were trained in seminaries in Russia. It remained a major religious organization in Latvia because of the heavy influx of Russians and other Orthodox Slavs after the war. Only in 1992 did the Orthodox Church of Latvia become administratively independent once again. Its cathedral in the center of Riga had been transformed by the communists into a planetarium with an

adjoining coffee shop popularly dubbed "In God's Ear." The cathedral has been in the process of being restored to its original architecture and purpose.

Latvia is and has been a multi-confessional state. Nevertheless, religious institutions have played a very important role in the unification of the Latvian nation itself and the development of one Latvian culture. Up to the Independence of Latvia in 1918, the Lutheran churches were basically in the hands of the German pastors and German aristocrats. The Polish influence was very strong in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church was tied to the Moscow Patriarchate. Religion was a major source of values in society for centuries. According to Latvian philosopher and theologian Visvaldis Klīve, in the '90s "the preservation of Latvian nationality was seen as a Christian religious duty. In Latvia itself membership and participation in church life became to some extent a protest movement against the Soviet authorities. The great interest in ecumenical relations by the Latvian church leaders gave significant visibility to the Latvian nationality in the international organizations at the time when it was not fashionable to talk about Latvia." Religious values have been used for national and political strategies. In this sense the religious institutions which came from the West made the Latvians into a distinct Western rather than Eastern nation.

During the years of Soviet occupation of Latvia, according to Marxist-Leninist ideology, Christianity was to be eradicated from the people's mind, and the church role in society was to be reduced to nothing. Whole generations grew up with no sense or need for religion. Spirituality was cultivated only in homes of believers and congregations that struggled for survival. Atheism along with materialism and pragmatism, a simplified utopian world view served the purpose of diminishing the church. As the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev once said, atheism was replacing religion, but the phenomenon was merely superficial.

Religious situation in Latvia today

After declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, freedom of religion and worship was restored for the first time since 1941, and several changes were introduced. Potential Lutheran pastors could now receive their training through the nondenominational Faculty of Theology, affiliated with the University of Latvia. Lutherans have also established a seminary in Riga. The Roman Catholics acquired a new, modern seminary, but have had problems recruiting able scholars and teachers as well as students. Roman Catholic seminarians from outside Latvia have returned to their respective republics, and new seminarians are being trained locally. The Orthodox Church also established its own seminary. The new freedoms have allowed many other religious groups to proselytize and recruit members. Under conditions of economic and political uncertainty, their efforts are bearing fruit. Such denominations as the Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-Day Adventists have made significant inroads. Charismatic movements, animists, Hare Krishna, and the Salvation Army have all attempted to fill a void in Latvia's spiritual life. Undoubtedly, there is great interest among Latvians in spiritual matters, but it is difficult to know how much of it is genuine and how much it reflects the ebb and flow of fashion and will be replaced by other trends.

Currently Catholicism is dominant in Latvia numerically, but not spiritually. Intellectual dimension is lacking in Latvian Catholicism, which has been for centuries so powerful in the history of Europe. The Thomas Aquinas' doctrine admitted the decisive role of the mind but it cannot be said of Catholics in Latvia today. There is little dialogue with society, little participation in the cultural life.

Lutheranism could show its connection with society and its ability to attest the values of Protestantism during the years of the Third Awakening (1988-1991). In the late 80's, young priests who had graduated from Latvia University Physics and Mathematics and Chemistry faculties and then turned to religion were extremely popular. They managed to conduct a dialogue with society, attest moral values and could present Lutheran beliefs in a modern context. Their interpretations of Christian values are keen but with a flavor of postmodernism. Young Lutheran priests have many followers, they were shown on TV, interviewed, they published books and work at the Faculty of Theology of University of Latvia as teachers. However, critics have recognized these books as postmodern.

National minorities of Latvia pursue their own religions, mostly formed by Russians, Koreans, Tatars, Armenians, Moldavians, and other minorities. Some of these religious groups originated as a result of missionary activities Baptist parishes in Latvia are one of the most active missionary and charity organizations. Religious institutions interact with other spheres of social activity. Some missions do socially important work, such as "Steps." The mission has opened a children's home for children from different confessions. The Salvation Army of Latvia was restored in 1991.

