

Challenges and Opportunities in the Healing of Church Memories: Reflections on Baptist-Catholic Relations in Lithuania¹

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Written as a response to a theme of ‘Challenges and Opportunities in the Healing of Church Memories’ for the Phase III of the Joint Commission for the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, this article investigates the Lithuanian speaking Baptist-Catholic relations. Providing an overview of the country’s geopolitical, cultural and religious context, it highlights the role of nationalist sentiments, religious majority-minority dynamics, and the impact of the Lithuanian Catholic Church’s recent loss of social, political and cultural hegemony, in Lithuanian ecumenical relations. It also draws attention to the role of ecumenical work around the translation of the Bible as a catalyst for the healing of painful memories and an opportunity for the formation of new bonds.

Keywords

Lithuania; Baptists; Catholicism; nationalism; ecumenical relations; bible translation

Introduction

The stimulus for writing this paper was the third meeting of Phase III of international ecumenical conversations between the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) which took place 9–13 December 2019 in Warsaw, Poland. The overall theme of this phase of the dialogue is ‘The Dynamic of the Gospel and the Witness of the Church’. The 2019 meeting was devoted to the theme of ‘Challenges to Common Witness’, ‘giving attention to contemporary circumstances in church and society that represent not only challenges faced by Baptists and Catholics in fulfilling their summons to offer common witness to Christ, but also opportunities for bearing witness to the gospel

¹ A version of this article was presented at the Joint Commission for the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Warsaw, 10 December 2019.

together'.² In relation to exploring the challenges to common witness, the realities of lingering hurts and strains in the relationships were acknowledged, and avenues for 'the healing of the memories' were considered. Lithuanian Baptist-Catholic relationships was one of the cases presented; this article is an adapted version of that presentation.

I begin with a quote from the Lithuanian Baptist monthly *Tiesos Draugas* ('Friend of the Truth'). The magazine was published between 1924 and 1940, and the quote comes from an editorial of October 1931:

The Government of our country has given us rights to preach the Word of God and to pray and worship God according to our convictions. Nevertheless our brothers and sisters have to suffer persecution [...] We try not to offend those who think otherwise, and instead pray that God would bring all to the truth of genuine Gospel. Not everybody likes such teaching, and for that reason we are persecuted [...] But thanks be to God, we have the freedom of faith and our government is not persecuting us for our faith. Deception does not endure, and the officials of our Government are wise enough to distinguish between lies and truth. The intention of [this] our little magazine is to spread love everywhere, and not to offend anyone, but alongside many friends it has many enemies too. In certain locations post offices are run by Catholic priests or organists, and they withhold our magazine, refusing to pass it on to the subscribers.³

How justified or measured was such grievance? In order to understand its context, an overview of the geopolitical and cultural context of the country is due.

Geopolitical, Cultural and Religious Context until World War II: Broad Strokes

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was known as the last pagan country in Europe, baptised only in 1387. In many ways it retained various pagan elements, which resulted in a rather syncretic form of Christianity.⁴ There was a brief period of Reformation, mostly promoted by the Lithuanian nobility, but due to an effective Jesuit mission, not least by the establishment of Vilnius University, Lithuania was soon Catholic again, with the exception of a few small Reformed islands and a few ethno-religious minorities. Under

² 'Communiqué', <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/alleanza-battista-mondiale/dialogo-internazionale-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-l-alleanza-batt/comunicues/2019-warsaw.html> [accessed 17 December 2019].

³ T.G. [Teodoras Gerikas], 'Apžvalga' [Overview], *Tiesos Draugas*, 10 (1931), p. 4.

⁴ For example, Miranda Zapor Cruz, 'The Role of Catholicism in the Development of Lithuanian National Identity', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 94 (2014): 479–504 (p. 484); Antanas Musteikis, *The Reformation in Lithuania: Religious Fluctuations in the Sixteenth Century* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1988), p. 69. On the syncretism of different Baltic tribes, see W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 38. Whilst discussing Livonia primarily, Ward suggests that in the Baltic region as a whole, 'the penetration of Christianity of any kind was remarkably shallow' (ibid).

