

## *Faith in Europe?*

THE KEENE LECTURES 2006

### ***'Faith for the Future'***

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I'm profoundly touched and grateful for this honour to present one of the Keene Lectures this evening. It affords me an opportunity to reflect on the religious situation in my country, Latvia, as it has emerged from 50 years of occupation. It's a case study of what deformation takes place when there's a massive assault on a country's religious and cultural traditions and the resulting effects on its religious life when that assault is removed.

I have an observation and a thesis to offer you.

My observation is that it is unfortunately very easy to deform, and in large part remove, the religious commitments and habits of a people. As a youth I'd have thought that religion is so deeply ingrained in a culture, in a tradition, in a set of attitudes and habits, that it would survive. That's not the case. It's certainly not the case in the particular instance of Latvia. And my thesis is that once this has been done, the revival of religion doesn't begin at the point at which you lost it, but has to return to a much earlier period.

I'm not going to extensively develop either this observation or this thesis, but that's the background of everything that I want to say to you this evening.

You are being very generous in giving your time to hear about a country that probably is very distant in both perception and geography to your own experiences and needs, and is really in some ways of minor importance to the scheme of things, even European. I follow Sky and BBC News and journals and magazines, and am well aware of the most recent warnings and challenges that have been put forward about the threat of terrorist actions on mainland Britain. I felt very distinct parallels with Latvia when I read and heard about second and third generation Muslim youths feeling not quite in place here and finding solace in their religious tradition, saying that their parents were not real Muslims, and girls wearing veils that their mothers would never have worn and have never worn.

The population of Latvia is 2,300,000, and while it's a population of great variety in terms of ethnic origin, there is no Muslim problem as yet. There are only nine refugees in Latvia. Seven of them are with me in a home for children for which I am responsible; they having been thrown out of every other place.

But the parallels between Latvia and the Muslim problem here are not with refugees, but with the role of fundamentalist religious attitudes. It's much the same whether it's a Muslim fundamentalism or a Christian fundamentalism, and I'll be pointing out some of those compatibilities and parallels shortly. I wanted to know what this phenomenon is, what is the fundamentalist way of using and experiencing religion all about, and I want to look at that case in the instance of Latvia.

By way of introduction, let me make some very ordinary connections between Great Britain and Latvia. First of all, there's a trade connection that goes back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. Latvia was always the bridge to Russia. It had the only ice-free port to mainland Russia and it was therefore a trading area. Most of Henry VIII's ships were masted by pine trees from Latvia, and the Battle of Trafalgar is really in part also the Battle of the Pine Masts from Latvia!

The Anglican Church in the capital Riga indicates the presence of a vital British community 200 years ago. It was set up first as a benevolent society at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to help the sailors who came on trading ships to Riga. The local English business community was tired of individually having to haul out of prisons and pay fines for sailors who'd got into trouble, so they created a co-operative benevolent society so that they shared this onerous task, and that was the beginning of the Anglican church in Riga. I think it's a wonderful way for a church to begin.

One of the most illustrious mayors of Riga, George Armistead, was a British citizen and is regarded as being the best mayor that Riga has ever had. He had a long tenure and is known for many innovative projects. The independence of Latvia, at the end of the First World War, was really on the backs of the sacrifice of British servicemen who served on several ships that sailed into Riga harbour and gave protection to the Latvian forces who'd have been overwhelmed if it hadn't been for the British assistance. Just two weeks ago His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh unveiled a plaque, in St Saviour's Anglican Church, in commemoration of the 112 British servicemen who gave their lives for the independence of Latvia in 1919-1921.

Latvia, as I say, is just south of Finland. It's a border state, constantly ravaged by powers to the right and to the left of it - Russia and Germany – and at times also the Swedes, or the Poles, from the south. It's like the Plain of Megiddo where armies constantly move through and on. It's also a border between East and West, both politically and religiously. You've got the Orthodox Russians and the Roman Catholic and Protestant Western Europeans, and this has both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage for Latvia, and one of the reasons this small territory remains a country, is because it's needed by both sides. Neither wants to be bordered by the greater power and so these buffer states are always useful politically. The disadvantage is that it creates a prominent identity problem: a feeling of being abused and misused and misunderstood, a psychic experience of continual life under threat, a feeling that you are being acted upon rather than being an actor on the wider stage.

