

operate.

They also approve the rules, operational methods and aims of the associations and societies. Taking into account the freedom to assemble, they may hold their meetings on the basis of these approved rules, methods and aims.

Associations which have names suggesting a religious character, but which have been granted permission to operate by the appropriate state body, can be considered Catholic associations only if they are accepted by the Catholic Church.

State bodies should not contribute to the working of associations with Catholic names.

Religious orders may also exist to assist the church in its operation. The individual religious orders may enjoy community life according to their own rules. They may freely maintain contact with their highest superiors, even if they reside abroad. Their field of endeavour, their means of subsistence, their social security all take place as laid down in an agreement signed with the relevant state bodies when the order began to function. If someone is a member of an order as a Hungarian citizen, he or she may take up work with non-church em-

ployers in accordance with the valid regulations (e.g. nursing the sick in hospital).

Church Press. The church has the right to make use of the tools of mass communication to ensure its own operation and to express its teaching. It may publish religious books without restriction. Similarly it may issue national, diocesan, and parish publications, and take responsibility for the launching of new church papers.

The planned law will probably affect the wide sphere of life that is related to religion, and deals with areas that universal church law also regulates.

For this reason, in the interest of bringing the two legal systems into harmony before publication, the Hungarian Catholic community feels it desirable that the Hungarian People's Republic and the Holy See harmonise their standpoints, whether through informal discussions, or — if possible — through a broader range of contact between the two sides, set up with the agreement of them both. Such an agreement might be a worthy preparation for, or suitable complement to, the law on religion.

Which Way to the Church?

Juris Rubenis, pastor of the Luther Church in Liepaja and lecturer at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Riga, is probably one of the best known clergymen in Latvia today. For several years he has been one of a group of younger Lutheran pastors trying to persuade the Latvian Lutheran hierarchy to adopt a more independent attitude towards the state and thus assist the present

process of renewal within the Latvian Lutheran Church.

Rubenis is a close friend of Modris Plate and Maris Ludviks, two popular and active clergymen who were dismissed in spring 1987 by the Lutheran Consistory at the demand of the state authorities. In protest at this, on 14 June 1987 Rubenis, Plate and 13 other Lutheran clergymen and theological lecturers formed a group

entitled 'Rebirth and Renewal' — whose aim was 'to defend openly the right of Latvians to lead a Christian life'. × Like the other members of this group, Rubenis wished to end the post-war decline of the Lutheran Church in Latvia and to involve it more actively in the national revival that had begun in the republic as a result of the hopes aroused by Gorbachev's glasnost' policy. Rubenis was among the first to participate in various new religious and national organisations that were founded in 1987-88 in Latvia — for example, in the Želsirdība (Charity) movement, that united doctors, academics and religious believers in promoting the concept of charitable activity by individuals rather than the state. Together with his colleagues from the Theological Seminary, Rubenis took part in producing *Ceļš (The Way)*, the first theological journal to be published in Latvia since the war.

He also took an active part in founding the Latvian Popular Front, an umbrella organisation representing various cultural, ecological and human rights groups — both unofficial and official — and thus reflecting Latvian public opinion fairly accurately. In October 1988 Rubenis was elected as a member of the LPF's council. His involvement in this organisation, which included other representatives of Latvian churches and of the Latvian Jewish community, was undoubtedly due to his conviction that the moral and spiritual values taught by the church should be emphasised at this possible turning-point in history, and that the church should assist the Latvian people in reviewing their past and planning the future according to these values.

× See '“Rebirth and Renewal” in the Latvian Lutheran Church', RCL Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 237-49.

The state authorities did not necessarily approve of this. After the article printed below by Rubenis was published in *Padomju Jaunatne* on 27 August 1988, the four leading Latvian and Russian newspapers in the Latvian SSR — *Cina (Battle)*, *Padomju Jaunatne*, *Sovetskaya Latvija* and *Sovetskaya Molodezh'* — received a letter from the Commissioner for Religious Affairs in Latvia, E. Kokars-Trops, objecting to the publicity given by the press to people such as Rubenis and Plate. He declared that while clergymen should be given an opportunity to express their viewpoint in the media, this should not apply to the 'schismatic' Rebirth and Renewal group, who had 'set themselves up against the Archbishop'.

The influence exerted by Rubenis and the 'Rebirth and Renewal' group was, however, demonstrated on 9 October 1988, when delegates to the LPF's Congress in Riga supported a request by Rubenis that they should be allowed to hold a religious service in the former Lutheran Cathedral, which had been transformed into a concert hall by the state authorities. To everyone's surprise, the state granted permission for the service, which was conducted by the Revs. Plate and Rubenis. That this service meant a great deal to Rubenis himself is clear from an interview he gave in Brussels on 16 October, while on his way to visit Latvian Lutherans in Canada. He felt

it could even be described as a miracle. . . You understand, of course, that I had no way of pulling strings in order to influence the higher officials responsible. . . but the leaders of our movement must have devoted a great deal of effort to arranging it with the powers that be. . .

