

THE LIFE OF THE BALTIC CHURCHES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BALTIC NATIONAL THEOLOGY IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

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Alternative education of clergy. The Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran–Church of Latvia from 1923 to 1937

The administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, and especially bishop Karlis Irbe (1861–1934) weren't pleased with the Faculty of Theology that had been founded in 1920 at the University of Latvia. In its early stages the faculty had no chair of practical theology. Its overall policy was liberal. The Church had a dire need of ministers after the First World War. In 1922 a third of the congregations was without a minister.

The premise for the theological institute's operation was in the instruction in practical theology that was given to the Church's spiritual workers between 1921 and 1923 by the 1919 founded Latvian Home Mission Society. The General Assemblies of 1922 and 1925 defined that it was possible to be ordained without a university degree from the Faculty of Theology.

The Theological Institute operated from 1923 to 1937. Its development can be summarized into two phases. During the first ten years (1923–1933) its purpose was to directly train ministers for the church; give instruction in practical theology for pastoral exams to theologians who had graduated from the university; and organized various courses for the Church's different groups of employees. Thus the institute's goal wasn't merely to train ministers, but also several other types of employees for the Church, such as evangelists, organists, deacons, Sunday school teachers, choir leaders and teachers of religious education. The Church also started to organize special courses in youth work in 1926. Between 1926 and 1929 these courses were attended by a total of 560 people.

The institute was in close connection to the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In practice it was the Church's own seminary, which bishop Irbe favoured both in bias and in practice. Additionally it was also way for the conservative clergy in the Church's administration to make a riposte to the liberal basic policies of the Faculty of Theology.

The institute operated primarily in the Church's premises at Elisabeth's Street 37 (*Elisabetes iela 37*). In practice, studies at the institute were free, and the number of students varied from 46 to 19 between 1923 and 1933. There were also a few women among the students. The institute also housed a small library.

The institute's financial situation was tight, even though its administrative structure was fairly light. It received financial aid from the Church and to some extent from the Latvian government. The foreign financial aid received in the 1920s was especially important. The National Lutheran Council (NLC), a federation formed by the majority of Lutheran Churches in the United States, and Th.D. John A. Morehead, who was a renowned figure in the international Lutheran communal movement, arranged funding for the training of ministers for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. Bishop Irbe had become renown in the Lutheran World Convention and the rising ecumenical

movement. He was able to use his connections to acquire funding for the institute. Professor Alfred Th. Jørgensen, a Danish conservative theologian and a member of the inner circle of the Lutheran World Convention, was also a supporter. In fact, the institute received some financial support from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark.

The support of the NLC was vital for the operation of the institute. For example, in the first half of 1927 the NLC's endorsements accounted for almost two thirds of the Theological Institute's income.

The NLC's support was primarily based on the mutual trust between Morehead and Irbe. In fact, Irbe's international connections gave him a strong basis against domestic "liberals".

The domestic atmosphere and solidarity of the small educational institution was strengthened by the fact that a part of the students lived in the institute's own dormitory, which operated during its first stages. Also, the institute's profile wasn't primarily academic or scholarly, but practical and ecclesiastic. The tuition prepared one for practical work in the congregations instead of academic theological scholarship.

The institute's first director was Teodors Grünbergs, who held the position from 1923 to 1925. Pastor Adams Maculans, the Church's multitasking man, was the acting director from 1925 to 1931. After Grünbergs was appointed archbishop, Maculans worked as the institute's director from 1931 to 1933. In this first stage of operation, the number of teachers employed by the institute varied from 5 to 13, depending on the semester.

The institute's teachers of theological subjects were all ministers who had been trained by the 'Old Tartu' and had experience in practical religious work. At the same time they also represented the head of Latvian spirituality and Church administration. The teachers of the institute's first stage included – in addition to *Teodors Grünbergs* and *Ādams Maculans* – provost *Vilhelms Rozenieks* and vicars *Kārlis Freidenfelds*, *Kārlis Beldavs*, *Jānis Ermanis* and *Edgards Bergs*. In the latter half of the 1920s vicars *Edgards Wille* and *Ernsts Stange* also rose into the faculty. Both Maculans (New Testament exegesis, Riga 1933) and Freidenfelds (Church history, Warsaw 1930) had their doctoral dissertations in the early 1930s. Grünbergs and Beldavs were both appointed the title of doctor honoris causa by the Theological Faculty of the University of Latvia in 1928. Alfreds Feils and Pēteris Riba gave musical instruction at the institute in the 1920s.

But the spiritual and actual leader of the institute was bishop *Kārlis Irbe*, whose calculated activeness resulted in the institute's foundation. It is well known that Irbe was one of the most significant East-European church leaders between the two World Wars. He was appointed doctor honoris causa by the University of Lund in 1924.

The institute's teacher of pastoral counseling, vicar *Kārlis Beldavs*, was one of Latvia's most famous socio-religious influencers. He was known as a powerful religious speaker, a revivalist preacher and a pastoral counsellor, a hymnist and a diverse spiritual writer. Beldavs also took part in Latvia's political life, since he was a member of parliament (Saeima) from 1928 to 1934 as a representative of the National Christian Party. He also served as the Minister of Education for a short time in 1934.

The teachers responsible for the formation of the institute's theological profile were all conservatives, with the exception of *Edgards Bergs*. Bishop Irbe and the exegete Maculans were closest to Lutheran orthodoxy, but even they were quite pragmatic in their theology. The other

teachers were clearly advocates of a salvation historic form of Biblical theology. Thus they represented a “third way”, a middle ground between Lutheran orthodoxy and liberal exegetics. Karlis Freidenfelds was perhaps the most open to the academic findings of historical-critical exegetics.