But Latvia has also been, and especially the port of Riga, a typical mercantile, large, busy port, in many ways like London. Such ports are places where new ideas quickly make their appearance, and that's certainly true of Riga. Lutheranism was preached from pulpits in the city. Luther wrote a letter to his sympathisers in Riga; and for that reason it also has been traditionally very liberal.

In the twenties and thirties of the last century, when the country was first independent, the religious tradition was very influenced by the most liberal wing of Germany. Bultmann was a great influence and representatives of all the higher criticism of the Bible were on the staff of the theological faculty. In education it's been very progressive (Herder being a prominent influence), and in music Wagner wrote his first opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, in Riga. He left without paying his debts!

On women's ordination, the church had no problems. It was simply assumed as a natural development. But the ravages of war brought less liberal experiences and

attitudes in other periods, and the most recent deformation was the Soviet occupation of Latvia from 1944 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. It was a fifty-year occupation, which meant forced Russification and massive influxes of Russian migrant workers into industries that are not natural to Latvia, which is really an agrarian country. To this day, 35% of the population is ethnically Russian and up to 47% are citizens of other countries now living in Latvia because of the Soviet period.

This Soviet period brought tremendous moral deformations of character to the Latvian people, which we see in almost every aspect of life to this day. Latvians have historically been regarded as very hard-working, conscientious people, but the Soviets did away with that attitude because the work was so useless and so badly organised. Any self-respecting person thought they were being terribly abused. This is especially true of the men, for whom work is the mainstay of their identity, and the psyche of the men in Latvia has for the most part been very disfigured. As a result we have a greater number of divorces and problems of alcoholism and child abuse than was ever the case before. It also has meant the corruption of political and social life.

It has also destroyed trust among people. In English you have a word that's ordinary and natural called 'relationship'. In Latvian we don't have a word for 'relationship' and we don't even have the attitude. When I teach my students theology, it's very hard for me in some aspects to tell them what communion and *communio sanctorum* types of relationships are all about. They have no vocation for them, and it has also meant the collapse of ideals and hopes.

In the Soviet period, religion was first of all ostracised and then permitted in small doses as long as it was very contained within the walls of religious buildings. It was vilified constantly by massive propaganda against religion, against pastors, against clergymen. They were regarded as deviants, both sexual and in other ways. Religious people were treated as being mad - religion itself as being a type of craziness - and these attitudes remain to this day. Some of my students who go out for work hide the fact that they have studied at the Faculty of Theology, because their director or owner will have a negative attitude, thinking that the person is really not very stable if he is interested in religion or has studied at a theological faculty.

This erosion of religious habit is, in the Latvian case, obvious, massive, and observable. It exemplifies what can happen - and in my personal opinion does happen, in other places - let's say Great Britain or in Europe in general - in slower motion than in Latvia. In Latvia it was done suddenly and deliberately. In other places we don't notice that it's happening, so that in a sense you can look at Latvia and see what some of the consequences are, and perhaps it's a sobering warning.

The overt religious participation in the life of the congregation has in many ways collapsed, in Great Britain, in Germany, in Sweden and in Denmark. Grace Davey has pointed out, in her many explorations of European Christianity, that while for the vast majority religion has become a secondary habit, it nevertheless has the advantage that there is a background and rather profound collection of tradition and experience which still works its way in the population. Her tag statement about 'believing without belonging' and the vicarious nature of religious observance by the few for the many, is very accurately positing what the situation is in most of Europe. But it doesn't apply in Latvia, because you no longer have this deep, profound religious observance and experience.

Let me turn to this religious situation in Latvia. I've mentioned the destruction and distortion of religious habit. This was done on a massive, persistent and deliberate

scale. All religion suffered, but the Lutheran church in particular was most badly mauled in those fifty years. The more hierarchical and authoritarian character of Roman Catholic practice made it a useful tool for the government to control. The more free-wheeling Lutherans were more heavily sat upon than the other groups, with the result that in Latvia the registered religious community is a small minority, 20% at most. The churches give official figures which are inflated by an increment of ten times, and therefore a fiction. The actual registered membership, let alone the worshipping community, represents at most, of all denominations together, 20%. That means that 80% are unchurched in Latvia.