The atheism of Soviet times disappeared with the political changes in 1991 because Marxist ideology had not penetrated the profoundest layers of consciousness and life values. It has created a dangerous tendency of a simplified worldview, materialism and denial of transcendental truth. Religion has been interpreted as a useful phenomenon for human reasons. When religious life revived and obtained a wide cultural, political and economic context in the post-Soviet period, the family values weakened and such secular values as money, power, and social status became dominant. Society was enthused over the wish to regain the lost Christian values, but with time this religious idealism naturally faded away. People discovered the difficulty of cooperation and the discrepancy between romantic religious enthusiasm and reality. For many people who tried to return to religion in the 90's, it became an aesthetic experience and remained a shadow of the real affairs of life. Traditional religions have lost the power to compel or to frighten, gradually turning into a museum of culture rather than a gateway to an everlasting life. This is one of the reasons why different forms of new religiosity appear in Latvia, that give rise to different new forms of religion, including scientology church, Hare Krishna, Baha'i or New Age teaching. In Latvia, just like in all other post-Soviet societies, mysticism and occultism prosper. As old certainties start to crumble, there is a tendency to feel that all views are valid. Spiritual values are no longer highly regarded, people can change their identities, experiment with spirituality, and select an option from a vast cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before.

At present the number of adherents to new religious and spiritual minorities is proportionally small - about 1.5% of the population of 2.6 million. At the same time the dynamic development of those religions is evident. The new religions in Latvia are multi-ethnic. The majority of their followers are Russian-speaking people. They include not only Russians but also people of other ethnic minorities plus some Latvians who do not speak Latvian. (Not speaking the Latvian language makes it difficult for people to join some of the traditional Latvian religious groups.) One of the major reasons why people turn to new religions is their search for identity. If they fail to find their place in the current social processes, which in Latvia include, among other things, the realization of the nation-state, they look for their "niche" elsewhere, and

sometimes they find it in some non-traditional religions. Another reason is the major changes in the understanding of the essence of religion and its role in the life of people.

The growth in numbers of the different religions is youth. Youth are looking for charismatic leaders. The influence of charismatic congregations on religious life may grow in Latvia in the near future because they compensate for the lack of communicative values that the traditional religions - Catholicism, Lutheranism, and the Orthodox Church-fail to supply. However, these congregations also boost the middle and older generation joining the new religious movements. These are people who, under the communist regime, abandoned or did not acquire any religious beliefs and are now looking for solutions to their religious needs. These people give stability to their congregations, although it sometimes turns into conservatism and routine. To name but a few such charismatic congregations of the "new wave": "Jauna Paaudze" (The New Generation), "Prieka Vests" (Message of Hope), and "Dzivibas Vards" (The Word of Life). It is typical for these congregations to have strong leaders, and that youth makes up a large part of their followers.

Nominally Christian, the New Apostolic Church of North Rhine-Westphalia from Germany is also active in Latvia. Its missionaries appeared in Latvia at the beginning of '90's and have about 800 followers in Latvia. Four Mormon missionaries arrived in Latvia in 1992. As of March 1997, there were 265 members. Now there are 4 congregations. The Jehovah's Witnesses had about 1,643 preachers and 3,956 supporters in 1997. Although this religious minority is not officially registered in Latvia, it presently numbers 13 congregations. The Unification Church, an unregistered denomination, is active in Latvia, carrying out its activities through the mediation of different registered non-governmental organizations, such as Women's Federation for World Peace.

Among the Eastern religions in Latvia Krishna is the largest. It has 3 missions and temples in Latvia. There are altogether 200 consecrated persons plus about 3,000 followers. The dominant view among the public is that this religion is absolutely foreign and unacceptable for most people, but this is changing. There are also the Sri Chinmoy movement, the movement of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the Baha'i faith, Sahaj Marg movement, Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University, a Sukyo Mahikari Center, an Eckankar congregation, the Messianic congregation "Joshua" and other Eastern-oriented religious organizations in Latvia at present.