Czarist Russia — from 1795 to 1918 — and especially with the emergence of collective national identities that characterised nineteenth-century Europe, Roman Catholicism played an ‘extraordinarily powerful role’⁵ in the nurturing of Lithuanian identity and countering the Czarist suppression of the Lithuanian language.⁶ By 1918, when Lithuania declared its independence, Lithuanian identity and Catholicism were virtually inseparable, with the Catholic Church dominating both the political and cultural life of the new country.⁷

In contrast to the towering significance of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, the Baptists had never been more than a minority among minorities, particularly in regard to the native Lithuanian population. There was one significant exception, however, and it had to do with a recently incorporated region. Termed ‘Prussian Lithuania’, or Lithuania Minor, it represented a very different cultural and religious context.⁸ I have considered the contrast between these ‘two Lithuanias’ and the Baptist work in these two contrasting contexts elsewhere,⁹ but in this article I will stay with what is generally termed Lithuania Proper or ‘Major’. Here, the statistics for 1930 report sixty

⁵ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (New York, 1985), pp. 5–96.

⁶ For example, T. Balkelis, *The Making of Modern Lithuania* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 6.

⁷ Cruz, ‘The Role of Catholicism,’ pp. 489–90. Matters became somewhat more complicated after the 1926 coup d’état which resulted in an increasingly authoritarian rule by the Lithuanian Nationalist Union and a certain degree of distance between the State and the Catholic Church. (For a study of the period in English, see, e.g., R.J. Misiunas, ‘Fascist Tendencies in Lithuania’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 48, vol. 110 (1970): 88–109.) However, the Lithuanian Catholic Church continued to function as ‘the most influential institution in Lithuanian society’ (Cruz, ‘The Role of Catholicism’, p. 491).

⁸ Lithuania Minor consisted of the region around Memel, or Memelland, which had represented the eastern part of the Prussian Kingdom and, from 1871, unified Germany. Founded by the Teutonic Knights, Memel, or Klaipėda, as it was and is called by Lithuanian speakers, was situated on the northernmost tip of East Prussia on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. In 1923, under controversial circumstances, the region finally came under the jurisdiction of the newly independent Republic of Lithuania, although retaining considerable autonomy, not in the least in religious matters. See, for example, V. Vareikis, ‘Memellander/Klaipėdiškiai Identity and German-Lithuanian Relations in Lithuania Minor in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai*, 6, nos. 1-2 (2001): 54–65.

In contrast to the Catholicism of Lithuania Proper, Prussian Lithuania was deeply influenced by German culture and Lutheranism, at times under the severe pressure of Germanisation. The religious-cultural context of Memel itself was cosmopolitan, but the local population was largely Protestant, predominantly Lutheran, and, especially if one ventured into the surrounding villages, with a strong flavour of Pietism. It was there, in Memel, that in 1841 the first Baptist church on what is now Lithuanian territory was founded. The story of Memel Baptist church — at one point, the largest Baptist church by membership in Continental Europe — is not only a story of a vibrant missionary identity amongst predominantly German-speaking believers, but is also instrumental to the beginnings of the Baptist movement in Latvia and the Baptist beginnings in Russian Transcaucasia. See, for example, H.J. Coleman, ‘Baptist Beginnings in Russia and Ukraine’, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 42, no. 1 (2007), 24–36; Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2009), pp. 87–88.

⁹ Lina Toth (Andronoviene), ‘Revival Among the Aliens: The Case of Lithuanian Baptists’, in *Baptists and Revivals: Papers from the Seventh International Conference on Baptist Studies*, ed. by William L. Pitts Jr (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2018), pp. 304–323; ‘Strangers in the Land and True Lovers of the Nation: The Formation of Lithuanian-speaking Baptist Identity, 1918-1940’, *Perichoresis*, 16, no. 1 (2018): 99–117.

Lithuanian-speaking Baptists from among 1040 adherents across the country.¹⁰

In what follows, I will briefly reflect on the way the Baptists, as a tiny minority, saw their relationship to the Catholic Church, the dominant religious player of the country. It is important to acknowledge that, as a Lithuanian Baptist and someone whose own family was part of this story, I approach the subject from a particular perspective. As a historical scholar, however, I also have done my best to check my own possible biases and blind spots against the existing scholarly literature. Moreover, as a theologian, I would argue that the Gospel warrants paying particular attention to the voice of those in the minority. The minority happens to be a Baptist one in this case, but I would insist that a similar approach be applied to situations where the Baptists represent the voice and power of a majority.¹¹