But there is still a residual religious memory. A poll taken in the year 2000 of all Latvia didn't ask the question: 'Are you a member of the church?' but asked a more interesting question: 'To which religious tradition do you feel you belong?' Only about 19% said they didn't belong to any religious tradition. Eighty per cent were able to identify a religious tradition that they belong to, and the surprising thing was that the poll percentages reflected the pre-Second World War make-up of the religious faiths of Latvia. A majority were Lutherans, with the Roman Catholics coming in second, and the Orthodox a distant third.

But those were the statistics among the native Latvians. Now, of course, we have a large Russian population, and when the poll included the Russian population, the largest grouping was the Lutherans, representing some 28%, with the Orthodox second, representing about 22% of the population, and the Roman Catholics about 19%. We have large numbers of 'Old Believers' (a wing of the Orthodox Church), plus Baptists, Adventists and every new movement that is in Europe. There's a special affinity in Latvia for everything Eastern – Hinduism, Buddhism and every type of Eastern tradition. Most of them have at least a small smattering of people who are interested and followers.

But while there is this memory, it doesn't transfer to any kind of active, positive attitude towards the church. The Lutheran Church was created anew when Latvia regained its independence in 1990-1. Most of the pastors came from families which had lost their religious affiliation. Most of the pastors are recently baptised, and the church itself is looking for a model for being a church. It doesn't know what Lutheranism is, or what Protestantism is, and its closest model is Roman Catholicism. For this reason the Lutheran Church is looking more and more like the Roman Catholic Church. I asked the Archbishop why is he going to the trouble of writing a constitution which looks so much like the constitution of the Roman Catholic Church, but he didn't appreciate my comment! In most ways I couldn't identify any marks that would make this church a Lutheran Church, or even Protestant.

So what is the purpose of the Lutheran Church as it is now reformed in this aftermath of the disaster of the Soviet occupation? It's really to create, I would say, an identity for people who've lost their identity. I don't mean religious identity, I mean their identity as a people; the church used for that resurrection of a personal identity. The result of that is that, as I see it, the church is of necessity made to be a place of security and reassurance, a sort of fortress against everything and everyone.

Secondly, it is a place that has to draw very clear lines about those who are in and who are out, about the believer and the unbeliever, about the traditionalist and the liberal. For this reason you have a lot of discussion about Satan. I think it would be the case that most sermons would have at least one reference to Satan, and many of them have numerous references in every sermon given on a Sunday. There's much talk about the Satanic and so on.

Thirdly, it means that words like 'ecumenism', 'pluralism' and 'tolerance' are words that are a temptation of the devil for Lutheran pastors and Lutheran congregations. It's for that reason that the 'Porvoo' Agreement between Lutheran and Anglican Churches in the northern European area was rejected by the Latvian Lutheran Church. It instead returns to traditional Lutheran confessions and refuses to ask the question: 'What should we say and believe today? How should we express our belief in the current context?' It also means that the participation of the Lutheran Church in the wider church, in the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, is taken to be a mistake. In fact there are attempts to get the Church out of these larger unions. Instead the Church joins with fringe groups in Germany and one of the very conservative and non-participatory churches in the United States, the Missouri Synod.

It also means that this need for identity results in an arrogance - the arrogance of the frightened, I would put it. That is, you'd never have a public discussion of any issue. The Church maintains you can privately discuss but you can never discuss publicly any issue that would cause any dispute or a disagreement or difference of opinion.

Above all, it has meant that – and this is perhaps the saddest part of it – it has meant that one searches for convenient scapegoats for one's inner unhappiness and insecurity, and the churches found them in homosexuality, in the feminist movement, and has expressed it by its participation by the church leadership in very scurrilous publications in Latvia that are anti-Semitic, anti-Russian, anti-gay, and so on. Remember that 'pluralism' means the ability to understand others who are quite different, whose attitude and whose manners are quite different. It's the ability to tolerate, that is, to bear, these differences and the psychological precondition for that ability is an inner security. It is my observation that that inner security unfortunately is lacking, that trust in life and, we have to say, trust in God, is not really there.

