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Religion and Religiosity as a Cultural Toolbox: Understanding the Estonian Religious Landscape*

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Abstract. It is significant, that both the institutional and ideological aspects of religion have emerged as distinct factors in the social and political life of contemporary societies. The re-emergence and the consolidation of the religious institutions and identities in the social and political life of contemporary societies have given a renewed fillip to the study of religion and religiosity even in so-called ‘secular’ societies. The Baltic State of Estonia presents an interesting example of distinct understanding of religion in its non-institutional form, as a cultural tool to address ordinary concerns of human existence within the socio-cultural milieu of the society and within the non-institutional and syncretic idiom of spirituality. This article aims at presenting a broad overview of religion as a cultural toolbox in the study of contemporary religion particularly in the context of societies that have very limited experience with institutional forms of religion.

Keywords: Religion, Religiosity, Post-Soviet, Estonia, New Spirituality.

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Introduction

As a culture-specific phenomenon, religion has been viewed throughout history as a major integrating force in society. Its significant role in the political domain as a means of legitimization and consolidation of power is also established and acknowledged (Berger, 1999). Significantly, in the beginning of the last century, on account of the momentous social changes, the relevance of religion in the life of the society came under serious questioning. The paradigmatic assumption was that secularization was one of the major thrusts of modernization. However, the linear inevitable secularization of modern societies came under serious doubts towards the end of the 1970’s with the rise of Evangelical Christianity in the United States and many similar developments elsewhere in the world and what was witnessed was the return of religion to society and politics in a big way. The religious factor, thus stands out in a significant way in much of the struggles in the world, be it in West Asia, in Israel, in Iran and also in Afghanistan. Consequently, what is evident today is a growing acceptance among political scientists,

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sociologists and specialists in religious studies about the importance of religion as a factor in political life – both as a premise of decisions undertaken by states, as well as an instrument used by them in pursuit of political goals. In the case of Communist countries two distinct experiences have shaped the overall discourse on religion and religiosity. The first being the state initiated secularization drive of the socialist societies aimed at the weeding out of religion and religiosity at the societal level, followed by the surge in “religious revivalism” and the reestablishment of the ties between the church and the state (Froese, 2004) witnessed after the Cold War. This article aims at presenting a broad overview of religion as a cultural toolbox in the study of contemporary religion particularly in the context of societies that have very limited experience with institutional forms of religion. In this regard, the experience of the Baltic State of Estonia particularly stands out as a unique example of non-institutional and syncretic spirituality.

Approaches to the study of Contemporary Religion

The study of contemporary religion and religiosity presents multiple challenges as it involves the understanding of both the institutional and non-institutional variants of the phenomenon. Religiosity particularly in secular Western countries has come to be increasingly located outside the ambit of conventional religious institutions. It has come to acquire non-institutional, hybrid and at times disguised forms with people choosing their own “subjective-life spiritualities” (Heelas et al 2004). Consequently, non-conventional forms of religion have remained understudied (Woodhead, 2010). However, there is increasing recognition of the need to find new concepts and models that would aid in the better understanding of religion as it is practiced in everyday context.

It is significant that matters which elude description and expression in words often prove to be most important for humanity. Such is the case with religion which eludes both research and precise definitions, for it refers to something supra-natural, supra-empirical or transcendent (Beyer, 1994: 5). In this regard, it needs to be noted that there are two most widespread research approaches towards religion: the substantive approach – endeavouring to describe the substance of ‘what religion is’ – and the functional approach – characterising ‘what religion does’. While on the one hand religion, acts as a catalyst in society, on the other it demarcates a line of division between those who belong to the community and those who do not. It is this sense of separateness, along with the sense of continuity that influences the process of self-identification of not only individuals, religious organisations and nations, but also of the enormous geo-cultural community that is called civilization (Toynebee, 1949). Religion plays a critical role in worldview formation and also in the creation and legitimisation of culture. It also serves in the reconstruction of collective memory in modern times and enables a nation to identify itself with a given tradition (Bonnell, 1996). There are other operative functions also that are performed by religious institutions such as that of mediator, arbiter and also organizer.

According to Emile Durkheim religion is a “system of beliefs and practices... which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere

to them” (Durkheim 1964: 47). Three elements can be discerned from this definition: faith, belief and values referring to the supra-empirical sphere; cult (practice) and community (the church) (ibid: 31, 40). In the words of John Milton Yinger, religion is “a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life” (Yinger 1957:9). Robert N. Bellah defines religion as a “set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence” (Bellah 1964: 385–374). In a fairly comprehensive definition of religion, Wladyslaw Piwowarski proposes an understanding of religion as a “system of beliefs, values and activities connected with them, that are shared and followed by a group of people and which result from the distinction between empirical and supra-empirical reality and subordination of the significance of the former to that of the latter” (Piwowarski, 1996:37).

