

# **THE ROLE OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ESTONIAN NATIONALISM**

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A Mighty Fortress is our God,

A Bulwark never failing;

Our Helper He amid the flood

Of mortal ills prevailing:

For still our ancient foe

Doth seek to work us woe;

His craft and power are great,

And, armed with cruel hate,

On Earth is not his equal.

## **Introduction**

Among the many historical developments that are occurring in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, surely one of the most interesting is the revival of religious life. The churches are experiencing a dramatic increase in membership; their buildings are being restored, and their influence is growing. In its scope and scale, the spiritual reawakening can be compared to "the reopening of the church in China in the 1980s and the 1,000 baptisms-a-Sunday in Indonesia in the 1970s."

Most of the scholars who look at religion in the Soviet Union focus on the Catholic Church in Lithuania, Islam, or the Russian Orthodox Church. One of the most infrequently examined is the Lutheran Church in Estonia and Latvia. Usually a scholar will mention that the Lutheran Church exists in these republics and then dismiss it as an insignificant force in Estonian or Latvian cultural and political life.

Contrary to this viewpoint this paper will argue that the Lutheran Church should not be cavalierly dismissed as an insignificant force. Instead the Lutheran Church has played an important part in the civil religion of Estonia. The term civil religion has been discussed by a variety of authors such as Rousseau, Durkheim, and Bellah. While it is usually

discussed in the context of American politics, it has been successfully applied to Japanese, Mexican, and Italian politics. Civil religion is a collection of beliefs, rituals, and symbols which integrates society and legitimates its structures. This essay will begin by briefly examining the history of the Lutheran Church in Estonia from the 1500s to the present day. It will then make the argument that the Lutheran Church is a pillar of the civil religion of Estonia. It will conclude with a summary and a discussion of further research questions on this topic.

## **History**

The first Christians in Estonia were Roman Catholics who came to the country in the 12th century. Roman Catholicism remained the dominant confession until the 1500s when, due to the conquering Swedes and Germans, the Lutheran Church became the predominant faith in Estonia. During this time the church was under control of the large landowners and that caused friction between the population and the church. This system remained in place until the end of Russian rule in the early 1900s.

After World War I Estonia became an independent country with a constitution providing for freedom of religion. At this time the Lutheran Church had 876,026 adherents or 78.2% of the population. The Lutheran Church attempted to increase its visibility during this time period by having most of its services in Estonian (as opposed to German) and by performing many works of charity such as establishing orphan shelters, schools for deaf mutes, and rescue homes for women (Magdalene homes). In addition many Estonians were baptized in the Lutheran Church, and parishioners were fairly active in church services and events. Thus during independence, the Lutheran Church strengthened its position as an element in Estonian culture.

Of course the period of independence came to an end in 1944 when the Soviet Union invaded the country and made Estonia into a Soviet Republic. During the Stalin and Khrushchev years the Lutheran Church came under attack from the central authorities. The KGB infiltrated the church; pastors were deported or murdered; church buildings were not repaired, and Soviet officials dissuaded the Estonians from going to church. The church was also attacked in the schools through promulgation of the Soviet state doctrine of atheism. As a result of these policies, the number of people who went to church fell to about 5-10% of the population by the 1960s. As in the rest of the Soviet Union most of the people who went to church were elderly women.

There was a revival of religious activity in Estonia beginning in the 1970s. This revival can be broken down into two stages. The first stage was from 1970 to roughly 1988, and the second stage was from 1988 to the present.

In the 1970s, in certain areas of Estonia, the number of Estonians going to church began to increase. During this time there was a large influx of Russians into the republic. Interestingly enough, in areas that were affected by this migration, the number of people going to the Lutheran Church increased most dramatically. This increase could be explained because the Estonians were searching for a concrete symbol of their national

past in the face of the cultural threat brought about by massive Russian immigration. This fascinating phenomenon will be elaborated on in the next section of the paper. Also, during this time, many young people went to church. Often, after a Lutheran service, people would leave the church and lay flowers at the graves of patriots who died fighting the Russians or who held important posts in interwar Estonia. They would also sing national songs and church hymns. Several Estonians have pointed out that during this time, the church served as the protector of the people, thus gaining their confidence. The Lutheran Church's influence was also seen in different national festivals such as the annual song festival. These festivals usually began with a prayer and a reading from the Bible. This pattern continued until 1988.

From 1988 to the present day Estonia has experienced a rebirth of national political and cultural life as have most of the countries in Eastern Europe. Just like other political and cultural institutions in Estonia, the Lutheran Church has experienced a reawakening. The numbers of baptisms has increased from 4,535 in 1988 to 12,962 in 1989, and the number of confirmations have increased from 2,711 in 1988 to 8,837 in 1989. Also witnesses who have recently visited Estonia point out that the numbers of Estonians going to church have increased. However these numbers are still low when compared to the total population of Estonia.

The reasons for this resurgence are simple. The first is that it is a backlash against forty years of Soviet repression. The Estonians, by going to church, are doing something that was forbidden by the Soviet authorities as well as participating in a cultural event. The second reason is that many Estonians feel that there was something wrong with the socialist way of life because there was not much motivation for work, and personal morals are low. They feel that to give their children a better life, they should be raised in the church. The primary reason why the resurgence did not occur before 1988 was the repression (or the threat of repression) from the central government.