Catholics and Baptists as Majority-Minority Relations Prior to World War II

The Catholic context was certainly a key factor in the formation of Lithuanian-speaking Baptist identity, even if by the way of negative identity, namely, Baptists being ‘not Catholic’. Much frustration was caused by the fact that, from the creation of the state in 1918 to its Soviet annexation in 1940, the Catholic Church in Lithuania Proper had successfully blocked the introduction of a civil registry.¹² This situation created serious difficulties for those belonging to ‘unrecognised’ religions as well as non-religious persons in terms of marrying, registering their children and burying their dead, also illustrated by rather disturbing accounts of priests refusing the burial of the bodies of those who had links with Baptists.¹³ Indeed, one of the pressing matters (and a key *raison d'être*) for the creation of the Baptist Union of Lithuania was the legal recognition of the Baptist Registry Centre in Kaunas, established in 1931–1932.¹⁴

On the other hand, there were some bridge-building efforts. The earlier issues of *Tiesos Draugas* in particular contain regular attempts by Lithuanian Baptists to identify good practice and good teaching by other churches, including the Catholic Church of Lithuania. For example, in 1925

¹⁰ Teodoras Gerikas, Letter to Jonas Inkenas, 30 June 1930. The majority of the Baptists in Lithuania Proper were German, Latvian, or Russian speakers.

¹¹ Examples of such contexts referred to or explored by other members of the dialogue were Naga Baptists in India and the ‘Bible belt’ of the southern USA.

¹² Regina Laukaityte, ‘Society Without a Civil Registry (1918-1940): Outcomes and Consequences’, *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 18 (2013): 105–122.

¹³ Petras Martinaitis, ‘Prisiminimai iš vaikystės dienų’ [Memories from childhood days], private manuscript, 12 April 2005, pp. 1–2. Available through the author.

¹⁴ Albertas Latužis, *Po Jo Sparnais: Baptistų istorija Lietuvoje 1841-1990* (Klaipėda: Eglė, 2009), p. 137.

the magazine reprinted a poem from the Catholic periodical *Šv. Pranciškaus varpelis* (*The Little Bell of St Francis*).¹⁵ Two issues later, the editor of *Tiesos Draugas* reflected on the fact that *Šv. Pranciškaus varpelis* was forbidding its readers to read Protestant publications, including such periodicals as *Tiesos Draugas*. The editor then proceeded to comment that *Tiesos Draugas*

has never yet quarrelled or ridiculed anybody. It strives to fight against godlessness and sin by preaching Christ's love. Its co-workers are believers from different Protestant churches, as well as Catholics with a living faith.¹⁶

What was seen by Lithuanian Baptists to be the absence of this 'living faith' in the Lithuanian Catholic tradition, and what featured as their most common criticism of it, was an ignorance of and/or the lack of respect for the Bible.¹⁷ I mention it here without further comment, but the question of the role of Scripture will re-emerge in this Lithuanian Catholic-Baptist story several times.

Lithuanian Baptist construction of a theology of culture involved navigating the increasing tension between love for one's nation¹⁸ and the insistence on an ultimate citizenship in the heavenly Kingdom.¹⁹ With the intensification of nationalist sentiment, the growing emphasis of Lithuanian-speaking Baptists on building bridges of peace is evident in different communications, and especially in the editorials of *Tiesos Draugas*. Amidst the highly charged nationalistic rhetoric that characterised the country of the time, the relationship between being Lithuanian and being Catholic was also being questioned: 'Not all Catholics [in Lithuania] are good Lithuanians. There are among them various types, those who have become quite Polish, and others.'²⁰ The accusation of having become 'Polish' is significant. Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, was captured by the Polish army in 1919 and remained under Polish control until it was returned to Lithuania by Soviet Russia after its invasion of Eastern Poland in 1939. Indeed, the idea of regaining Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania was central to the general Lithuanian identity discourse of the time. According to an insightful observer of the politics of that time, the ideal of Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania '[was] a much stronger dogma than the dogmas of the virgin birth, the infallible Pope and other dogmas of the Catholic Church'.²¹

¹⁵ J. Naruševičius, 'Žmonės užimti be galo...' [People are endlessly busy...] (1925), cited in *Tiesos Draugas*, 2, no. 3 (1925), p. 1.

¹⁶ Editor, 'Laiškų dėžutė' [Letter box], *Tiesos Draugas*, 2, no. 5 (1925), p. 4.

¹⁷ For example, T.G., 'Knygų knyga' [The Book of books], *Tiesos Draugas*, 1, no. 5 (1924), p. 2.

¹⁸ T. G., 'Laiškų dėžutė', *Tiesos Draugas*, 4, no. 2 (1927), p. 4.

