

Anti-Religious Rites in Estonia

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This article has been abbreviated and translated from German. The original contained extensive footnotes, referring chiefly to Estonian-language sources, which have been either incorporated into the text or omitted (readers wishing to consult them should apply to the CSRC). The author's two main sources are: G. Gerodnik, *Uued traditsioonid ja religioon* ("The New Traditions and Religion"), in *Motisklusi usust* ("Reflections on religious belief"), Tallinn, 1962, pp. 128-151; and K. Vimmsaare, *Luterlus enne ja nüüd* ("Lutheranism Yesterday and Today"), Tallinn, 1969. As an appendix to this article we also print extracts from a recent article on the same subject in a Soviet atheist book.

(Editor's note)

Reliable information on the religious situation in Estonia is difficult to obtain today. From the Christian side there is only one publication: "Yearbook (sic) of the Estonian Evangelical-Lutheran Church", Tallinn, 1956. Otherwise none of the Churches has been able to publish anything worth speaking of since 1945.

When assessing the present situation, one should remember the considerable psychological tensions which affect religious life in Estonia today. The two largest confessions in Estonia, claiming the membership of almost 98 per cent of all Estonians before the war – the Lutheran and the Orthodox Church – had only just over 20 years (1917-1940) under independent Estonian leadership; before 1917 their leadership was firmly in the hands of Germans and Russians respectively, and after 1940 external conditions prevented further normal development. The period of independence was too short for these Churches to develop a native Estonian tradition. The attraction exercised over Russians by the Russian Orthodox Liturgy, or the native church tradition of Lithuania, where the clergy had always been Lithuanian, has no counterpart in Estonia. The free churches on the other hand (their membership, however, is small) have enjoyed a longer period of independent development.

The hatred of Russia, evoked by the russification of the country, places the Estonian Orthodox Church in a very difficult psychological position. Previously this Church was almost independent, but in 1945 it became a diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate. In contrast, all other Churches are looked upon as organizations where "the Russians" have no say, and thus as positive forces for the survival of the Estonian people. They are favoured by the authorities as representatives of the USSR at international church gatherings, unlike the Estonian Orthodox diocese.

A new period in the struggle against the Churches in Estonia began with the introduction of state-propagated rituals replacing the church festivals. The first "Summer Days of Youth", intended to replace confirmation classes, took place in the summer of 1957. New "rites" are not only supposed to represent "a strong antidote to religious deception", but also to meet the psychological need to celebrate family occasions appropriately. They must "reflect contemporary social ideas": to this end songs are specially commissioned and speakers carefully trained for such events. But above all the new rites are intended as a weapon: "Entirely new traditions are the best means for completely eradicating religious customs" (Gerodnik, p. 150).

Confirmation has always been one of the most popular festivals in Estonia. Since the Orthodox Church adopted the custom, 98 per cent of the youth were eligible and actual participation was high. According to information from atheist sources, 49 per cent of all eighteen-year-olds still took part in confirmation in 1957. During the period of preparation the young people usually lived together in the pastorate for about three weeks. This instruction was always antipathetic to the atheists; but it was only in the summer of 1957 that they thought of organizing similar state courses to keep the young away from confirmation classes. The first anti-confirmation camp had 39 participants; the following summer there were 2,200; the third year attracted 6,300. In 1961 the figure reached 7,000 and in 1962-65 it was 5-6,000. As each year-group comprises less than 20,000 young people, clearly these camps have been very successful. But the extent to which their success corresponds to the expense involved is still an open question: much was spent on theatre productions, music, excursions and so on, in order to make the camps more attractive. They end with a "coming-of-age ceremony" at which the young people appear in black suits and white dresses, just as for church confirmation. (In Latvia the camps are organized under the name "Coming-of-age Day".) The search for new rites continues: "The *Komsomol* is constantly in search of a ceremonial form for the Summer Days which would give the young people a good time and leave lasting memories, while at the same time being a real school of communism" (Gerodnik, p. 140).

In 1959 a "Commission for the Preparation of New Family Rites" was founded in Tartu (formerly Dorpat). The commission's suggestions were published in a brochure, "Suggestions for Secular Traditional Events", and put into practice. An effort was made to outdo church ceremonies: old folk marriage customs were resurrected; attempts were made to recruit choirs and orchestras from the places where the young couples worked, and when they failed, the authorities tried to use suitable music

on tape. Since this was clearly inferior to organ music, the first "ritual" quartet was established for the registry office in Tartu in April 1960. Two years later five of the larger cities had their own registry office musicians. Poets and composers were asked to write suitable songs for the new festivals. The book "Songs for Family Occasions" contains 66 melodies, including 20 for weddings – but the content of these is poor.