We can expect that new religious movements will continue to enter the religious life of Latvia. Such probable further development of the religious situation is determined by the ethnic, social, cultural, and psychological diversity of society. There is a growing attitude against "sects" or "cults", even among some authorities, similar to movements in Germany and France. However, anti-cult movement in Latvia does not limit its targets to the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology or the Jehovah's Witnesses, but extends against charismatic Christian congregations that have generally not been regarded as "destructive cults" elsewhere.

Religious Freedom

The Latvian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. However, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions. There is no state religion, but the government does distinguish between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. It does not require the registration of religious

groups, but the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords registered religious organizations certain rights and privileges, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax-deductible donations. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings. In practice, these laws have not resulted in government discrimination against any particular religion.

There are two councils that monitor religious issues: the New Religions Consultative Council, consisting of doctors, academics, and an independent human rights ombudsman; and the Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body organized in 2002 by the prime minister and chaired by either the sitting prime minister or the deputy prime minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers. The Ecclesiastical Council met during the reporting period to discuss a new draft law on traditional confessions (those that existed during the country's first period of independence), and further define the relationship between church and state.

Under current Law on Religious Organizations, traditional religions enjoy certain rights and privileges that nontraditional religions do not. It stipulates that only representatives of the traditional Christian churches (i.e., Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, and Baptist churches) may teach religion to public school students who volunteer to take the classes. The government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations and religions that do not have their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 require foreign religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process, requiring letters of invitation and proof of seminary training, remain cumbersome, although the government generally is cooperative in helping resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers. Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities.

Property restitution has been substantially completed, although most religious groups, continue to wait for the return of some properties, their status being unclear and subject to complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the communities to which properties belonged before the World War II.

Conclusion

What kind of future is forming for the free Latvia? More and more Europe is becoming secular and materialistic. Yet in South America, Africa, and Asia Christianity, reportedly, is growing. Even in Communist China, Christianity is increasing in numbers. Unfortunately, Europe is ailing with atheism and agnosticism. When the U.S. President mentions God, the Europeans roll their eyes, and the enemy is rubbing his hands for the work well done.

Latvia is enjoying its independence, but is it enjoying true freedom? Only faith, a genuine profound faith in Jesus Christ can guarantee this freedom. Yet it is impossible to experience and live it, believing in the true God, if one does not know Him, or even that He is. If one does not know Him, he cannot be grateful either. One needs help if he cannot learn by himself, especially if he is spiritually hungry. Just like in many other countries, many Latvians need help, so that their eyes may see the light and be able to grow spiritually with a new understanding, feeling as if they are being reformed from within. But how can they hear the Good News and mature in their Christian walk if we do not help them? "How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:13-15)



What do the following US household names such as Charles Bronson (actor), Joseph Weber (an eminent physicist), Aaron Copland (composer), Sara Lee (Sara Lee Foods), as well as the mother of Pope John Paul II have in common? They are all people of Lithuanian descent. Lithuania is a country with rich culture, famous for its amber, spectacular wood carvings and great basketball team Zalgiris.

Population and Religion

Lithuania has a population of 3.48 million, of which 2.33 million (66.9%) is urban and 1.15 million (33.1%) rural. Ethnic Lithuanians make up 83.45 % of the population, Poles – 6.77 %, Russians – 6.33%, Belarusians – 1.23%. Average density of population is 30 persons per square mile and 50 in the capital city of Vilnius.

Religiously speaking the majority of the population is Roman Catholic (79%). In addition, Lithuania has long established communities of Orthodox Christians (4.1%), Old Believers (0.8%), Evangelical Lutherans (0.6%), Reformed Evangelicals (0.2%), Jewish, and Karaites. There are also smaller “new” religious groups among them Protestant Christians, Adventists, Muslims and Eastern and New Age religions. All recognized religions are equally treated under the law as no state religion exists in Lithuania, but groups must be registered through a governmental process that does not recognize all religions.