¹⁹ T. G., 'Tikyba ir tautybė' [Faith and nationality], *Tiesos Draugas*, 17, no. 2 (1940), pp. 10–12.

²⁰ T.G., 'Tikyba ir tautybė', *Tiesos Draugas*, 17, no. 2 (1940), pp. 10–12.

²¹ Dangiras Mačiulis and Darius Staliūnas, *Lithuanian Nationalism and the Vilnius Question, 1883-1940*, Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung, Vol. 32 (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2015), p. 200.

It is important to note that the strength of nationalist sentiment was considered to be problematic by the Vatican as well, with its representatives being ‘concerned with the absence of the spirit of the universal Church in the hearts of Lithuanian [Catholic] clergy, who were inspired rather by the ideals of national revival’.²² Thus, for instance, the Vatican’s 1925 concordat with Poland, which recognised the diocese of Vilnius — the capital of Lithuania as far as Lithuanians were concerned — as part of the Polish Catholic Church, was met with anger and protest. ‘The crowd threw rotten eggs at the windows of the flat of the representative of the Vatican, and the diplomat was forced to leave the country.’²³

During the 1930s, with the increasingly authoritarian direction of the country and ‘conservative Catholic nationalism’ as ‘the official and exclusive ideology’ of President of the country Antanas Smetona,²⁴ the stance towards the Catholic Church grew more forceful in official Lithuanian Baptist rhetoric, such as in a long report on the conversion to Baptism of Brazilian Catholic priest Jose Marcelino Nunes de Araujo: ‘I became dead to Catholicism.’²⁵ At this point, certain aspects of the legal rhetoric of the state were amplified in order to contrast them with what was felt to be an atmosphere of religious hostility: ‘our state’s constitution recognises equal rights to all religious organisations, [...] [but] the Catholic Church hates us.’²⁶ The feelings would have been reciprocal, reflected in the Lithuanian Catholic press of the time which regularly warned the readers against ‘Biblists [Jehovah’s Witnesses], Baptists and other pioneers of godlessness’, cautioning that ‘we cannot permit Lithuania to become a Protestant or Communist country’.²⁷

Pausing at this point, we can observe the key role that nationalist sentiments can play in the ecumenical relations between the dominant religious group and the minorities. This is a story not only of Lithuania, but many of its other European neighbours of the time, regardless of the particularities of the dominant religious group. The roots of the process can

²² Arunas Streikus, ‘The History of Religion in Lithuania since the Nineteenth Century’, in *Religious Diversity in Post Soviet Society: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania*, ed. by Milda Alisauskienė and Ingo W. Schröder (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 40.

²³ Mačiulis and Staliūnas, *Lithuanian Nationalism*, p. 93.

²⁴ Leonidas Donskis, ‘Mapping Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Lithuania’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 13, no. 3 (1999): 474–500 (p. 488).

²⁵ ‘Šviesos keliu’ [Walking the way of light], *Tiesos Draugas*, 9, no. 4 (1932), p. 4.

²⁶ ‘Lietuvos sveikinimas Talino suvažiavime’ [Lithuania’s greeting at Tallinn convention], *Tiesos Draugas*, 7, no. 10 (1930), p. 3.

²⁷ Č. Šaduikis, ‘Vilkai avies kailyje’ [Wolves in sheep’s clothing], in *Vienybė* [Unity], 16, no 11 (1931), p. 87. To alleviate at least some of the tensions, humour was also employed. Reflecting on the fact that certain Lithuanian Catholic periodicals issued a warning not to read such literature as *Tiesos Draugas* and called it ‘trash’, Gerikas noted that ‘after such advertisement, some people decide to get acquainted with such “trash” and as a result encounter genuine Gospel truth. So we are not upset over such advertisement, and indeed are even grateful for cost-free announcements about our newspaper’s existence’. (‘Iš redakcijos krepšio’ [From the basket of the editor], in *Tiesos Draugas*, 15, no. 3 (1938), p. 8.)

be seen in the nineteenth-century European phenomenon which Stefan Berger terms ‘the sacralization of the nation’.²⁸ It enforces a particular national identity narrative: ‘unless you are Catholic, (or Orthodox, or Lutheran), you are not really or fully Lithuanian (or Bulgarian, or Estonian).’ As Jonathan Hearn noted, nationalism involves making ‘claims on behalf of a population to identity’ as well as to territory and jurisdiction.²⁹ In relation to religious identity, one’s belonging to a minority religion has to go hand in hand with the relinquishment of a claim to national belonging. That is, one can be a Baptist, or a Lutheran, or an Orthodox, as long as one is content to identify as a non-Lithuanian. Here we see the dynamic described by Hearn at play, accompanied by the othering of those who do not conform to this identity claim made on their behalf.