In his opinion, the service marked 'a turning point' in the evolution of Latvian society.

That was shown by the way people reacted afterwards. The service was seen on TV all over Latvia and led to a kind of seismic disturbance in people, if I may put it that way. . . . On that day a great many people reconsidered all that they had built up against faith in God.

Rubenis emphasised that, if the church was to accompany the Latvian people into the future, it must make clear to them the importance of spiritual values.

The spiritual element must not be pushed into second place, it should always be in a position of influence. . . . People need it, they seek it, even if they don't know the right words or the right place to look. . . . We create various external structures, we try to achieve external successes, but for all this we need an inner, spiritual fulfilment.

He felt the need for

a radical change in the Church's role, its situation and opportunities in our society, . . . for truly democratic possibilities within our state and the social system, such as the permitted use of the mass media. . . . We can in fact say that the fight for a new, full-blooded role for the church in our Latvian society is also a fight for Latvian society as such, for the existence of spiritual values, a real, Christian spirituality, in Latvian society. . .

'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed... The kingdom of God is within you.'
(Luke 17:20-21)

*We live in a border time — a time when not only economic systems and the rules of engineering and technology change, but when also the ideas humanity has about the order of the world, and even people's vision changes. (G. Ziedonis in *Literatura un Maksla*, 1 January 1988)*

I see my role in aiding this.

For the church to play a new role in society, Rubenis feels the repeal of the present Law on Religious Associations to be essential.

The state authorities have never been quite sure how to deal with the 'Rebirth and Renewal' movement and its clergymen. That Rubenis was permitted to visit Latvian Lutherans in Canada shows that the state recognises his ability to influence the Latvian emigre community. However, the state may well be unwilling to allow 'Rebirth and Renewal' further concessions in Latvia itself. There are indications that the authorities are going back on their offer to return the Lutheran Cathedral to the believers for worship — at Christmas the Lutherans were not allowed to hold a service in the Cathedral and the Latvian Minister of Culture stated on Moscow TV that it would remain a concert-hall. It is probable that the state authorities intend to play the 'Rebirth and Renewal' group of clergymen off against the more timid and conservative Lutheran clergy, headed by Archbishop Mesters. The open commitment of Juris Rubenis and the 'Rebirth and Renewal' group to the Latvian Popular Front may make this easier — or more difficult — in a year when the LPF intends to become involved in the promised new-style elections in the Latvian SSR.

One of the most characteristic traits of recent times is that every day we receive a great deal of new, often unexpected information. This information reveals certain aspects of our society to a wider public, as if for the first time. We learn to recognise our society as a much more complex structure than it seemed to us even quite recently. One of the phrases which has burst like a whirlwind into the mass media is 'the Christian Church'. Of course, it is not as if this

phrase had been unknown until now, but it has changed from a static into a dynamic concept. This has happened as a result of two circumstances coinciding. On the one hand, the process of democratisation tends to give opportunities for the public expression of opinion to representatives of various strata within society. On the other, it was in this year that the millennium of Russia's Christianisation was celebrated. This anniversary attracted to the celebrations in Moscow clergymen from various denominations and countries.

So society is meeting the Church, meeting it not as a dying organism but as something that still has a remarkable identity. Writing earlier this year in *Ogonyok* (No. 21, 1988) K. Kharchev, the commissioner for religious affairs, stated that there were 70 million believers in the USSR. . . [Yet] some administrative officials have looked upon the Church as a tolerated remnant of feudalism which should be 'helped' to liquidate itself. Now, when relationships formed in this way are becoming part of the past, the question of democratically formed, long-term new relationships has come to the fore.

It is not, however, a simple matter to form a new relationship. Often a true knowledge of Christianity, of the idea of the Church and its possible role in our socio-economic development, has been replaced by stereotyped clichés about 'the overall harmfulness of religion', a phrase which apparently needs no justification. Additional difficulties have been caused by one-sided attempts to define the Church as a social institution or an expression of one form of social consciousness, but not on its own terms. The majority of people have a very vague idea of the basic principles of the Church and of Christianity, aided in this by a great deal of 'popular scientific' atheist

articles, which have fought against the faith by consciously vulgarising and tendentially interpreting it, thus giving the impression that the matter had been 'settled'.

For example, we use the words 'God', 'faith', 'sacred', 'conscience', and 'Church' — sometimes it is astonishing how passionately these words are used, though more often they are used unthinkingly or inappropriately — but what does each person understand by these words?

Do we each have the right to use them as we please? Experience shows that popular ideas of these concepts are unimaginably far from their Christian meaning. On occasion I have spoken to people who categorically object to faith in 'god', but when it became clear what they thought 'god' was like we could agree that there was really no point in believing in such a 'god'. A great many of the public have an extremely one-sided knowledge of the Church. This is even more serious when it leads biased people to pass 'final judgement' on the Church. Lots of us are like the city dweller who on his way to work passes a church every day and knows it perfectly well from the outside while remaining unclear about what goes on 'inside'. In order to develop an objective, or to put it more simply, an honest attitude towards Christianity and its expression, people must first of all have an adequate knowledge of it.

