

## **Religion in Estonia, Research in English**

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There is no substitute for learning languages. There is little point to conducting research on a country without knowing the tongue spoken there. This is obvious, but some languages are more often studied than others and area studies scholars may never be able to master all of the languages of the region that concerns them. At this point the researcher and student become dependent on colleagues.

Estonian is one such understudied language, but Estonia is of no smaller importance to Eastern Europe than any other country. To understand the whole, all the parts must be considered. Therefore, scholars without a command of Estonian by necessity must turn to work published in other languages, most commonly English.

This article is meant to serve as an aid to those interested in religion in Eastern Europe without a command of Estonian. It provides a bibliographical and historiographical review of the literature within an outline of religious development in a less commonly studied country. The religious history of Estonia, although closely paralleling that of Latvia, is unique and an understanding of it and available secondary sources concerning it is certainly useful for scholars of the Eastern European region as a whole.

The literature in English concerning religion in Estonia is not extensive. There are few lengthy monographs that deal specifically with the subject. Nevertheless, enough material exists to get a fairly good picture of religious culture in Estonia over time. This paper will begin with historical surveys of religion in Estonia and move on to cover more

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narrowly focused works in rough chronology (there is often overlap between topics). It will cover key moments and movements in Estonian religious history and look at the literature regarding these factors that helped shape Estonian culture and spiritual life. In this way, the scholarship on the evolution of Estonian religion in the literature will be observable.

A review of the literature on religion in Estonia cannot fail to mention the prolific writer Arthur Võõbus. In addition to many shorter works, his multi-volume *Studies in the History of the Estonian People with Reference to Aspects of Social Conditions, In Particular, the Religious and Spiritual Life and the Educational Pursuit*,<sup>1</sup> provides a unique survey of Estonian religion from pre-Christian times to the Soviet period. A brief essay such as this cannot do justice to such a massive work and will only use selections that cover aspects of religion that are lacking elsewhere in the literature.

Võõbus' work also suffers from an evident bias. The author is an Estonian patriot-exile and a devout Christian. This comes across in his interpretations. For example, in his treatment of pre-Christian religion he injects a monotheistic Christian notion of a high God in heaven of supreme importance. His accounting of the arrival of Christianity via the Knights of the Sword is largely limited to a scathing report of the subversion of Christian ideology. Võõbus sees Germans and Russians as impeding the spiritual development of Estonians, but Swedish rule is looked upon favorably as a time when the church was better organized and more in touch with the people. The Orthodox conversion movement of the nineteenth century is looked at only as an offensive attempt at Russification on the part of the tsarist government, not for its role in fostering religious pluralism in Estonia. Võõbus naturally sees the Soviet takeover of Estonia as having the most damaging effect on Estonian religious culture. However, despite the biases in Võõbus' work, there is much in his description that is

<sup>1</sup> Vols. 1-12. Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1969-1985.

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useful. The religious emphasis of his history leads him to cover all the major turning points and developments in Estonian religious culture.

August Torma wrote a rather short survey of Christianity in Estonia titled *The Church in Estonia*.<sup>2</sup> Written in the middle of World War II, this work also offers a somewhat nationalistic interpretation of events. He argues that the Estonians were initially receptive to the word of Christ as preached to them by the first missionaries to visit the Baltic. They resisted the crusading knights, and subsequently their religion, because of the brutal manner in which it was accompanied. Again, the conquering Germans and Russians are seen as unhelpful to the spiritual health of the Estonians, and the Swedes are looked upon more favorably. The Orthodox conversion movement is depicted as a dastardly trick intended to Russify the Estonians. The inter-war independence period is interpreted to be the high point of Estonian religious culture as a time when the people and the church became most closely bound together. The atheistic Soviet regime is depicted as mercilessly oppressive with regards to religion.

The low volume of scholarship on the pre-Christian Estonian religion is due to the serious difficulties involved with understanding something that existed in a pre-literate age. A picture of this religion has to be cautiously pieced together from archeological, linguistic and folkloristic evidence. Early chronicles written by Christians also shed some light on the matter. Much can be gleaned from these various sources, but few monographs devoted specifically to the religion of this period exist in English. An exception is Ivar Paulson's *The Old Estonian Folk Religion*.<sup>3</sup>

In this work, Paulson describes an animistic religion closely tied to the ancient Estonian way of life. Therefore, he argues that when Estonians left the forest for the farm

<sup>2</sup> London: World Evangelical Alliance, 1943. <sup>3</sup> Bloomington: Indiana University, 1971.