Under the Soviet Occupation: Survival Politics

As it happened, Lithuania did become a ‘Communist country’. The life of the young Republic was brought to an abrupt end first by Nazi Germany’s ultimatum and annexation of Prussian Lithuania in 1939, and then by the Soviet Union’s ultimatum and annexation of the Republic of Lithuania in 1940. The end of World War II brought a Soviet occupation which lasted until 1990, when the newly elected parliament declared the restoration of Lithuanian independence.

The Soviet decades brought a very different set of priorities to the life of all religious groups. The official doctrine of the USSR and the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic included the separation of state and church, whilst confirming — in theory at least — the citizens’ freedom ‘to perform religious rites’.³⁰ Social engagement of the churches was prohibited (leading to a development of a very particular kind of a theology of witness)³¹ and the organised social activities of the religious groups were highly restricted, although the specific restraints varied as the leadership passed from Stalin to Khrushchev to Brezhnev, and finally (with a few very short chairmanships in between), to Gorbachev. The years under Stalin involved drastic measures against all the religious groups, including arrest, prosecution and the

²⁸ Stefan Berger, ‘History and Forms of Collective Identity in Europe: Why Europe Cannot and Should Not Be Built on History’, in *Essence and the Margin: National Identities and Collective Memories in Contemporary European Culture*, ed. by Anna Saunders and Laura Rorato, *Studie Imagologica*, Amsterdam Studies on Cultural Identity, Vol. 15 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 21–28 (p. 25).

²⁹ Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Red Globe Press, 2006), p. 11.

³⁰ ‘Constitution of the Lithuanian SSR of 1940’, quoted in V. Stanley Vardys, *The Catholic Church, Dissent, and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania* (Boulder CO: East European Quarterly, 1978), p. 232.

³¹ Lina Andronoviene and Parush R Parushev, ‘Church, State, and Culture: On the Complexities of Post-Soviet Evangelical Social Involvement’, *Theological Reflections: Euro-Asian Theological Journal*, 3 (2004): 161–213.

deportation of clergy as well as the closure of churches. In the context of Lithuania — the only Catholic country amongst the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics — the suppression of the Catholic Church was particularly intense,³² although it could be argued that these Stalinist measures only ‘strengthened the synergy between Church and nation’.³³

Faced with Khrushchev’s antireligious propaganda campaign of 1959 to 1964, Catholic Church authorities (and indeed much of the population-at-large) developed forms of low-level resistance against the Soviet state’s efforts to undermine the role of the Catholic Church in the life of what was left of the Lithuanian nation. The Church’s popularity did not wane with Brezhnev’s attempts to further limit the legal rights of religious associations and closely monitor the clergy considered to be ‘disloyal’ to the regime.³⁴ Dissent was expressed through such activities as the underground publication of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which regularly covered the repression of Catholics, but also other violations of religious and human rights in the Soviet Union as a whole.³⁵ As Šaulius Girnius puts it, the *Chronicle* ‘played an important role in convincing many Lithuanians, even nonbelievers, that the Church [was] the chief guardian of the national heritage’.³⁶ The *Chronicle* may have been the most famous, but not the only, samizdat publication. *Aušra (Dawn)*, also published by Lithuanian Catholics, was equally strong in making the link between the survival of the Lithuanian nation and the survival of the Lithuanian Catholic Church: ‘every Lithuanian should be a Catholic who lives according to the precepts of the Bible.’³⁷ Reference to the Bible here is notable: whilst the translation and publication of the Bible in Lithuanian had often been a Protestant venture,³⁸ the Bible would later prove to be the key area of Baptist and Catholic collaboration. At this point in time, however, the survival mode and siege mentality meant that any ecumenical relations were very limited, and the Second Vatican Council’s *Unitatis redintegratio* had little impact on the ground.

Meanwhile, the handful of Baptists who had survived the war, occupation and deportations, were joined by some new settlers from the

³² See, for example, Streikus, ‘The History of Religion in Lithuania’, pp. 47–50.

³³ Cruz, ‘The Role of Catholicism’, p. 494.

³⁴ Cruz, ‘The Role of Catholicism’, p. 497.