Historical highlights

Before accepting Christianity, Lithuanians practiced paganism, which remained a folk religion for several hundred years after Christianization, which took place in 1387. Lithuania was the last country in Europe to be converted to Christianity. In 1569, a common Statehood of Lithuania and Poland was set up. Soon thereafter Lithuania fell under the power of Tsarist Russia, but in 1918, it proclaimed its independence. During that time the Lithuanian constitution guaranteed the church the right to register marriages, births, and deaths. Religious education in public schools was compulsory, although there was no state religion. In 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, it lost a great part of its population to mass deportations to Siberia and forced migration to the West. Soviet authorities not only totally separated churches from the state but also from individual support. In 1990, Lithuania declared the restoration of the Lithuanian nation. The newly elected parliament guaranteed compensation for the losses suffered under the Soviet rule. The constitution of 1992 guarantees "freedom of thought, religion, and conscience." In 2004, Lithuania joined NATO and the European Union.

Generally, Lithuanian society is highly secularized, although, as in many post-communist countries, younger people are searching for some sort of spiritual fulfillment. Catholics are the oldest continuously surviving religious institution which has played a dominant role in the development of Lithuanian society,

especially during the long stretches of time when Lithuanians had no state of their own. During Russian imperial occupation it was forbidden to publish Lithuanian books in the Latin alphabet, and parishes smuggled books from Germany. Under the Soviet rule, the church served as a focal point of resistance and dissident activities.

Protestants also have contributed significantly to Lithuania's cultural development. The first book printed in Lithuanian was a Lutheran catechism, published in 1547. Protestant Lithuanians published many books of national awakening. Later, both Lutheran and Reformed Christians supplied political leadership out of proportion to their numbers in the population.

Persecution under the Soviet Rule

In the 1930s, religion flourished in Lithuania; 95% of the citizens were Catholic, the rest being divided between Protestant, Jewish, and Russian Orthodox faiths, with freedom to worship open to all. Clergy were exempted from military service and received a small salary from the state government. In 1940, the Soviet Union annexed the country and attempted to destroy the presence of religion. Ministers and the religious community were persecuted, churches were desecrated, and the teaching of religion by the church was forbidden. Salaries and pensions were denied to clergymen, the sacraments of Marriage and Baptism, Communion and Confirmation were forbidden and declared superstitious. Many were imprisoned, exiled to Siberia and murdered for their religious work. Church buildings were confiscated, turned into warehouses, their beautiful interiors stripped bare, works of religious art, some dating back to the XV century—destroyed. The Cathedral in Vilnius became a picture gallery; St. Casimir's Church was turned into a Museum of Atheism; in Kaunas, the Benedictine Church stored old books, and St. Francis Xavier Church was a bookstore at first, and later, a gymnasium. Adults who continued to practice their religion lost their jobs. The teaching of religion in schools was banned.

After Communism

In the outset of democracy the increased importance of religion met with popular support, and with it came the realization that social prosperity and religious values are two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, having re-established its independence over a decade ago, Lithuania is very different from the early expectations. Having adopted Western values and its own religious heritage, religion became the traditional decor of life often devoid of vital force to change and strong personal commitment.

Religious Freedom

The Government at all levels seeks to protect religious freedoms and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private forces. The Constitution provides that a person's freedom to profess and propagate his or her religion or faith "may be subject only to those limitations prescribed by law and only when such restrictions are necessary to protect the safety of society, public order, a person's health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." The Criminal Code protects religious freedom as well, prohibiting discrimination based on religion, interference with religious ceremonies and inciting religious hatred is punishable by imprisonment.

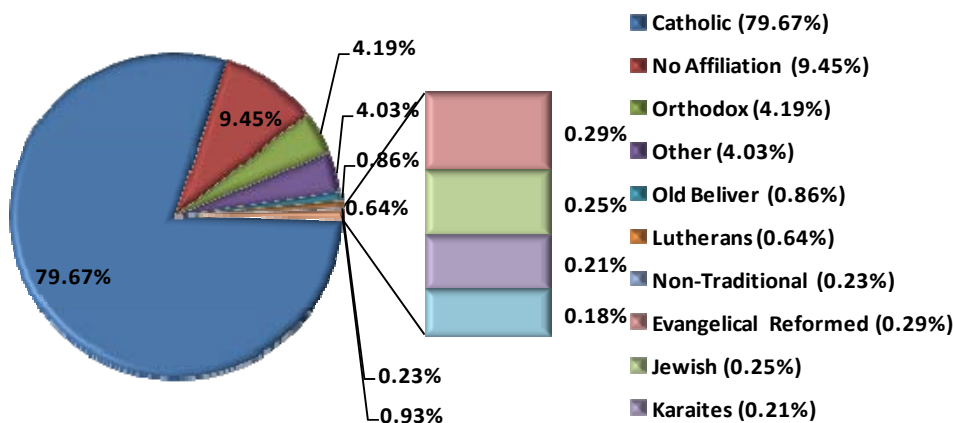
There is no state religion. However, some religious groups enjoy benefits not available to others, including government funding, the right to teach religion in public schools, and the right to register marriages. The law enables all registered religious groups to own property for prayer houses, homes, and other uses, and