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their religion changed with their circumstances. He describes a religion whose key features are a cult of the dead, complex understanding of the soul(s) and nature worship (i.e., natural beings have accompanying spirits which affect daily life and must be appeased). He supports his arguments by drawing cultural comparisons to other Finno-Ugric peoples at a similar stage of development as well as cultural artifacts that survived into more recent times. Paulson points to a coexistence and merging of pagan and Christian practices that lasted for generations under the German-led dominant religion. His basic interpretation is affirmed in works by Vööbus and Raun,<sup>4</sup> although he appears perhaps a little too confident on some of the details of his analysis given the sparse direct evidence.

Using existing sources and cross-cultural comparisons, specific practices associated with Estonian pre-Christian religion have been elaborated. One such example is William Sayers' article "Scapulimancy in the Medieval Baltic."<sup>5</sup> Relying primarily on the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia and what is known of the practice outside of Estonia, Sayers argues that reading the shoulder blades of certain animals was common practice among the pagan Estonians. He explains the predictive power of the bones by a belief that God descends to earth through rain which then grows into grass which is in turn eaten by animals (sheep were especially good for scapulimancy). Estonians in this period

were greatly at the mercy of nature, so it was important to read God's plan beforehand.

Sayers also points out that this practice lasted into the Christian period.

Estonians did not wholly accept Christianity overnight. It took many years for the German conquest on the Baltic to be complete and many more for Christianity to become fully ensconced in Estonian culture. However, the arrival of Christianity marks a crucial

<sup>4</sup> Vööbus, Vol. 1, pp. 1-13; Toivo U. Raun. "Estonians" in Paul D. Steeves, ed. *Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and Eurasia*. Vol. 8. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1999. <sup>5</sup> *Journal of Baltic Studies* 23/1 (Spring 1992): 57-62.

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turning point in the cultural history of the Estonians. The best primary source for this period is the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*.

Henry was a common priest who had constant contact with ordinary people and even managed to learn some Estonian. He shows sympathy for the Estonians, but clearly sees the imposition of Christianity as a good thing and admonishes the Baltic natives for instances of backsliding away from the church. From his chronicle we also catch a glimpse of surviving pre-Christian religion. The chronicle mentions sacrifices and superstition. In one episode, the Estonians are described as sacrificing cattle and reading the flesh of butchered animals in order to discern God's wishes. <sup>6</sup> Overall, Henry tells us little about Estonian culture—save that they did not consider it inferior to Christian culture—but rather provides a useful account of just how the Estonians came to be pulled into the sphere of Western Christendom. Secondary sources on this pivotal turning point in Estonian religious and cultural history include William Urban's *The Baltic Crusade* and *The Livonian Crusade* <sup>7</sup> and Eric Christiansen's *The Northern Crusades*. <sup>8</sup> Two articles

focusing on the Danish role in this period are found in *Gli Inizi del Cristianesimo in Livonia-Lettonia*.<sup>9</sup>

Picking up on Henry's observations, James Brundage has analyzed the coexistence of pagan and Christian practices in the sacrament of marriage in his article "Christian Marriage in Thirteenth-Century Livonia."<sup>10</sup> He illustrates how pre-Christian marriage practices continued and were even tolerated by the church. This is another example of how the

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James A. Brundage, trans. *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961. p. 110.

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Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1994; Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981.<sup>8</sup> London: Macmillan, 1980.<sup>9</sup> Peter Rebane. "Denmark, the Papacy and the Christianization of Estonia" and Edgar Anderson. "Early Danish Missionaries in the Baltic Countries" in *Gli Inizi Del Cristianesimo in Livonia-Lettonia*. Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1989. pp. 171-201, 245-275.<sup>10</sup> *Journal of Baltic Studies* 4/4 (Winter, 1973): 313-340.

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Estonians either imperfectly understood or only partly accepted Christianity in the centuries that followed the crusades that brought them into the cultural orbit of Western Christianity.

The literature on religion in Estonia generally lays emphasis on the Estonians themselves, yet Germans dominated the church until the twentieth century. Toivo Raun has pointed out that this divide helps account for the slow penetration of Christianity into Estonian culture.<sup>11</sup> This may also help account for the paucity of analysis regarding

Estonian religion from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Even major events such as the Reformation and the pietist movement of the Moravian Brethren are more commonly evaluated for their contributions to the development of written Estonian and therefore the modernization of the culture. However, these contributions undoubtedly brought Christianity closer to the people and intertwined the religion more tightly with Estonian culture. It is also noteworthy that the English language literature pays little attention to the group in Estonia whose culture was always intimately bound to Western Christianity: the Germans. A question even as basic as why the Baltic Germans so overwhelmingly embraced Lutheranism is not thoroughly explored despite the fact that it had profound consequences for the region.