Now I've been describing the Lutheran Church, and it might seem to you that I'm being rather extreme and negative about it. I really say all of this with sadness, because I feel that of course it's the work of a deliberate regime that wanted to destroy the faith. But individuals also have to take the responsibility for their lack of faith, to counter the assaults on their faith. I've been speaking about the Lutheran Church, but of course that applies in equal measure to all the other traditional confessions and denominations in Latvia. This came to a striking, observable head in the events last year and this year around so-called Gay Pride marches, where all the denominations could join with each other in common cause, not only with each other but also with numerous anti-Christian and anti-religious groupings to fight their common enemy which brought them all together. You had all the denominations from the whole spectrum of the Christian community in Latvia, the wild-eyed charismatic groupings, Russian, very radical groups on the one hand, to the very traditional Orthodox on the other, with every type of skinhead and radical in between gathered around the same cause, and the mobs that were around the Anglican Church last year and the people who threw human excrement this year were all part of that one coalition.

We had the astounding image of well-known church leaders giving interviews on television which invited violence and promised more violence to, as they said, remove this evil from the community. This disparate alliance found common cause around the single hatred, and that is that atavistic device of defining oneself not by whom you are but by the people you are against. You're against someone rather than being for some personal identity that you already possess. And that's the most unhappy feature of this post-Soviet church experience.

The sadness, of course, as you will recognise and I suppose in some ways you feel uncomfortable listening to me to this rather dour description, is that the religious community is always the one that should be providing the ideals for the society, even if they are not lived up to. It would be the community that has an understanding of victimisation, it would be the community that would know what compassion and works of healing are about, it would be the community that would set up ideals and hopes, it would be the community that would encourage listening and understanding of different groups and parts of the society, it would be a community that would have a desire to learn to speak the truth, and not to misuse language.

For example, there isn't a single publication that speaks about homosexuality in the religious press that doesn't immediately link it to paedophilia and the feminist movement. Well, that's just a misuse of terminology, it's a wrong speaking, it's a not-speaking-the-truth. If the church fails to speak the truth, or at least try to speak the truth, then it's of course failing at a very fundamental level.

I've always felt that a church that lacks generosity to its fellow persons is a church that dishonours God. It displays a lack of trust in the creator of other human beings. Abraham Heschel, this wonderful prophet of the Jewish community, once said the most important pre-requisite for interfaith is faith, and I've always understood that. It's no good talking about interfaith, understanding, if you're not going to have faith.

So there are certain lessons that we can take from this Latvian experience. The work of the Christian faith is the work of habit formation. We create a certain kind of character over time which displays itself. Lacking that, you're just left with attitudes and points of view. But a true Christian community is one that creates this stable character - let's call it stable identity – that displays itself in the way this identity speaks, acts, encourages and lives with others.

When Latvia regained its freedom, it was very obvious that removing the outer chains really did not remove the inner chains, and if you're still bound by those inner chains, the removal of the outer chains is for quite a while of small matter. It's also the case that under duress, one knows what one opposes, but one has little chance to learn what one stands *for*. I find that while most Latvians understood they didn't want the occupation of Russian forces on their land, they had no clear common vision of what they *did* want in and on and by their land. And, thirdly, one can lose these habits of character. In Latvia's case, these religious habits were lost because they were massively and deliberately obliterated. In other western countries, religious habits may be lost more slowly, by attrition.

Fifty years isn't a long time to lose religious habits, but to regain them is a long road back. That brings to me to ask what is the attraction of this harsh, judgemental, rather hate-filled religious attitude? I've already suggested that it's the need for one's personal identity and self-security. But a part of that is, I believe, in a rather interesting observation that Martin Amis made in a short story about Muslims, and this brings me back to make connection between the Muslim and the Latvian experience. Amis said (and I don't take this as a derogatory description), 'Islam is a tremendously severe religion. Islam is nothing without its severity.' I was struck by that. I believe that word very accurately describes something crucial in fundamentalism. The fundamentalist attitude or the fundamentalist experience is a kind of severity. It promotes, it provides and it requires a severity that helps some people deal with the terrors of the plurality of experience and life, the manifold options, viewpoints, experiences, the fluidity and contradictions that we as adults know life to be. Teenagers and young people searching for their identity appreciate this cutting-down of options by a severe regimen, and I think that's what's going on in

the case of these new countries, Latvia just being an example of all the post-Soviet countries, where we as adults learn to live with contradictions, with mystery, with unexplained and inexplicable trends and events. But the teenager longs for a foundation and a firmness. In these religious fundamentalist religious expressions there is little trust of unreason, of intuition, of the emotional side, or of the mystery of life. Everything has to be defined and fixed, with a severity which is practised on oneself and imposed on others.