permits construction of facilities necessary for their activities. The Constitution recognizes "traditional" churches and religious organizations, as well as other churches and religious organizations, provided that they have a basis in society and their teaching and rituals do not contravene morality or the law. Government authorities acknowledge as traditional only those religious groups that can trace their presence in the country back at least 300 years and enumerates nine traditional religious communities: Roman Catholics, Greek Rite Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed Churchgoers, Orthodox Christians (Moscow Patriarchate), Old Believers, Jews, Sunni Muslims, and Karaites.

"Traditional" religious communities and associations may register marriages, establish subsidiary institutions and joint private/public schools, provide religious instruction in public schools, and are eligible to receive government assistance. Their highest religious leaders are eligible to apply for diplomatic passports, their clergy and theological students are exempt from military service, and they may provide military chaplains. The Ministry of Justice does not require traditional religious communities and associations to register their bylaws. Traditional religious communities do not have to pay social and health insurance for clergy and other employees, and they are not subject to a value added tax on basic utilities. The law stipulates that the Government may grant state recognition to "non-traditional" religious communities that have societal support and have been registered in the country for at least 25 years. Nonetheless, nontraditional religions do receive some privileges from the Government, but not to the extent that traditional religious groups do. The Baptists are the only state-recognized "non-traditional" religion. They are entitled to perform marriages and do not have to pay social security and health care taxes for clergy and other employees. However, the Baptists do not receive the annual subsidies, tax exemptions, or exemptions from military service granted to "traditional" communities.

Following the restoration of the country's independence, the Government began returning religious communities' property confiscated by Nazis and Soviets.

Denominational Representation



The law grants all religious communities equal opportunity to reacquire property once used for religious services and other activities. Some claims are still pending resolution. The Constitution establishes public educational institutions as secular. However

the Laws on Education permit and fund public school religious instruction only in "traditional" and

state-recognized religious beliefs. In practice parents can choose either religious instruction or secular ethics classes for their children. Schools decide which of the traditional religious groups will be represented in curriculums by requests from parents for children up to age 14 (after that, the pupil decides). The number of wholly private religious schools is relatively low. There are approximately 25 schools with ties to Catholic and Jewish groups, although students of different religious groups often attended these schools. All accredited private schools (religious and nonreligious) receive funding from the Ministry of Education and Science through a voucher system. Private Roman Catholic schools receive additional funds from the government to cover operational costs.

In 2007, public schools provided religious education to 272,912 Roman Catholics, 3,804 Russian Orthodox, 762 Evangelical Lutherans, 343 Greek Catholics, 225 Jewish students, 115 Evangelical Reformed Lutherans, 15 Old Believers, and 6 Muslims. A total of 222,233 students studied ethics.

Traditional Religions

Various surveys indicate high levels of confidence in the dominant Catholic Church. Alongside the media, the Church is the most reliable social institution. And yet all attempts of traditional religions to be a moral compass have had little impact on society. Many are more concerned with restitution of property than religious matters. Faith met the free society with great want in educated leaders and superficial knowledge of basic Christian doctrine. In addition, allying themselves with the civil power in favor of special privileges and economic incentives is still a more popular tactic of the traditional churches than the fostering of values of freedom and responsibility.

Roman Catholicism remains dominant and influential. According to a recent census, approximately 79% confess to be Catholic. As of April 2007, there are 685 registered Roman Catholic communities and associations (such as parishes, schools, and monasteries, including two seminaries). There is a small Greek Catholic community estimated 300 members.