Since 1988 the Lutheran Church has also been fairly active in the political system in Estonia. One of the many movements in Estonia is the Heritage Movement (*Muinsuskaitse Liikumine*). The objective of this movement is to restore the historical memory of the Estonians as well as the different historical monuments that were damaged or torn down by the Soviets (incidentally some of the monuments were disassembled by the Estonians and hidden in the churchyards). Sources in Estonia assert that the Lutheran Church is supporting this movement as well as participating in the Estonian Congress.

This rather brief sketch of the history of the Lutheran Church in Estonia has set up the framework for an analysis of the role of the church in Estonian nationalism. It is incorrect to dismiss the church as having no influence at all.

## **Analysis**

In analyzing the Lutheran Church in Estonia, it seems necessary to make a conceptual distinction between the "manifest church" and the "latent church." This was first

suggested by Paul Tillich in his book, Theology of Culture and was later picked up and elaborated upon by Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond in their work on civil religion. The manifest church, in the terminology of Tillich and Bellah and Hammond, refers to the institutionalized church. In Estonia the manifest Lutheran Church includes the buildings, the services, the number of baptisms and confirmations, and the activities of the church in society such as its social ministry. The latent church refers to what Bellah refers to as "civil religion" (see p. 3). Before we examine the civil religion of Estonia in more detail, it is necessary to examine briefly the manifest church. The manifest church is fairly weak given that only about 5-10% of the population go to church. Of course these numbers have increased in the last couple of years, reflecting an increase in support for the church. Yet for the time being the manifest church remains weak. Some people believe that the church is weak because, in comparing it to the Catholic Church in Lithuania, the Lutheran church in Estonia played little to no role in the protest movements in 1987-1989. We must be careful in making this assertion because the Lutheran Church has traditionally remained aloof from politics due to its theology. Martin Luther wrote extensively about what he referred to as the "two nation theory." These two nations included the religious nation and the secular nation which Luther felt should not mix. This theory is, "based essentially on the spiritual nature and inwardness of the church, while all external secular matters are handed over to reason . . . [and] to the civil authorities." To individuals the theory's implication is that they should be, "humble and [should] patiently endure existing conditions on Earth." Therefore the Lutheran church has not had an active role in the protest movement not because of its lack of power but because of its theology which calls for its removal from secular affairs, thereby removing it from an active part in protest activities. Therefore, as we have seen, the Lutheran Church is weak in terms of the manifest church.

However, in terms of the latent church (or civil religion) the Lutheran Church retains considerable influence. This underlying church is comprised of not only the Lutheran Church but also Estonian literature such as the *Kalevipoeg* (an Estonian epic folk tale), nationalist folk songs, historical monuments such as the Pik Hermann Castle, and art. These elements combine to provide the symbols, ritual, and beliefs which integrated the society and strengthened it against Soviet cultural onslaughts. The Lutheran Church is an integral part of this civil religion because "the Christian churches in the Baltic Republics are the region's oldest institutions. . . To have survived centuries of foreign occupation and a multitude of radical and not-so-radical political and social changes as such, they are deeply rooted in national tradition and provide rallying points for the maintenance and the furthering of these traditions." The Lutheran Church also provides symbols which are important because, as David Kowalewski suggests, "By coming together in honor of a single symbol to which all members are emotionally attached, internal group divisions are at least temporarily obscured." The integral part that the Lutheran Church plays in the civil religion of Estonia is also seen in the philosophy of Uku Masing. Masing believes that Estonian culture is comprised of a synthesis of three elements, which include the native Estonian, the Lutheran, and other cultural influences. This suggests that the Lutheran Church is an element in the civil religion in Estonia which provides the symbols and beliefs for the maintenance and solidarity of Estonian culture. The solidarity provided by the church as well as the other elements of the civil religion helped Estonia

survived the onslaught of Russification, and it helped nationalist movements such as the Popular Front by providing a unified group which could spread information about the movement's activities.

Another role of the Lutheran Church in the civil religion in Estonia is that helps maintain the Western culture of Estonia. Vardys suggests that, "Through the centuries these Western religions, the Latinstvo and the Reformation (Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism) have imbued the Balts with differing views regarding authority, the work ethic, and the law, and have thus given them different concepts of culture." These differing views are best exemplified by individualism. The Estonian culture is oriented towards a Western style individualism. This orientation partly comes from the church, "since the Lutheran ethical system is one of individual morality and piety. No group or communal concern is evident, the result being a strong emphasis on religious individualism." This view is extremely different from the Russian communal culture. Therefore the Lutheran Church has had an important function in Estonia since it helps preserve the Western orientation of the culture. Interestingly enough theorists assert that civil religion manifests itself "when the structure of society is seriously threatened." We saw the emergence of this civil religion in the 1970s when the Russians began massively immigrating into Estonia. The emergence of the civil religion was marked by an increase in participation in one of the elements of the civil religion (the Lutheran Church) as well as taking part in rituals (the laying of the wreaths) of the civil religion. The interplay of cultural pressure and the emergence of the civil religion would provide a fascinating topic for further exploration.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined Lutheran Church in Estonia. We began by discussing the history of the Lutheran Church from the 1500s to the present day. In our analysis of the Lutheran Church, it became apparent that while the Church is weak when we look at the "manifest church," it does have influence in the "latent church" or the civil religion. Its influence is seen in its position as a one of the nations oldest institutions, constantly reminding the Estonians of their past. It also provides a resource around which Estonians can rally for nationalist causes. Finally it has provided an influence for the maintenance of the Western culture of Estonia. In a sense it has provided a tower in the fortress of Estonian national identity.