The Chronicle of Balthasar Russow, written during the Livonian Wars in the sixteenth century, while Lutheranism was still new in the Baltic, offers a glimpse into the religious thought between the arrival of Christianity and modern times.<sup>12</sup> William Urban states that Russow was indisputably at least half Estonian.<sup>13</sup> However, this does not necessarily make him representative of the Estonian cultural milieu. He was an urbanite and although he shows some sympathy for the Estonians, he also condemns them along with the rest of Baltic society for their sacrilegious ways. Continuing superstition and idolatry among the Estonian peasants was particularly irksome to Russow. He condemned the Baltic<sup>11</sup> Estonia and the Estonians. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1991. pp. 23-24.<sup>12</sup> Jerry C. Smith, trans. The Chronicle of Balthasar Russow. Madison: Baltic Studies Center, 1988.<sup>13</sup> “The Nationality of Balthasar Russow.” Journal of Baltic Studies 12/2 (Summer 1981): 161.

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Germans for improperly following and teaching the gospel and preached the Reformation. He claimed that the Livonian Wars were God’s retribution for the

sinfulness of Estonian society, both rural and urban. His work is an example of the religious fervor that accompanied the Reformation and calls for bringing God closer to the people, especially the peasants.

A second important revolution in the history of Christianity in Estonia is that of the Moravian Brethren in the eighteenth century. Võõbus explores this movement in detail in the third volume of his series. In his analysis, the success of this movement was due to the efforts of earlier pietistic preachers who worked mainly among the Germans, but nevertheless laid the foundation for the acceptance of new religious thought. He understands the success of the movement among Estonians as due to the sincerity and conviction of the Moravian preachers. They worked energetically among the peasants, accorded the Estonians a sense of dignity and showed willingness to bring Estonians into their ranks as preachers and equals. Unlike the Catholic or Lutheran churches to which the Estonians joined at the behest of German overlords, Estonians freely chose to join with the Moravians. Võõbus considers this a period of religious “awakening” for the Estonians.

Despite this movement, Christianity as an institution remained dominated by Baltic Germans until the time of Estonian independence. Jakob Aunver has noted in a discussion of religious life and the church that religion was an issue in the Estonian “national awakening” (although, late coming) and that earnest effort was put into the Estonianization of the Lutheran church only during the independence period.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is at this time that the dominant religion for the previous 400 or so years truly becomes part of Estonian culture. He remarks that the period of independence also separated church and state. At the same time, Aunver notes the diversification of religion in Estonian during this period.

<sup>14</sup> “Religious Life and the Church” in Evald Uustalu, ed. *Aspects of Estonian Culture* (London: Boreas, 1961) pp. 66-84.

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Religious pluralism in Estonia dates back at least to the diversification of the Lutheran church by the arrival of pietism. The Orthodox conversion movement of the 1840s brought further diversification to the religious world of the Estonians. However, this movement has received relatively little attention in the English language literature. In the brief treatment that this subject receives in Toivo Raun’s survey of Estonian history, it is evident that conversion was undertaken for socioeconomic gain (which was actually not forthcoming), but achieved a greater cultural impact by breaking the hegemony of the German-led Lutheran church and introducing a new cultural element.<sup>15</sup> As previously mentioned, Võõbus and Torma hold a different view. They interpret the introduction of Orthodoxy as part of an attempt at Russification.

The nineteenth century and early twentieth century also saw the arrival of new Protestant denominations in Estonia such as the Baptist church. Another such addition to the Estonian religious scene that is in a sense over-represented in the English language literature is the Methodist church. This may be attributable to the international ties the Estonian Methodists have always had, their missionary work, and the fact that although small, this church survived the Soviet period.

A history of the Estonian Methodist Church can be found in S.T. Kimbrough’s *Methodism in Russia and the Baltic States*.<sup>16</sup> Missionary work by the first two Estonian Methodists began in 1907 and by 1910 a church was established and grew fairly rapidly until World War II. In this book, Heigo Ritsbek, Martin Prikask and Jaan Puskey ascribe the appeal of Methodism in Estonia to dissatisfaction with the dominant Lutheran church.

Converts considered Lutheran ministers insincere contrasted with the persuasiveness and deep conviction of Methodist preachers. Their description of why Estonians were attracted to

<sup>15</sup> Raun., pp. 45, 53-54. <sup>16</sup> Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.

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the church sounds like a replay of the Moravian movement and indeed one of the first Methodist missionaries was a pietist.

Heigo Ritsbek has examined Methodism under Soviet rule in two articles published in English. <sup>17</sup> Ritsbek argues that this is an important subject because Methodism survived the Soviet period despite being denied a seminary and suffering the discrimination all churches felt. Many small churches disappeared or merged with larger churches, but the Methodist church continued to be active. According to Ritsbek, the church made it because of its flexibility as much as by the stubborn anchor of its conviction. He cites the tenacity of the Methodist clergy and their refusal to compromise in 1940-1941 and then the willingness to compromise in the post-war period as the reason for the church's survival.