There are other Christian confessions that boast long history in Lithuania. The Eastern Orthodox Church under jurisdiction of Moscow Patriarch, the second largest religious group, has approximately 140,000 members, with 52 communities. Old Believers, who came to escape persecution during czarist Russia, number 27,000 and have 62 registered communities.

With the Reformation, Evangelical Reformed Churches and Lutherans quickly spread in Lithuania. An estimated 20,000 Lutherans belong to 59 communities. The Evangelical Reformed community has approximately 7,000 members in 17 communities.

Groups of Karaites and Tartars were brought to Lithuania as personal security of dukes in 1397. These groups maintain their cultural and religious identity even today. Karaites speak a Turkic-based language and use the Hebrew alphabet. Their religion is based exclusively on the Old Testament and they are recognized as a distinct ethnic group. The seven Sunni Muslim communities maintain about 2,700 members.

Jews, who were persecuted in medieval Europe, also found shelter in Lithuania, having found good conditions for fostering their culture and faith. The Jewish community numbers approximately 4,000.

Non-traditional religions

The first period of de-sovietization established numerous new religious groups with society's positive reaction. The variety was thought to be a significant mark of democracy, though the positive attitude has disappeared in recent years, due to a change in the conception of the role of religion—it is a private matter which cannot influence one's public life. Therefore, if religion commits one to something it is not a healthy religion but rather fanaticism. The role of non-traditional groups is small and passive.

When one is to speak of "religious movements" in Lithuania, there are about 60 different non-traditional movements. They embrace more than 300 religious communities and groups. The population percentage involved in these religious communities (and this does not include all the smaller esoteric groups) is about 0.46 % of the population. The most numerous of these are the Full Gospel Word of Faith Movement, Pentecostals/ Charismatics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and the New Apostolic Church.

Christian and Christian origin groups

The general decrease of the appeal of non-traditional religions during the last six years may not have affected so much the appeal of the native origin groups of esoteric nature, and the groups that do not display the communal structure. New Age type teachings are being spread by people who usually shun the label of religion and have quite a large client cult or audience cult type followings. With a significant percentage of Lithuanian Catholics holding beliefs mixed with eastern origin, popularized by the esoteric teachings, as reincarnation, it is hardly surprising.

There are quite a number of Christian and Christian origin groups in Lithuania. Those are the largest non-traditional religious movements. One of the largest and most publicized is the Word of Faith church movement, which has counterparts in other parts of the world, but it has evolved independently of the similar phenomena in Sweden (Word of Life church movement), US (prosperity theology), and Latvia (New Generation churches). Though at first the movement followed closely the theology of the Swedish Word of Life movement, currently it is harder to attribute to any specific category; the movement refers to itself as a Christian charismatic non-denominational Church.

The first Word of Faith church started in 1988 and grew dramatically, increasing to 5,000 members in 1992. The next few years were followed by a tide of a negative publicity about the movement: blaming it for the suicides of a few members, financial exploitation of the members, etc. The negative publicity decreased the appeal of the movement, and raised the public awareness of new religiosity. The authenticity of charges against the movement were questioned; however, the coming years saw gradual decrease in membership of the movement – the number of adherents in 1998 was about 2600, with about 56 communities, the largest of those being about 800 members.

The movement of New Apostolic Church is perhaps the biggest non-traditional movement in Lithuania, which in part is due to the high degree of adaptation to Lithuanian culture. The movement's first communities were founded by German missionaries in 1991, are still very dependent on the missionary resources, but have also spread throughout Lithuania with 45 communities and about 4,000 people attending religious services. The number of people attending services has not been decreasing.

Jehovah Witnesses are another large Christian origin movement in Lithuania, far outnumbering the Mormon community (3,400 and 2,500 in weekly attendance respectively). The Jehovah Witnesses are currently quite a controversial movement, due to their position on blood transfusions often discussed.

By far the most controversial Christian origin group is the Unification movement, having at most 50 active members. It is well known in Lithuania because of its public campaigns "Pure Love" and street fundraising. Media attention to the movement's activities is very high, and the unwillingness of members to tell people who they are during street fundraising is quite striking.