Instead of baptism parents are supposed to bring their child to the "ceremony of name-giving": "At the beginning the organizers of the children's name-day imitated christening and unnecessarily copied the various elements of the religious service" (Gerodnik, p. 132). A "baptismal vow" is still required from the godparents and the parents receive a document similar to the baptismal certificate. The ceremony is arranged for a large group of children and it is intended to impress both young and old.

The first state funeral ceremony was held in Tartu in 1960. A special official visits the family of the deceased, discusses the details of the ceremony, arranges for a suitable speaker and hires an orchestra for the funeral procession. "The church funeral is the weak link, where the Church remains most strongly entrenched. If the deceased is not buried according to the civil rite, a clergyman will certainly appear" (Gerodnik, pp. 145-6). In 1957, church funerals still accounted for 64.5 per cent; in 1968 it was still 46 per cent. Only later were the authorities able to establish "funeral offices", supported by several collective farms, in country areas.

Besides confirmation, the summer memorial day for the dead was one of the most popular church festivals and often drew thousands of people to the cemeteries. The state inevitably tried to rival this too. In the "new rite", the dead are remembered by name if the family so wishes; short memorial speeches alternate with orchestral music, choral and folk songs (orchestras and choirs play an even more important role in these ceremonies than in those previously mentioned).

Since 1957 the authorities have invested large sums of money in the struggle against the Churches: more atheist books have been published (especially between 1961-63); propaganda in schools and the mass media increased. But the chief weapon against the Churches is still the so-called administrative method – e.g. discrimination against believers at work, moral pressure and provocation. The situation is particularly acute in the schools. A teacher who is married in church, for example, can be sure that he will be dismissed without notice.

It is difficult to assess the religious situation on the basis of statistics, for these are scarce and unreliable. The new Estonian encyclopedia (1970)

stated that on 1 January, 1969, Estonia had a total of 366 state-registered congregations : 144 Lutheran, with 15 branch congregations; 87 Orthodox; 82 Baptist; 13 Adventist; 11 Methodist and 11 Old Believer (i.e. one church to about 2,600 Estonians). In 1937 the 9,909 Baptists formed only 49 congregations, but in 1968 with 8,273 believers there were already 84 congregations. The Catholics before the war had six parishes, and in 1969 only two, although the number of believers had increased slightly. The greatest decrease is with the Orthodox parishes, of which there were 158 in 1940. But the comparison of recent statistics with pre-war figures can be misleading : such factors as territorial and population changes must be taken into account. Many Germans and Swedes emigrated, many Estonians became refugees or were deported. The cession of eastern areas of Estonia to Russia deprived the Orthodox Church of more than 20 parishes (in addition 50 had to be closed down for various reasons).

The first book on the Estonian Evangelical-Lutheran Church was published in 1969 and contained many statistics on the religious life of this Church (K. Vimmsaare – see introductory note). The author states that he spent ten years visiting 300 church services throughout the country with his assistants, during which they noted the number and the age of those attending and took shorthand notes on the sermons. However, the author only uses the material which supports his thesis – i.e. that the Estonian Lutheran Church has suffered severe losses. He cites figures for confirmations in the St. Charles parish, Tallinn : in August 1959 there were 214, but in August 1968 only seven. No statistics are given for church attendance (perhaps the numbers seemed too high to the author – or the censor) nor are there any for believers, clergy or state-registered congregations. Almost all statistics for the Soviet period are given as percentages.

How high was the true figure for Lutheran confirmations in 1967, which Vimmsaare gives precisely as “2.2 per cent of all 18-year-olds”, while in 1929 it was supposed to have been 60.8 per cent? If we consider the results of the 1970 census, the 1967 confirmation figure, according to Vimmsaare, should have been more than 400. But the head of the Lutheran Church in Estonia, Archbishop Alfred Tooming, declared on Danish Radio on 25 August, 1969, that “only a few” young people came for confirmation nowadays – about 2,000 per year. (He also stated that there were 47 churches, 125 priests, and 30 students preparing for the ministry.) Of course he was speaking only of Lutheran confirmations and with the express permission of the authorities. Whom should we believe? Virtually no one knows how many young people of the St. Charles parish were confirmed elsewhere in secret. The same applies to baptism and other church rites.

The available statistics are unreliable for two reasons: the believers conceal facts for fear of reprisals, while the authorities will not admit that, despite all their efforts, the number of Christians remains high. According to Vimmsaare, two-thirds of all Christians and almost half of all clergy belonged to the Lutheran Church in 1969. The above-mentioned radio speech stated that there were 300,000 Lutherans and 125 clergy. Thus in Estonia in 1969 there would have been half a million Christians and about 250 clergy. According to the census of 15 January, 1970 there were 925,000 Estonians. It appears, therefore, that despite all pressures, half of them espouse Christianity, making it the largest popular movement in Estonia today.

