

Estonia

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Introduction

In 2016 the Parliament of Estonia elected a new President for the Republic, Kersti Kaljulaid. She was inaugurated on 10 October. The occasion gave rise to heated debate: not because for the first time in Estonian history a woman had become President, but because she broke with the tradition of her predecessors and did not take part in the celebratory thanksgiving service in the Lutheran cathedral in Tallinn.

She explained that she had never been a churchgoer, although she respected all religions and people of different confessions. As an example she described how as a member of the European Court of Auditors in Luxembourg she had been on a delegation to the Vatican where she had been received by the Pope and participated in all the religious services in connection with the visit. She also said that her decision not to attend the service had been motivated by the fact that according to the Constitution of Estonia there is no state church. She has written that 'A self-confident Estonian is free in their choices'.¹

Her decision provoked an extraordinary number of reactions and a heated debate broke out. Many felt insulted; others welcomed her decision. The leadership of the Lutheran Church tried to keep a good face, but they were mostly disappointed and critical. Arguments were pitted against arguments and there were emotional discussions.

Why I have begun my introduction to religion in Estonia with this incident? There are three reasons. First, the debate clearly expresses the

controversial attitude to religion in Estonia. Second, it highlights the rather strange position of the Lutheran Church in Estonian society. Third, it sheds light on the position of all the churches in Estonia towards the secular state and church-state relations. In Estonia there is great confusion in religious matters; this is a confusion that characterises Estonian reality generally.

Religion (and politics) in Estonia

I shall focus mainly on the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC), which has been the majority church since the sixteenth century, but I shall also consider the Orthodox Churches in Estonia.

Before the Second World War, Estonia was overwhelmingly Lutheran: 80% Protestant, 19% Orthodox. Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. The Soviet authorities considered the EELC a nationalist organisation and according to the church historian Riho Altnurme (2004, pp.97-98) had neutralised it politically by the late 1940s. According to a decree of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, in 1945 the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church was liquidated in Soviet Estonia and was replaced by the Russian Orthodox Church. Both the EELC and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church established themselves in exile and the EELC became an organisation that maintained Christian as well as national identity outside Estonia.

According to Ringo Ringvee, an adviser at the Religious Affairs Department of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior,

During the Soviet period the Lutheran Church as well as religion in a more general sense, became a form of cultural

¹ Quoted on the main page of her official website, <https://www.president.ee/en/president/biography/index.html>

resistance and counter-culture. The Lutheran Church and its clergy carried on and maintained something that could be considered as the continuity with the pre-Soviet past or alternative to the Soviet reality. At the same time neither the Lutheran Church nor other religious associations became a political opposition like, for example, the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania. (Ringvee, 2000)

After Estonia regained independence in 1991, the EELC remained politically neutral, but was respected as a guardian of the old traditions and as a source of guidelines for moral conduct.

Estonia is currently one of the least religious countries in Europe in terms of declared religious attitudes. Only 18% of the population say that they believe there is a God compared to an EU average of 51% (Latvia 38%, England 37%). But the Estonian case is not simple, since over 50% say they believe that 'there is some kind of spirit or life force', and only 29% say they don't. (The respective figures for England are 33% and 25%).² Thus it could be claimed that more than 70% of the Estonian population are believers, at least in some sense of the word.

Religion has never played an important role in politics in Estonia, and close relations between the state and the Lutheran Church were ended with the Soviet occupation in 1940. The Soviet authorities promoted atheism by all possible means; one consequence is that currently around 54% of the population could be described as agnostics. At the same time, there have been significant changes on the Estonian religious landscape. When compared with the national census of 2001, the census of 2011 showed that the Orthodox Churches in Estonia had

overtaken the Lutheran Church and become the largest Christian denomination in Estonia. There are two Orthodox Churches, one under the canonical jurisdiction of Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and the other under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.

A team led by Professor Marju Lauristi of Tartu University has conducted a sociological survey 'Life, Religion and Religious Life' (see the Appendix to this article). This has been carried out every five years since 1995 following international standards for questionnaires. In September 2014 Professor Lauristi wrote in the online journal *The Interpreter* that in Estonian society today the nature of belief is complicated and that from one perspective at least the Estonian people are under the power of superstition. One could say that Estonians believe in God but this god is very small!³

Estonian society today is divided by language, nationality and culture: predominantly between Estonians and Russians. This division extends to religion, as documented by the survey mentioned above. According to that survey only 11.4% of ethnic Estonians observe religious rituals, while among ethnic Russians the figure is 38.4%. The respective figures for people who are believers but who don't go to church are 7% and 31%; the figures for people who are not religious believers but who nevertheless observe some religious rituals are 36% and 21%. The respective figures for people saying they are atheists are 7% and 3%. These figures are significant in many ways. One thing to note: Estonians often think that official Soviet atheism affected Russians more than Estonians, but in fact the figures indicate that this is not the case.⁴

2 Special Eurobarometer 341: Biotechnology (2010)
http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S755_73_1_EBS341/resource/b4a7f478-08ea-44a0-843a-414d913d9d24
VolumeAEB731RESEARCHbiotechnology.zip

3 <http://www.interpretermag.com/estonians-believe-in-higher-powers-but-not-in-god-lauristin-says/>;
<http://www.interpretermag.com/?s=Marju+Lauristin>
4 *ibid*

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

The Reformation reached Estonia only a few years after it had taken place in Germany. An independent Estonian Lutheran Church (EELC), however, dates from 1917, when an Estonian church congress was held and the first Estonian bishop was elected.