³⁵ For full text in English, see <http://lkbkronika.lt/en/>.

³⁶ Šaulius Girnius, ‘Fifteen Years of the Lithuanian *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research*, Baltic Area Situation Report 3 (8 May 1987), p. 41.

³⁷ Kestutis Girnius, ‘Nationalism and the Catholic Church in Lithuania’, in *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, ed. by Sabrina Petra Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), pp. 82–103 (p. 97), quoted in Cruz, ‘The Role of Catholicism’, p. 499.

³⁸ Giedrius Saulytis, ‘Pirmieji Šventojo Rašto vertimai į lietuvių kalbą. Teologinė perspektyva’ [First Lithuanian translations of Scripture. Theological Perspective] <http://biblijosdraugija.lt/biblija/pirmieji-sventojo-rasto-vertimai-i-lietuviu-kalba-teologine-perspektyva/> [accessed 1 November 2019].

Soviet Union who happened to be, or became, Baptists. Integrated into the All-Union Council of Evangelic Christians-Baptists (AUCECB), Baptists in Lithuania had to find new ways of negotiating life within and beyond their own fragile, multicultural, multi-lingual communities, which by now also incorporated Pentecostal communities, forcefully merged with AUCECB in 1945.³⁹ In some of these congregations, such as one in Klaipeda, strong ecumenical links were forged with the local Lutheran congregation. Albertas Latužis, a Lithuanian Baptist historian, would argue that such association was based on the ‘pietistic inclinations’ of the local Lutherans as well as the fact that both groups were ‘[minorities] in the Catholic environment’⁴⁰ — a reminder that, radical change of circumstances notwithstanding, the majority-minority dynamic was still present. The closest relationship, naturally, was with the Pentecostals, who after the merge were in many ways inseparable. Ecumenical links also existed with some Reformed and Adventist groups, but no official links were forged with either the Orthodox or the Catholics.⁴¹

It should also be noted that there was no formal structure uniting these disparate and diverse Baptist-Pentecostal congregations until 1979, when an association of Lithuanian Baptist congregations in the framework of the AUCECB was established.⁴² Various restrictions placed by the Council for Religious Affairs in terms of places of and opportunities for communal worship meant a careful navigation of the awareness of surveillance, relating to the local authorities, and dealing with the occasional pressure by KGB workers. Such circumstances encouraged an inward-focused, self-protecting stance. However, in comparison to the Catholic Church, Lithuanian Baptists (alongside most other religious minorities) generally experienced gentler treatment from the side of the authorities.⁴³

The era of Mikhail Gorbachev and his perestroika and glasnost projects brought the relaxation of previous restrictions and possibilities for engaging in increasingly open religious and evangelistic activities. The ‘beginning of the end’ of the Soviet regime was signalled by such events as the return of Vilnius Cathedral to the Catholic Church and its re-consecration in February 1989: a joyous occasion the live broadcast of which I remember watching, with wonder, together with my (Baptist) family.

³⁹ For an English-language overview, see Albertas Latužis, ‘Lithuanian Baptists during Soviet Times’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2010): 5–24.

⁴⁰ Latužis, ‘Lithuanian Baptists’, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Post 1990 and beyond: Transformations in the Majority-Minority Relations

The early years of independence reinforced the motif of the Lithuanian Catholic Church as the guarantor and protector of Lithuanian identity. Whilst the constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, adopted in 1992, affirmed freedom of conscience, religion, and belief, and declared there to be no state religion as such, a clear distinction was made between ‘traditional’, ‘state-recognised’, and ‘other’ religious communities.⁴⁴ The criteria of a ‘traditional’ religion has been primarily inspired by the religious landscape of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and therefore includes, beside the Roman Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Judaism, Karaism, Sunni Islam, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Reformed Evangelical Church — but not Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals or Adventists. It is important to note that none of the religious communities with the legal status of a ‘traditional’ religion had conversionist aspirations in the Lithuanian context, and therefore did not represent a challenge to the dominant status of Roman Catholicism as the ‘national’ Lithuanian faith. Of course, this is not unique to the Lithuanian context. As Ingo Schröder points out,

The close ties of majority churches to ideas of cultural heritage and local historicity make the establishment of ‘other’ religions, perceived as strange and essentially foreign to the local social environment, especially difficult and the joining of such religious communities appears as an act of conscious rejection of one’s historic culture.⁴⁵

In relation to Catholicism in particular, Schröder notes that ‘in Catholic majority societies issues of cultural authenticity and political power relations are equally important themes in the religious field as questions of belief and religious practice.’⁴⁶ The Lithuanian religious context is an illustration of Schröder’s thesis.