And finally, I don't think it's an accident that the Latvian Lutheran Church didn't sign the Porvoo Agreement. As I conclude, so that I bring it closer to your experience, I want to reflect on the differences between the Lutheran and the Anglican attitude towards faith. I was here helped by my Archdeacon, Mark Oakley, who said some very delightful and very insightful things about the Anglican experience, and some of that I rehearse here. And as I turn to these points, I think it would be wonderful if the Lutheran Church would subscribe to the Porvoo Agreement and therefore have the benefit of this more gentle – if I can put it that way – experience of what the Christian faith is all about. I offer, as I conclude, differences between the Lutheran and the Anglican attitudes.

- The Lutheran Church, unlike the Anglican Church, is systematic and confessional, whereas the Anglican experience is more pastoral and liturgical. In the Lutheran tradition you have this need to over-define God. We were looking at a plaque commemorating the great divine Thomas Hooker, who said he was 'against the over-confident definition of God for the sake of God'. I think that's a wonderful phrase.
- In its best moments, the Anglican Church sees itself as a large house, and not as self-contained huts: a broad church that includes, as you know, a very large spectrum from one side to the other, from the high to the broad, to the low, evangelical, liberal, liturgical and so on.
- In the Anglican Church, God is not a schoolmaster checking for mistakes. Mark Oakley has a wonderful phrase – 'God is reckless with his welcome'. God has no self-interest or purpose to his love. This wonderful exchange – someone asked, 'What did Jesus do on Saturday after Good Friday? And a little girl said, 'He went down to Hell to look for his friend Judas.' A wonderful description of Christianity.
- Understanding what matters to us helps us to understand what matters to others. That is, true faith makes us more rather than less tolerant.
- Finally, a believer is always learning and this requires tremendous patience. Without such passionate patience, we will do damage to other people and to our own faith. We will injure rather than heal.

Now, what is the solution? I work with young people and with children. I have a wonderful helper who has one gift to a remarkable degree - a gift that I don't have. She is able to truly like the children and the young people she is with, regardless of their oddities, unacceptable attitudes and ways. She really likes the children, and they recognise it. I feel that all injured people first need to know that there's someone who likes them, who welcomes them, rather than judges or puts them down. It's an enormous challenge. Again and again I'm exhilarated when I see someone who can do it as a natural gift, because it encourages me to know what the true answer to all these problems is. I see it working practically day in

and day out. My work with these children, with these teens, has taught me that there's nothing that heals except this unconditional love, however hard it is to deliver. And that's also the reason that love is not reasonable. Love defies reason, and I suppose the last thing I want to say is that that's why the God we worship through Jesus Christ is so very, very strange.

I thank you for this privilege of speaking to you.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **'To rediscover relationship' – is this where the Gospel intersects with Latvia's need?**

I was just speaking with Peter Judd here. He referred to 'suit of armour Christianity'. I think it's a very apt image. In a suit of armour you really are incapable of most types of relationships, that is, you move stiffly, you avoid contact, you hide, and are really isolated. And I think the question is very apt because of course relationship is of the essence. What does relationship mean? It means that there is an exchange, there's a discussion, there's a passionate connection, and not that everyone thinks the same. In fact, there's no point in discussing if everyone's the same.