The institute’s theological teachers all emphasized the practical profile of ministers, and wanted to support home missions and active work in the church at a grass-roots level. In this sense, they were more or less representatives or sympathizers of revivalist Christianity, though not necessarily clearly definable Pietists. Beldavs and Wille were the clearest representatives of a Pietistic-Evangelical form of revivalist Christianity. In addition, bishop Irbe and pastor Maculans also respected and supported Latvia’s Herrnhutian tradition.

The tension between the Faculty of Theology and the institute wasn’t unambiguously juxtaposition between Lutheran orthodoxy and liberal theology. The tension between conservative and liberal theology was naturally the basic principle, but there was also an additional difference in how the two sides emphasized the aim and usage of theology. There was also clear tension between the older and younger generations of theologians. The elder clergy, who had studied at the ‘Old Tartu’, lived in their nostalgic memories of the ‘ecclesiological’ theology of the late 19th century, which naturally had greater value of application to the praxis of the Church than the newer teachings of Adolf von Harnack and Bultmann.

Even though bishop Irbe and the elder clergy of the Latvian Church supported the institute, it came under heavy criticism in the 1920s. The faculty of the Faculty of Theology and some of its younger pupils – like Alberts Freijs – were unsympathetic towards it. The renowned writer Richards Rudzitis openly criticized both the institute’s operation and bishop Irbe’s policy on the education of the clergy. The criticism was specifically aimed at the way the institute trained ministers directly for the church, not so much at the supplementary education on practical theology that it gave to those, who were going to become ministers. Sometimes ministers who had been trained by the institute would also be called “half priests” (*pūsmācītājs*).

Some of the Church’s clergy were also critical towards the institute’s operation. At the end of 1924, the Council of the Clergy in the deanery of Valmiera demanded that the institute’s seminary should only be a supplementary institution to the Faculty of Theology. There was a heated discussion on the institute’s role at the General Synod of 1925, which reflected the inner tensions of the Church.

This was a case of confrontation between two different ideals of priesthood. The Theological Faculty, the younger generation of clergy, and the liberal side of the church emphasized academic education for the priesthood and were worried about the Church’s connections to the intelligentsia. Irbe and his supporters represented a Pietistic-Orthodox ideal of priesthood and an ecclesiastic view on the education of the clergy. The Church had to have a right to influence the education given to its employees.

The institute’s role changed in the end of the 1920s, as the shortage of ministers started to lessen. The Faculty of Theology and the Church aimed a kind of compromise. The Church’s extended consistory decided on 30.11.1928 that the institute would stop training deacons. However, in the future all graduates of the Theological Faculty who wanted into the service of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia had to study at the institute for a semester. The faculty and the institute were now consciously cooperating in the training of the clergy. The situation changed significantly when the Faculty of Theology started to teach practical theology and then named two of the institute’s teachers to its chairs: archbishop Grünbergs as an additional professor in 1932 and

Rozenieks as a docent (Privatdosentz) in 1933. Also, the founding of the Church's gymnasium at the turn of the 1930s affected the situation.

In the fall of 1928, by bishop Irbes motion but with the support of the consistory, the decision was made to found a preparatory department in the theological institute, in which students could take gymnasium subjects. This gave birth to the Church's upper secondary school in 1930. The Gymnasium of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (*Latviskas evaņģēliski luteriskās baznīcas gimnāzija*) was a four grade school, which focused on humanistic subjects and classical languages. Many of its boy graduates applied to study at the Faculty of Theology.

Between 1926 and 1933 a total of 30 ministers graduated from the theological institute. A short time before World War II only 8% of the clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia were pupils of the institute. In 1944 a total 27 out of the 243 priests had graduated from the theological institute, which accounted for 11% of the clergy. As such, the theological institute's role as a trainer of priests wasn't that significant. It fell well behind the Faculty of Theology in this respect.

The second phase of the institute's operation took place between 1934 and 1937, as the seminary was turned into the Church's training centre. The consistory decided on the new guidelines of operation on 7.12.1933 and Vicar Ernsts Stange was appointed as the director of the institute from the beginning of January 1934. The institute started to operate as the newly shaped training centre in 1934. It was now even more clearly a training- and educational centre for the Church's varied employee groups and trustees. Its aim was – as was earlier – to teach practical theology to graduates of the Faculty of Theology and to those men who had finished a theological degree and wished to be ordained into the ministry. After 1934 the institute's instruction of practical theology converged more distinctly with the syllabus of the Faculty of Theology. At the same time it taught the Church's other employees groups, active participants in the congregations various forms of work, and trustees by arranging various short courses. A significant phase was marked by the consistory's 1936 decision to give the institute the status of a vocational school. This marked the final separation between the educational goals of the institute and the Faculty of Theology.

The institute continued to operate in the premises on Elisabeth Street, but also utilized other Church-owned properties. Courses were also being organized outside of Riga.

Between 1934 and 1937 the new teachers in the field of practical theology were docent *Edgars Rumba* and *Ārtūrs Voitkus*, the principal of the Church's gymnasium.

Additionally, the institute's own courses were taught by at least 40 different men between 1934 and 1937, almost all of them ministers and theologians.

This article is based on Prof. Talonen's research focusing on the history of Latvian Evangelical-Lutheran theology in the interwar period. He has been engaged in this research more or less continuously since 1995.

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