The EELC developed freely until the Soviet invasion in 1940. The Theological Faculty at the University of Tartu, the only school in Estonia at that time where clergy for the churches and theologians were educated, was closed. Church property was expropriated and almost all church organisations were dissolved. During the Second World War many church buildings were destroyed; some Estonian theologians and pastors escaped abroad; some were deported to Siberia. Religious education and public church activities were forbidden, although church services could continue. All church property was confiscated.

The liberation movement which started in 1988 led to a renewal of church life. The state was finding it difficult to cope with the changes and challenges. The former Chairman of the Parliamentary Judiciary Commission, Jüri Adams, has said that the state was in trouble and that it wanted the EELC to come to its rescue. (The areas in which the EELC might help were secondary to church life: property; cash flow; the use of donations and sales; models for deployment of work force and payment of taxes.) At the same time, however, the EELC was also in trouble and wanted the state to come to its rescue. Fifty years of official atheist ideology and education had broken a Lutheran Christian tradition in Estonian society.

The historical self-understanding of the EELC as the 'People's Church' lives on, but membership of the EELC, formerly the majority church, has fallen to 10% of the population. The atheist cultural context of the generations born in the twentieth century, who grew up without religious socialisation

during the Soviet occupation, has influenced subsequent generations. It is not only the Soviet system that is to blame for the rapid decline in the membership of the EELC, however.

One reason for this cultural change is that Estonian national identity has in fact very little to do with religious identity. This is in contrast to the situation for the Russian Orthodox in Estonia. As the latest census has shown, the religious identity of Russian Orthodox is part of their national identity. The Archbishop of the EELC at the time, Andres Põder, asked members of the EELC to state their religion in the census. There were problems for the EELC with the formulation of the relevant question in the census, 'Are you a believer?' It was surmised that Estonian respondents would have answered differently if the question had been 'Are you a Christian?' For the Russian-speaking population, the formulation would have made no difference.

Another reason, argues the Estonian political scientist Alar Kilp (2007, pp.240-41), is that in societies where churches (and other religious institutions) sided with anti-national forces during early nation-building processes secularisation has been relatively fast and deep. He has also argued that the Lutheran tradition provides Estonians with a political rather than a national identity, and that it operates as a political symbol (Kilp, 2006, p.69).

Nevertheless, the political involvement of the EELC has been quite limited (see Rohtmets and Ringvee 2013). There have been only a few occasions on which the EELC has taken an openly political stand. The first was in 1991, when Estonia became independent from the Soviet Union and the EELC encouraged people to follow this path. The second was in 2003, when the EELC encouraged people to vote in the referendum on whether to join the European Union. The EELC did not recommend that people vote for or against, but described Estonian identity: 'Estonia has always belonged to Europe. Let us not forget

our history, let us not forget our Christian faith.’

The EELC might of course feel relief that the burden of being the ‘People’s Church’ has now been removed, but to agree with this truth might require reflection. It seems from the somewhat bitter and disappointed reactions from the leadership of the EELC to the decision by the new President not to attend the service in the Lutheran cathedral that the idea of being a national ‘People’s Church’ is still alive and well.

The relations of the EELC to politics and government

Political neutrality has granted the EELC access to the government. It has a political lobby which protects its institutional interests there quite well. In 1995 a joint commission between the Estonian government and the EELC was set up. It meets twice a year and is chaired by the Minister of the Interior and the Archbishop of the EELC. The EELC is the only church in Estonia which has this kind of close cooperation with government. There are several reasons for this.

- Historical and cultural reasons: for many centuries the EELC has been the majority church with a strong cultural identity.
- The EELC has more than 160 parishes which cover Estonia with a network.
- The EELC tends nowadays to be treated as a non-profit organisation rather than a religious organisation, as part of the third sector in secular society. At the same time, the EELC tends not to be seen as equal to other non-profit and civic organisations because of its size: its membership is bigger than that of all the political parties put together. It is difficult to treat the EELC and other organisations equally when they are applying for public funding for their projects.

An exiled church: the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in the diaspora

After the Second World War, when it became obvious that there would be no quick return to their homeland for refugees from Estonia, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exile was founded in Stockholm. After Estonia became independent in 1991, negotiations began between the EELC in Estonia and the church in exile. After several attempts the churches were united and the exile church became a diocese of the EELC which was based in Tallinn.