From the above definitions, it clearly emerges that religion is an “ideological, practical and symbolic determinant that encourages the creation, development and control of one’s awareness of belonging to a particular line of belief – and a certain community” (Hervieu-Leger, 2000:81). In contrast to religion (which is understood as an objectified phenomenon), religiosity has a subjective character and is strongly grounded in the socio-cultural milieu of a society and is fundamentally connected with religious institutions. It is understood as an assortment of ideas, values, convictions and attitudes towards non-empirical reality, as well as views and beliefs about humanity’s relationship with this reality. According to sociologist Thomas Luckmann, religiosity is an intrinsic trait of humanity. He further opines that in religion, humanity transcends its biological nature to become what is understood as human (Luckmann, 1967:13).

However, the scholarly definitions of religion are not entirely adequate to grasp the essence of the changing nature of contemporary religiosity that focuses on the individualistic and syncretic dimensions of religion. Religion in this broad and functional sense is a meaning creating system that fulfils a “core psychological need” for people to understand themselves and the world in which they live (Steger et al 2001:200). For the purpose of this study the most appropriate definition of religion would be to understand it as “a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a supraréality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (Wuthnow, 2001:307). In this sense, religion thus becomes a cultural tool that aids the process of locating a “frame of reference for interpreting reality”.

Contextualising Religion and Religiosity in Post-Soviet Estonia

Forced secularization resulting from a complete disdain for religion as the “opium of the masses” defined the Soviet State’s policy towards religion and religiosity across its vast territory. Consequently, socialist regimes not just in the Soviet Union but everywhere imposed measures that undermined the hold of religion both in the process of socialization and the transmission of religious beliefs. The Communist Party in the Soviet Union and in the countries of Eastern Europe asserted full control of religious affairs with the clear objective of creating “pure atheists” (Stan, 2009:90). The state-controlled process successfully diminished

the power and role of religion in the society through numerous means (Tomka, 1991:95). Not only were churches debarred from playing a role in public education, their own activities were prohibited or closely scrutinised. State policies promoting increased female labour participation along with childcare support, not only impacted the traditional family structures but also the process of religious socialization (Myers, 1996). Confiscation of church properties, persecution of church leaders and a clear bias against believers characterised the period of Stalin's rule (Ramet, 1987; Burgess, 1997). The suppression of believers manifested in multiple ways. Believers were "treated as second-class citizens – excluded from membership in the party, from the officer corps in the military, and from upper-level positions in the government, industrial management, socio-political organizations and the media" (Ramet, 1987:5). However, state driven secularization has its own limitations as the very process of secularization is neither a linear or a bounded process. It has its own dynamics and manifestations which operates at three distinct levels: societal, institutional and individual. Secularization at one level does not necessarily correlate with secularization at another level (Dobbalaere, 2002). Again, if secularization is to be understood as the decline of conventional religion, then Western and Post-Soviet countries would easily fit into the criteria of being secular. However, the decline of conventional religion did not in any way implied the absence of religion and religiosity in these very societies. In fact the diminishing importance of conventional religions have been instrumental in creating a favourable context for the emergence of several forms of alternative religiosity including what is called the New Age spirituality. The tendency to have new spiritualities widely and visibly has been described by scholars as some kind of a "spiritual revolution" (Tacey, 2004). New Age spirituality fits into the description of what Georg Simmel's describes as the "individualisation and segmentation of beliefs" in a scenario where social groups who cannot find their belief in traditional doctrines to fulfil their religious needs turn to "all sorts of exotic, farfetched and bizarre new doctrines" (Simmel, 1976:259). In other words, individualization and pluralization of religiosity widens the available choices and the liberty to choose them for individuals.

The introduction of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1980s eased the situation for religion and religiosity to re-emerge in the countries of the Soviet Bloc, though the intensity varied from country to country. While the "planned secularization" yielded fairly visible results in countries such as the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Hungary, in countries such as Poland, the church remained a strong societal force deeply embedded to national identity. Though the relegation of religion to the private sphere reduced the hold of religion over people's lives, it did not mean an absolute rejection of religion from their lives. More often than not, the abandonment of religion by citizens was more in way of confirming to the official expectations rather than rejection of religiosity (Tomka, 2010:3). Evidently, the process of forced secularization of the Communist rule differed greatly from the "natural" process of secularization that was visible in most of Western Europe.