Baptists and Pentecostals are strong Christian movements in Lithuania, with Adventists following close.

Eastern and oriental origin groups

One of the first Eastern origin groups in Lithuania was the Society for Krishna Conscience. The first adherents appeared in Lithuania in early 1980's, though persecuted a lot by the Soviet regime. The movement and its ideas spread mainly among artists at first. Today the Society of Krishna Conscience counts 3,400 members and 12 communities, being the largest eastern origin group in Lithuania. The other movement to gain much favorable attention even in the Soviet years was the Sathya Say Baba movement, impressing the public by promotion of peace and unity of all religions. The movement is often perceived as inter-religious, and the people involved usually identify themselves as Catholic. There are a few Buddhist groups and Zen communities in the country – Kwan Um Zen, Tibetan Buddhist, Karma Kagyu communities. Eastern type movements seem to be keeping their numbers – the number of the adherents in the Buddhist communities currently is higher than 200, with about 7 communities established.

Osho meditation centers, following the Rajneesh teachings is another movement, drawing a lot from Eastern sources. There are three centers and 100 adherents of the movement. The Ministry of Justice has refused to register Osho meditation centre "Ojas" in Vilnius, motivating its decision on the grounds that "Ojas" does not conform to the model of religious community described in the Law on religious communities and associations, and has some questionable requirements for those who participate.

The Oriental origin Baha'i movement numbers about 100 adherents and 6 communities, none registered yet.

Neo-pagan groups

The pagan religion of Lithuania contains many interesting Gods - including a god of Beer and a god of Marijuana. There are two types of neo-pagan groups in Lithuania. The first one is Romuva, started by Jonas Trinkūnas in 1967. It is aiming at regenerating ancient pagan beliefs and religious practices of Lithuania. According to the movement, the pagan gods of Lithuania are alive and well. Furthermore, the influence has now spread to America. The symbol of Romuva is a stylized oak tree, representing the axis mundi, or "world tree," known in Lithuanian mythology as "tree of life." In Soviet times, this movement was presenting itself as a cultural society, fostering Lithuanian folklore and history, but after the 1990 it re-emphasized its religious nature.

The movement has three communities and 100 adherents. Although small, it has a very positive public image. The beliefs of Romuva are quite difficult to describe – the "holy" is found in "darna" (Lithuanian for

“harmony”), which should be the highest aspiration of the people of all faiths. Romuva claims it does not negate other religions. This claim is perhaps best understood in light of very flexible doctrinal formulations with the emphasis of the experience of the “holy” in songs and folk festivals, inherited from ancient times. Though gods are often mentioned, sometimes one can get an impression that they are literally understood as mental projections of some immanent spirit in nature and human beings.

The other self-professedly pagan group, Society of Lithuanian pagan faiths “the Old Sorcerer”, combines concepts from science and different religions to create a teaching that many consider gibberish. The group has tried to register as a religious community at the Ministry of Justice, but so far with little success.

Spiritualist /psychic, esoteric groups

The Church of Scientology is perhaps the best-known of the Spiritualist/psychic groups in Lithuania. There is no branch of the Church of Scientology itself, but there is a Dianetics Center registered as a social organization in Vilnius. The Center started its activities in 1995, and since then has become one of the most controversial religious organizations in Lithuania, drawing criticism both from the society, religious studies specialists and the government. The newly set up government commission, aiming at the coordination of the activities of government institutions in implementing the recommendation of the Council of Europe “Illegal Activities of Sects” in its August 22, 2000 meeting decided to prepare publicly available materials on the Church of Scientology along the lines of the Council of Europe recommendations. This would be a move without a precedent in Lithuania’s recent history.