However, what is taking place in the twenty-first century, after the novelty of the freedom of religious expression has waned, points to a gradual but substantial erosion of the dominance of the ‘national’ religion. As such, it is not unique by far, and in fact characterises contemporary Lithuania as much as the Western world as a whole. However, Catholic majority societies share a particular set of processes in this regard, and for the purposes of brevity I will offer Schröder’s summary of this dynamic. Firstly, he claims ‘there is the erosion of the unified majority religion by the increasingly

⁴⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Milda Alisauskiene and Ingo W. Schröder, ‘Introduction’, in *Religious Diversity in Post Soviet Society*, ed. by Alisauskiene and Schröder, pp. 6–8.

⁴⁵ Ingo W. Schröder, ‘Catholic Majority Societies and Religious Hegemony: Concepts and Comparisons’, in *Religious Diversity in Post Soviet Society*, ed. by Alisauskiene and Schröder, pp. 17–37 (p. 18).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

individualistic understanding of what this religious identity means'. Secondly, it is expressed in secularism not as a rejection of one's religious identity, but as 'the loss of church authority in people's everyday lives and the view of the dominant church as one ideology among many'. Thirdly, there is a noticeable increase of 'alternative' religious views and practices, not necessarily as established new religious movements, but as 'the filtering down of certain beliefs and ideas, especially from the fields of New Age and Esotericism, into bricolages of individualized religiosity'.⁴⁷ Whilst in the last census (2011), over 77 percent of the population of Lithuania still identified themselves as Roman Catholics,⁴⁸ 'for many, contact with the Catholic Church is confined to the provision of services on occasions like baptisms, marriages, or funerals. Catholicism does not provide them with a matrix for perceiving the world or a guideline for action in everyday life.'⁴⁹

In this context, there has been a marked shift in the attitude of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, particularly in relation to various Protestant groupings, which can be described as 'a more dialogical "syncretic rapprochement"'.⁵⁰ It is certainly observable on the ground even from my own, rather limited, participation in the Lithuanian religious scene, and can be illustrated by various joint ventures which simply could not be imagined in the early post-Soviet years: 'Prayer Breakfasts' which bring together all the local clergy/religious representatives; words of greeting brought by a local Catholic priest at an anniversary of a local Baptist church or a Baptist pastor asked to offer a (brief!) sermon at a Catholic mass; or a joint celebration of a wedding of a Catholic and a member of a different Christian community.⁵¹

Consequently, it can be argued that the loss of social, political and cultural hegemony has been the most positive development for Lithuanian ecumenical relations. The Church is, as *Unitatis redintegratio* puts it, 'God's only flock' indeed,⁵² but Jesus seemed to think of it as a 'little flock' (Luke 12:32), and, from a Baptist perspective, that may be the norm. In the case of the Catholic Church of Lithuania, this new reality has translated into the Church distancing itself from the axis of 'Lithuanianness', an increased focus on the pastoral needs of the local parish, and, albeit with a considerable

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 31–32.

⁴⁸ 'Results of the 2011 Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania', http://statistics.bookdesign.lt/dalis_04.pdf (p. 152) [accessed 3 November 2019].

⁴⁹ Ingo W. Schröder, 'The Elusive Religious Field in Lithuania', in *Religious Diversity in Post Soviet Society*, ed. by Alisauskiene and Schröder, pp. 79–98 (pp. 83–84).

⁵⁰ Schröder, 'The Elusive Religious Field', p. 89; Gediminas Lankauskas, 'From Confrontation to Conciliation: On Syncretic *Rapprochement* between Catholics and Charismatic Evangelists in Lithuania', in *Religious Diversity in Post Soviet Society*, ed. by Alisauskiene and Schröder, pp. 99–124.

⁵¹ See also Lankauskas, 'From Confrontation to Conciliation', pp. 99–124.

⁵² *Unitatis redintegratio*, 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html [accessed 4 November 2019].

delay in terms of Vatican II, a new openness towards other ecclesial communities. To put it starkly, ‘the world’ (in the sense of an increasingly secular Lithuanian society turning away from the church as a dominant social institution) may have played a key role in offering a real chance for the healing of the memories of Lithuanian Baptist-Catholic relationships.