Another over represented group in the literature on religion in Estonia is the Jews. Judaism warrants attention because of the vigorousness of Jewish cultural life in Estonia, especially during the independence period. The case is also interesting because the number of Jews in Estonia actually increased from 4,500 in 1939 to 5,500 in 1989 due to immigration. <sup>18</sup>

Ella Amitan-Wilensky noted in her article "Estonian Jewry" <sup>19</sup> that although Jews only came to Estonia in significant numbers after residency restrictions were eased in the

19<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, the border along the Pale of Settlement was porous and Jews had lived in Estonia much longer. She claims that the Estonians were less anti-Semitic than their Latvian neighbors and views the independence period as a kind of golden age of Estonian Jewish culture. At the time, Jews set up schools, as well as cultural and professional organizations, participated in politics and had a lively press. Unfortunately, World War II put an end to this. 17

“Estonian Methodism During the First Year Under the Plague of the Red Commissars.” *Methodist History* 31/4 (July 1993): 248-254, reprinted in *Methodism in Russia and the Baltic States*; “Methodism in Estonia Under Communism” in Tim Macquiban, ed. *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*. Cambridge: Wesley Historical Society, 1993. 18

Eitan Finkelstein. “Jewish Revival in the Baltics: Problems and Perspectives.” *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 20/1 (1990): 3. <sup>19</sup> In M. Bobe, ed. *The Jews in Latvia*. Tel Aviv: D. Ben-Nun Press, 1971. pp.336-351.

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The Jewish population of Estonia bounced back after the war, but never regained its cultural vitality in the Soviet period. However, Eitan Finkelstein noted a change in this situation as the USSR was collapsing. In his 1990 article in *Soviet Jewish Affairs* he described a revival of Jewish culture made possible by opportunities that had opened up as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies and the Baltic independence movements. He also cautioned that this nascent cultural renaissance might be short lived because the most nationally minded Jews had emigrated, Estonians and other Balts placed primary importance on their own cultural revival and the number of Jews in Estonia and the other Baltic states remained small.

V. Stanley Vardys has examined the role played by religion in Estonian national and cultural identity in recent history in an article in the *Journal of Baltic Studies*. He argued that while religion played a more important role in Lithuanian national

consciousness and dissent than in Estonia or Latvia, but that western Christianity was important to all three.<sup>20</sup> He argued that Catholicism and Lutheranism were (are) marks of cultural distinction with long historical traditions that set the Baltic states apart from their eastern neighbors and that religion provided an alternative to communist ideology and a link to the western world.

In an article on “The Role of the Lutheran Church in Estonian Nationalism,” Andrew Hart made a distinction between manifest and civil religion.<sup>21</sup> Like Vardys, he argued that while church attendance might be low (manifest religion), Lutheranism provided an important backdrop to Estonian culture (civil religion) and as such contributed significantly to national identity. He explained the relative lack of activity on the part of the church during the independence movement with theology. He cited Martin Luther’s view that religion and politics should not mix.

“The Role of the Churches in the Maintenance of Regional and National Identity in the Baltic Republics.” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 28/3 (Fall 1987): 287-298.<sup>21</sup> *Religion in Eastern Europe* 13/3 (June 1993): 6-13.

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Jaak J. Leppik has determined there were 45 different religious sects operating in Estonia in 1992.<sup>22</sup> Why do Estonians join churches today? Tõnu Lehtsaar has examined this question.<sup>23</sup> Based on a survey of 94 members of various churches in Tartu, he concluded that people join churches out of religious conviction, rather than the prestige of the church or their upbringing. In his analysis, people attend churches today because of an individual choice and not because they are simply acting out a role dictated by their culture. This is a sensible conclusion, but Lutherans made up only 20 percent of his

interviewees even though they constitute over 85 percent of church members in Estonia. If his sample was different, perhaps he would have different findings, possibly that the historical-cultural foundation laid by the Lutheran church plays a significant role in the choice of church for many Estonians.

Clearly, the published research on religion in Estonia in English is not exhaustive. However, enough work has been done to glean the basic course of the religious history of the country as well as much pertinent detail. Denominational and sectarian gaps still exist in the literature as well as attention to the religious experience of several non-Estonian ethnic groups (e.g., Germans and Russians). Certain conversion movements, such as those of the Moravian Brethren and Orthodox also deserve a closer look. We can also look forward to more scholarly work on post-Soviet religious trends, but a solid base for comparative work and a foundation for understating religion in Estonia have already been created. The English language literature enables a wide range of students, scholars, clergy and interested persons to become broadly familiar with the history of religion in Estonia.

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57.<sup>23</sup> "Why do People Join the Churches in Estonia?" *Religion in Eastern Europe* 17/4 (August 1997): 1-9.

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