But the oddity is to be capable of that exercise, because it's a risk. What if you're wrong? What if the other one convinces you? What if your position is mistaken? How much of that can you take? And it's this avoidance of putting yourself in this position where you might be required to be a bit humble, open, in danger and rather unprotected, which is the problem of this kind of fear that is at the base of the problem as I see it.

question that comes back though is then, how do we encourage someone to open up, to actually discuss, to risk the challenge of that exchange? And again I return to my experience with the teens. You know their attitudes: some of them are arrogant and cocky, they're full of their cool and their put-downs and their carelessness and their indifference and 'it doesn't apply to me' and all this stuff. Well, I know those are all defences. Behind that is a very frightened little child. So how do we get the little child to just stay to the side a bit and let the adult engage in some discussion? It's a special gift, but truly that's the gift of our faith, isn't it?

### **Does the situation in Estonia and Lithuania mirror that of Latvia?**

The situation in Estonia is somewhat similar. The only thing is that it has had a greater experience of Western openness because of its long connection with Finland through television, even in the Soviet period, and so you had an influx of certain kinds of ideas and attitudes that have worked their way into the Estonian experience.

In the Lithuanian case you have had a very strong identity around the Roman Catholic Church, even during the Soviet period. The church was always the remnant of that national identity. Lithuania also is a former colonial power, which also gives it a kind of greater history. Latvia was set upon by a massive influx of non-Latvians. In Lithuania you have 4% Russians, in Estonia you have 22%, in Latvia you had at one point 55% Russians. That changes the experience of confidence, of threat, of assurance, of being in control of your own life and so on, and for that reason I think Latvia is slightly different.

**Do you think that membership of the European Union helps to develop a more tolerant and compassionate society in Latvia?**

I think it helps with the society in general because the European Union requires certain practices and that in the end will create also a kind of person. But in the [Latvian] church the European Union is being used as the foil for its antagonistic and critical comments, so that everything evil really comes from the decadent West represented by the European Union. The European Union is used, at present at least, as the whipping boy for the church's own hardened attitudes.

**During the time of the Soviet occupation, the media must have been used to create a negative view of religion. Can the media now be used in a positive way to balance this?**

Of course, but then you have to have a positive face to religion in Latvia. At present the media are turned off by all the religious communities, and this is not because they are anti-Christian. In fact, they search for a Christian expression, and they'd be very happy to propagandise; they recognise what compassion means, they recognise what tolerance means, they recognise what understanding means, they recognise people who are peacemakers and not troublemakers, and they would I think propagandise these values to the hilt, unlike, for example, most of the Western press.

In Latvia they are hungering for positive expressions, images and events. I apologise for what might sound like somehow putting myself in the limelight, but I have to say that on most religious issues the press comes to me, not because I'm of any particular significance, but for the simple reason that they know there's no point in going to the Church leaders because all you'll get is a potted answer. And nobody wants to hear a potted answer. Also because of the work I do with the refugees and the children. The media are constantly at my door, just for a positive example of something that's wonderful and something that they can appreciate. The sadness is that that image is not being given by the religious community. I think that it's somewhat unfair, because there are many positive things that the religious community and many pastors are doing in Latvia. But the leadership and the church on the whole presents a negative response to human beings, to other citizens, to communities, to minorities, and the media are turned off by this hostile and hateful attitude.

**In schools, what are children and young people being taught about religion and faith issues?**

The school programme provides a place for religious instruction of two kinds. One is of general religious information, such as ethical instruction or morals. The other is an opportunity for those who want education in confessional, denominational expressions of the faith. It's not easy because many of the school directors really have a negative and hostile attitude towards religion as whole. They are suspicious of it, so that it really depends on the local school director. Even though the programme requires this, the local director has a lot of clout and initiative in how much he or she permits and encourages this kind of instruction. At present it's rather patchy. The faculty of which I'm the dean is responsible for preparing teachers for this task. We've tackled it on a massive scale, but it's very hard going.

**Chris Newlands: Juris, I want to thank you for all that you've fed us with this evening. You have given us a tremendous insight into your country and your context and the wider view of the new Europe and those countries which are**

**new to that wider grouping of nations. You have also allowed us to see ourselves in the mirror that you have held up for us, to see how we are perceived by others and how we are able to fulfil our calling as Church here in this country and the work that we do in regard to the Europe, of which you are a part in the chaplaincy in Riga, and many other places. Thank you so much for giving us such wisdom, such depth and such insight, and I do want to thank you on behalf of us all very much indeed.**