Appendix

ANTI-RELIGIOUS RITES IN ESTONIA (extracts from V. Ranne of Tallinn "New rituals and their place in the spiritual life of the Soviet people", *Questions of Scientific Atheism* No. 13, Moscow, 1972.)

During the last few years the development of new rituals has caused a sharp drop in the practice of religious rites in our republic. While in 1957, 55.8 per cent of all babies were christened, 29.8 per cent of all weddings were held in church, and 65.5 per cent of all funerals were religious in nature, in 1969 by contrast 11.8 per cent of babies were christened, 2.5 per cent of all couples were married in church and 45.7 per cent of funerals were religious. While in 1957 more than 10,000 young people were confirmed in the Lutheran Church, in 1969 it was only 455. This is clear proof of the need for these new rituals, of the fact that religious rituals have exhausted their potential and lost their appeal to the broad masses. However there still exist many churches and prayer houses in Estonia and the clergy are doing everything in their power to keep people under their influence. . . .

Work on the establishment of civil rites is coordinated by the Council for Civil Rites under the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, the president of which is the first deputy Minister for Agriculture, I. Aamissepp. Within this Council there are five sub-commissions: on civil funerals and memorial days for the dead, on youth traditions, on family occasions and festivals, on words and music and the propagation of traditions, on state and social days and events. . . .

Alongside clear successes in the work being done, there are also many shortcomings. Not all districts have established Councils for Civil Rites. There is not enough transport available, so that the councils have to expend large sums on hiring transport from other organizations. It is also difficult to obtain marble grave-stones. There are still a great many church funerals. Although much attention is being paid to the organization of civil funerals, 40 per cent of all funerals in Estonia are still church events to this day. . . .

We must refute those who do not understand the importance of the new rituals, and who see in them either barren voluntarism and subjectivism, or else

the rebirth of old church traditions. One of such critics wrote in *Novy Mir*: "All these inventions and 'rebirth' of rituals and festivals do not of course – fortunately – leave any real mark on the life of our people. With calm indifference they accept the innovations, stuffed full of 'educational elements' and they simply smile in surprise at the naïveté of those who think they can kill two birds with one stone: improve our 'drab, prosaic-grey life', and at the same time rid people's consciousness of survivals of the past" (*Novy Mir*, No. 6, 1969, pp. 276-7). . . .

The new ceremonies for children have gained the support of Soviet people, and as a counterbalance to church christenings, there have arisen rituals that are Soviet in content, while beautiful and emotional in form – name-giving days and the ceremonial registration of children. The results are plain to see. Whereas in 1958, 50 per cent of all children were christened, in 1962 it was only 22.8 per cent, in 1968 – 12.5 per cent and in 1969 – 11.8 per cent. In Estonia today the birth of a child is marked by the ceremonial registration in the *ispolkom* and the name-giving festival at home, in the family. . . .

The honorary parents are invited to come up to the table. They sign a certificate which is handed to the parents, then the parents' workmates greet them in the name of the collective and give presents. The ceremony ends with a family festival. . . .

After the organization of the "Summer Days of Youth", the number taking part in church confirmation dropped sharply. Today no more than 400-500 are confirmed each year, while about 10,000 boys and girls participate in the "Summer Days". Today the "Summer Days of Youth" have become a traditional coming-of-age festival for Estonian youth, a demonstration of their loyalty to their country and people. The final festivities of the "Summer Days", which take place on the first Sunday in July, have become a truly national festival in which people of all ages take part. . . .

The organization of civil funerals is not an easy task. Thus in Estonia particular attention is paid to the training of people to organize these rituals, in seminars and schools of atheism. Civil funerals need to pay our debt of respect to the deceased, and to offer moral support to his family. . . .

Instead of the traditional cross over the grave, marble tombstones are erected. These are made in all district towns. While the grave is being decorated with wreaths and flowers, a farewell speech is made, and candles are lit on the grave in memory of the deceased. The ceremony ends with a funeral song.

In the summer on St. John's Eve, the Lutheran Church holds the so-called cemetery days, which are a very effective form of religious propaganda. Even to this day they have attracted tens of thousands of people. It was necessary to replace this church event with a Soviet ritual. In the cemeteries rest the remains of men who fell in the struggle for Soviet rule, also outstanding representatives of culture, whose memory is dear to all Soviet people. After all, who does not wish to honour the memory of his departed relatives, friends, advisers, fellow-workers – not with a church ritual, but a civil one? . . .

The new civil festivals and rituals fulfil an important role in the communist education of Soviet man; they have a lasting place in the system of atheist education. They exercise a beneficial influence on people's spiritual life and help them to overcome religious survivals; they form a materialist world-view.