Indeed, how far do we even know the Bible? After all, knowledge of it is the indissoluble corner stone of European education. Not knowing the Bible creates problems even on the level of everyday life. 'Without knowing the Bible it is impossible to understand the art of earlier centuries: our children have had this taken away from them' (V. Belševica in *Skola un Gimene* No. 11, 1987).

To believe or not to believe is every individual's personal choice. But to

know what the phenomenon of faith means and has meant in the course of civilisation is immensely important to everyone who does not wish to retain narrow minded anti-religious prejudices which, incidentally, are no better than religious prejudices. It is important to know not only about the negative side of church history but also about the positive forces inspired by Christianity. In choosing whether to believe, people must know the object of faith — this is especially important to the potential Christian and to the future atheist. The age of 'blind faith' in Christianity is now in the distant past; we live in a time of responsible and conscious faith. However, we must stop using the terms 'believer' and 'unbeliever' with the underlying meaning of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'.

It is not by chance that one of the slogans of restructuring is 'more spiritual feeling'. This shows a perception that we do not base our lives only on an external foundation, but on our inner (existential not emotional) experiences. And this world of inner experiences has, it appears, been ignored until now. In my view spirituality means finding a universal reference point beyond physical reality, which continually activates that physical reality, upholds it at moments of tension, impels it ever upwards and, most importantly of all, forces it to take responsibility for its own action. We are beginning to realise that the most important part of a person is the inner world (the cry of modern literature for the human soul!). Yet it is unlikely that we shall soon be able to hold beauty contests in inner beauty. It is in a person's inner world that thoughts are born, thoughts which are expressed in activity of one kind or another. So the world of outward events is closely dependent upon people's inner order and harmony. The future of the

world and civilisation has become more than ever an ethical and moral problem.

The time has come to admit that the Church has survived until our own times not because it knew 'how to adapt skilfully' to each age — on the contrary, history shows that wherever the Church adapted to outward circumstances it lost by it — but rather because it productively tackled the so called eternal problems, the questions of human existence. And these are the questions with which each person begins his life. Of course, everyone has the right to their own opinion of the opportunity offered by Christianity to give human life a meaning. But it should be noticed that the Christian model of life through the centuries has kept its attraction, not because of its 'illusory offers' but because it is seen to be truly effective and fruitful. . .

This admission encourages the thought that the time has finally come for a frank dialogue between three sides: the Christians, the atheists and those in between. The idea of such a dialogue is nothing new. In the 1920s public discussions were organised in Moscow between Lunacharsky and Orthodox Metropolitan Vvedensky. In many East European countries, in addition to the bible study which takes place in Hungarian schools, similar discussions have become an everyday affair.

The aim of such dialogue does not have to be confrontation, each trying to convert the other according to his own image or to 'overcome' him. Instead it can deepen mutual understanding and self-enrichment. Such dialogue could be presented in all kinds of ways, but the basic principle must be toleration and mutual understanding. Accepting the idea of toleration will allow us to sleep peacefully even if our opponent goes away without changing his views.

Another common denominator in the sphere of contacts between Church and public institutions, which is appearing ever more clearly, is in the field of charitable and cultural work. Sick people and ailing works of art need love and care, the lack of which we feel so sharply. It is to be hoped that the Cultural Fund, the charitable movement or other similar associations, such as new organisations formed in the period of restructuring, will include in their principles elements of democracy and toleration, and thus be capable of uniting people of different convictions on the road to common spiritual progress.

We need to touch on one more question whose incorrect solution has led to problems that need not have existed. I feel that many anomalies among our young people have been made worse by the blind activities of official functionaries whose motto was: it doesn't matter what a young person is like so long as he does not go to church. Thus the religious services I organise during the main festivals are visited by 'hunting brigades' of teachers from the nearby school. And pupils seen in church will catch it later! I should like to think that such happenings are irrevocably fading into the past. It is not

without reason that, during the period of restructuring, it has been asserted that 'ideological advances are impossible at the expense of universal ethical norms'. The Church, for its part, would be prepared to cooperate, by helping in the social rehabilitation of former drug addicts, prisoners, etc.

I would like to conclude my unsystematic reflections, whose aim it is to act as an invitation to discussion, with a quotation from an article in the journal *Avots* (No. 8, 1987), which had a somewhat 'religious' title: 'Let doubting Thomas speak as well': 'I cannot get rid of the thought that we still talk far too little about the most important things: I mean the mysteries of the development of the human soul. . .

Juris Rubenis
Pastor, Master of Theology.
May 1988

P.S. Philosophers, historians, legal experts, artists and writers are also invited to participate in this exchange of views. Spiritual survival is a subject for each and everyone of us. . .

*Translated from Latvian
by Marite Sapiets*