There is, however, another notable point of reconciliation and collaboration which is related not to external factors and circumstances, but to cooperation focused on the translation of the Bible into Lithuanian. One of the pleasant surprises of the Soviet times was the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference publication of the New Testament in modern Lithuanian, translated by Father Česlovas Kavaliauskas and released in 1972. Produced in consultation with the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Lithuania, Jonas Kalvanas Sr, it was well received by different religious groups in Lithuania as well as by Lithuanian expatriates.⁵³ After the collapse of the Soviet regime, an inter-confessional group was established for the preparation of a new, ecumenical edition of Kavaliauskas’s New Testament translation, with the support of the United Bible Societies, which was published in 1992. The Lithuanian Bible Society was founded in the same year. The representatives of founder churches included the Baptists and the Roman Catholics, as well as Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Orthodox. Indeed, most of the presidents of the Society so far have been Catholic representatives. Given the common perception of a ‘Bible Society’ as a Protestant venture,⁵⁴ this was, and continues to be, significant.

The next significant step in the work of the Society was the editorial work on the recent translation of the Old Testament into modern Lithuanian, produced by a Lithuanian priest Antanas Rubšys, Professor at Manhattan College, New York. The whole Bible in modern Lithuanian was eventually released in two versions — one by the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference in 1998, and another, ‘ecumenical’, edition of the Lithuanian Bible Society in 1999.⁵⁵ Thus, although not without difficulties, the directive of *Dei Verbum*

⁵³ ‘[I Prizmės klausimus atsako Petras Kimbrys] [Petras Kimbrys answers the questions of *Prizmė* journal] *Prizmė*, 4 (1997) <https://www.prizme.lt/zurnalas/>? [accessed 4 November 2019] (p. 624).

⁵⁴ For example, Louis Luzbetak, ‘Roman Catholics, Bible Societies and Bible Translation’, *The Bible Translator*, 42, no. 2A (1991): 41–47 (p. 42).

⁵⁵ Although the same translations for the Old and New Testaments were used, there were two editorial commissions. One was privately funded and consisted primarily of the Lithuanian (Catholic) expats in the USA, while the second, ecumenical, commission was funded by the United Bible Societies and functioned in cooperation with the translator of the Old Testament and the editor of Kavaliauskas’s translation of the New Testament. The ecumenical commission adopted the ‘Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible’ agreed by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the United Bible Societies and there were hopes to merge the work of the two commissions, producing a single version (in two editions reflecting canon differences) of the Lithuanian Bible. Unfortunately, this did not materialise. Petras Kimbrys, a member of the ecumenical Commission, considers the main reasons to be dissimilarities in transliteration of toponyms and proper names, differing timelines of the work of the two

for the translations of Scripture ‘produced in cooperation with the separated brethren’⁵⁶ was embodied in the ecumenical work of the Lithuanian Bible Society. While by far not unique in the work on ecumenical Bible translations, I find this a particularly powerful and hopeful theological symbol in the Lithuanian context: for all their differences and profoundly divergent identity narratives, Lithuanian Catholics and Lithuanian Baptists⁵⁷ have found a common cause around the work of making the Bible available in the contemporary language of their people. This certainly has not guaranteed an agreement on the questions of biblical hermeneutics, but the lively debates at the inter-confessional group’s discussions on the editorial tasks have been an encouraging example of Scripture coming alive with all its significance for life today — sometimes coming alive only because of how it is read by others.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reviewed the major developments in the relationship dynamics between the Catholic Church of Lithuania and Lithuanian-speaking Baptists. Particular attention was drawn to the role of dominant religion in the formation of collective national identity, religious majority-minority dynamics, and the impact of the Lithuanian Catholic Church’s recent loss of social, political and cultural hegemony on Lithuanian ecumenical relations. Lastly, I highlighted the role of ecumenical work on the translation of the Bible as an opportunity for the formation of new bonds and the healing of the memories of the past.

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commissions, and two different software programmes used. See Petras Kimbrys, ‘Dar kartą apie Biblijos vardu adaptavimą ir ne tik apie tai’, *Bažnyčios žinios* [Church News], 2 (1998) <https://www.baznycioszinios.lt/old/bz9802/802atg.html> [accessed 4 November 2019].

⁵⁶ *Dei Verbum*, 22, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html [accessed 4 November 2019].

⁵⁷ Alongside others, it must be said — but on the practical level the Catholic and Baptist representatives have played a key role in the work of the Society.