The Estonian Council of Churches: religious organisations and the state

In 1989 the two largest Churches in Estonia, the EELC and the Russian Orthodox Church, invited the Christian churches in Estonia to found the Estonian Council of Churches (ECC). The majority of the churches responded positively and joined the organisation: the EELC, the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Estonian Methodist Church, the Conference of Seventh-Day Adventist Congregations, the Estonian Christian Pentecostal Church, the Congregation of the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Estonian Charismatic Episcopalian Church.

The initial idea was to create a common Christian voice in secular society and also a forum where misunderstandings between the churches could be resolved. These functions are still there, but the ECC has received even large responsibilities: it has become the main partner for the state on many religion-related questions. The reason for this is pragmatic. Through its member-churches the ECC represents the vast majority of religiously affiliated people in Estonia, and since the decisions of the ECC are based on consensus they reflect the agreed position of all the

various churches. In 2002-2004 the ECC also organised a round table with the non-Christian religious associations.

There are several state programmes which are carried out through the ECC. In the area of heritage protection, for example, there have been the following developments:

- 2002: a protocol of common interests drawn up by the Estonian government and the ECC;
- 2003: a state programme for the protection of places of worship;
- 2008–2012: a development plan for the protection of historical natural sacred sites;
- 2015: a cooperation plan for 2015-2020 agreed and signed.

Another form of cooperation between the Estonian state and the churches within the framework of the ECC are chaplaincies: in prisons, the defence force, police and border guard. Chaplains are religious ministers and civil servants at the same time. They are employed by the state as civil servants but have to follow their churches' regulations.

One controversial issue

There have been heated discussions about introducing religious education in state schools. This became the first problematic issue between the different religious groups. Since the 1990s the government's policy has been to introduce optional non-confessional education about religions, but there has been opposition to any kind of religious education in schools. The strongest opposition has come from the neo-pagan House of Taara and Native Religions and other non-Christian religious traditions.

A new phenomenon: Estonian neo-paganism

A new phenomenon during the last 15 years has been the rising number of Estonians

identifying themselves with a nature spirituality. It is difficult to define it precisely as it stresses individualism in religious matters. Its practitioners claim to represent a pre-Christian religious tradition that has been passed on over centuries from generation to generation, and they dislike the term neo-pagan, but historical facts would seem to justify this description. Estonian neo-paganism is closely associated with reverence for nature as well as with reviving centuries-old folk traditions such as the lighting of bonfires during the summer solstice. On the other hand, claims by the organisation that all of that 54% of the population who say they believe in a spirit or life force are followers of old Estonian religious traditions is wishful thinking: there are not many neo-pagans officially affiliated with the organisation itself, and on ancient holy days the groves are not filled with people (Ringvee 2000).

Concluding remarks

The Estonian Constitution does not stipulate separation of religion and state, but states in Article 40 that 'There is no state church' and that 'Everyone is free to belong to any church or any religious society'. Mutual relations between the state and religious organisations are therefore mainly positive; they are able to cooperate successfully while remaining independent from one another.

As I noted earlier, religion has never been an important issue in political or ideological debate in Estonia. The new President's decision not to take part in the celebratory thanksgiving service in the Lutheran cathedral therefore sent out an ambiguous new signal and gave rise to controversy. The world is becoming more diverse and Estonians have to face phenomena such as increasing immigration which raise religious issues. We need to understand more about ourselves and about others in the religious and cultural spheres.

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Appendix

Statistics on religion in Estonia (figures from the sociological survey 'Life, Religion and Religious Life' (*Elust, usust ja usuelust*), http://www.saarpoll.ee/UserFiles/File/Elus,%20usust%20ja%20usuelust_2015_ESITLUS_FINAL.pdf)

2010

12.7 % 'believer'
Estonians 6%, others 26%
38.4%

27 % 'inclined to belief'
Estonians 25%, others 31%

2.7 % attend monthly

16% belonging
Estonians 15.9 %, others 17.6 %
%

2015

20 % 'believer'
Estonians 11.4%, others

26% 'inclined to belief'
Estonians 25%, others 30%

5 % attend monthly

20.7 % belonging
Estonians 15.9 %, others 25 %

Religious Beliefs In Estonia (<http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-estonia.html>)

Rank	Religious Belief	Share of Adherents Among Estonians Today
1	Atheist or Agnostic	54.1%
2	Eastern Orthodox	16.2%
3	Lutheran	9.9%
4	Baptist	0.4%
5	Roman Catholic	0.4%
6	Jehovah's Witness	0.4%
7	Taara, Maask, or Estonian Neopagan	0.3%
8	Old Believer	0.2%
9	Free Congregation Protestant	0.2%
10	Pentecostal	0.2%