Other well known but more mainline group in Lithuania is the Parapsychology Academy in Vilnius, with a branch in Kaunas, consulting people with different problems and publishing a lot of materials of esoteric nature, including a monthly magazine. There are quite a number of smaller societies like that. Those also shun being described as religious, rather trying to describe their beliefs in scientific language. The society of Rerich, working closely with a Lithuanian origin society of Vydūnas should also be mentioned, though those would also avoid being labeled religious.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In April 2006, the Government allocated \$1,310,000 (3,279,000 litas) to traditional religious communities for capital costs associated with houses of worship, schools, and other facilities. No other religious communities received this type of support, but funds from municipal or other government sources may be available for their use. The state additionally funds social security and health care contributions for spiritual leaders of traditional and state-recognized religious communities. Other religious communities must pay for these benefits on behalf of their spiritual leaders.

For the fifth consecutive year, Parliament deferred granting "state-recognized religion" status to the United Methodist Church of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventists and the Pentecostals.

As of this moment there were no substantiated reports of major active religious intolerance or persecution. However, there have been reports of vandalism and some members of religious minorities occasionally were targets of acts of intolerance, such as insults. Anti-Semitic attitudes have been steadily growing but are currently curbed by the government.

All in all, the state continues to engage in efforts to foster religious tolerance and understanding.

Closing observations

Undoubtedly we are living in the times of changes - the contemporary world is full of contradictions in the different aspects of its social reality. The sphere of religion might be called one of the most varied in forms. The prognosis about the retreat of religion to the periphery of the social reality shows few signs of being fulfilled. Furthermore, religious interest has re-emerged, both within the traditional form and a few innovative forms.

Religious situation of Lithuania in the context of Western world is distinguished by its unique central location, with ties to the West and to the East of Europe. Historically, it is a Christian country, with almost 600 years of Christianity. It is also unique in the timing of our efforts to plant the seeds of new Reformed foundation that has been systematically undermined during the Communist era and now by the powerful influence of European secularism, materialism and individualism on the one hand, and spiritualism of shallow theology and cultic legalistic simplicity on the other.

Although the majority of Lithuanians declare religious affiliation, the European Value research conducted in recent years revealed that 76 percent of population believed in life after death, 43 percent believed in reincarnation, 79 percent believed in telepathy, 33 percent were reading horoscopes every week. Researchers of religion distinguish different forms of nonofficial religion - variety of superstitious and magical beliefs and practices, beliefs in paranormal occurrences, (i.e. events outside the usual range of experiences). "Occult" practices should also be attributed to the sphere of nonofficial religion. Various secret organizations like freemasons, Rosicrucian's order and cabbalistic groups are to be considered a part of nonofficial religion, too. In these groups mystery and awe surround the esoteric knowledge protected by the secret society and its protection promotes solidarity of the group. The other element of esoteric culture that might be found in nonofficial religion is astrology.

In the early 1980's most of the elements of nonofficial religion received a new boost in the Western society facing the coming new millennium. With the reference to the message of coming of new era the new movement was called "New Age". Its syncretism has questioned former typologies of new religiosity. There are still debates about its definitions; because it hardly corresponds to what we are used to call a new religious movement, the term of sect or cult doesn't fit in this case either.

Presented with this awareness of spiritual battleground in Lithuania, one should no longer remain complacent regarding our mission of sound biblical teaching and theological education. When the opportunity is there, it is there not because it just happened to be there on its own, but because it has been ordained so. In light of this, now that you are more familiar with it, hear the call to be used by Him as He has been preparing you all these years. There is not only one way to do missions. Prayers, financial support, teaching trips, spreading the word of mission efforts are only some of the many different ways in which you can participate and extend your helping hand to brothers and sisters in Christ to show our unity in Christ, to let them know that they are not alone in their work of building the Church on a solid foundation.

Although, Lithuania today is open to Christianity, it has not been easy for Christians there. With religious freedom come competitive and money driven cults and religious groups snatching away the sheep. One of the major shortcomings is lack of theologically educated Christian leadership. Many Reformed communities are in great need of pastors and teachers. For this reason ITEM is involved in the mission of training national Christian leaders by establishing a theological school there and providing professors and funds to make a long lasting impact on Christian community and society at large.

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.” 1 Cor. 3:6-9

Source Materials Used: www.nationmaster.com; History of Christianity in Lithuania from Wikipedia; Religion and the Churches in Modern Lithuania; www.send.org/lithuania; International Religious Freedom Report, Winter 2007; www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/