Despite the anti-religious propaganda of the Soviet period, post-disintegration, there was an explosion of religious activities not just in Russia but elsewhere in the former Soviet space. Societies, clearly had managed to create social conditions that made it possible to maintain religious beliefs and their intergenerational transfer. In many parts of Eastern Europe, the state itself played a role in re-establishing the role of the Church. Return to religion was seen as a “return to the national roots” and political leaders lent support to conservative moral principles that supported the idea of a strong national identity (Titarenko, 2008:251, 252). “Existential security” became a strand of reasoning attributed to the understanding of the sudden explosion of religiosity in many of these societies. The need for rigid predictable rules, such as those prescribed by institutionalized religion came to be recognized as an effective tool to deal with the uncertainty of unstable times that followed the massive restructuring of the formally planned economies. The prevailing situation thus provided ample space for political interventions to encourage religious structures in tune with the newly formed ‘national ethos’ that would prove to be politically advantageous to the new establishment. What was thus witnessed was the process of de-secularization which manifested in three distinct ways: “a rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms”; “a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices”; and “a return of religion to the public sphere” (Karpov, 2010:239–40).

The Case of Estonia: Religiosity outside the Conventional religious sphere

Due to historical and cultural reasons, Estonia, the northernmost and the smallest of the three Baltic states, has the distinction of being the least religious country in the world. Greatly influenced by the Soviet-era state driven secularization policies that debarred the transmission of religious ideas and practices, Estonians by and large display a detached attitude towards religion and religiosity. This gets reflected in the visible decline of institutionalized and conventional forms of religion and religiosity in the society. It is significant that though Estonia shares many cultural and historical features with the countries in its neighbourhood, its religious situation has had a distinct evolution (Bruce, 2000). Sociological studies have placed Estonia among the highly secularized countries of the world (Berger, Davie, and Fokas, 2008). This implies that in the distinctive religious sphere, there has been a decline of religious beliefs and practice at the societal level with the relegation of the religion to the private sphere (Casanova, 2006). Estonia’s contact with Christianity can be traced to the thirteenth century, when the Northern Crusades reached its territory. Thereafter Catholic rulers were at the helm for centuries. However, since the Reformation, Estonia has been predominantly a Lutheran county with the Church playing an important role as the moral backbone of the society. This continued right till Estonia’s first short era of Independence that lasted between 1918–1940. The role of the Church in the national awakening at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century is also worth mentioning. In 1934, as per the Census Report, 88 per cent of the population in Estonia were ethnic Estonians and 8 per cent were Russian.

While 78 per cent belonged to the Lutheran Church, 19 per cent professed an Orthodox identity (Esti arvudes, 1937).

The scenario completely changed in 1940 with the Soviet Union's annexation of Estonia in 1940. The anti-religious policy of Stalin resulted in the state control of the Church and its leaders. From economic restrictions to development of secular Soviet rituals, multiple methods were adopted to combat religion and its influence in the society. As a result of the determined state driven onslaughts, religion came to be significantly marginalized resulting in the rupture of the church traditions and its linkages with the society (Rommel, 2015). The late 1980s, witnessed the loosening of the state's religious policy and consequently, religion once again appeared in the societal landscape of Estonia. Between 1987 and 1992 what was witnessed was a "religious boom", mainly manifesting in the proliferation religious movements of all hues in what may be described as the spiritual market place (Roof, 2001). The metaphor of the religious market place is useful as a grouping principle and is indicative of the growing significance of individual religion as against institutionalized religion (Davie, 1994; Bellah, 2007). Terminology such as lived or vernacular religion emphasise the individual experience of religion as "it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano, 1995:44).

Contemporary religiosity in Estonia can be best described as "Fuzzy Spirituality". In the words of Linda Woodhead: "Even today, vast areas of religious, sacred and ritual experience are routinely ignored or dismissed as "fuzzy", insubstantial and lacking in salience because they do not conform to the lineaments of what a dominant consensus considers "real religion" (Woodhead, 2010:4). It is noteworthy that as a general tendency, in Estonia the general attitude towards religion is characterized by indifference and at times even hostility. However, Estonians score the highest in Europe when it comes to belief in the spiritual and the supernatural. It is this idea of personal spiritual growth as one of the salient principles of "new spirituality" that has come to appeal to a large majority of the Estonians. Spiritual themes have made its way in the mainstream media as an acknowledgement of the individual's inherent freedom to choose between different sources of knowledge and alternative life styles. Scholars point out that one of the major reasons for Estonia's low religiosity in the conventional sense is the key role played by the Estonian national narrative that has shaped Estonian identity and understanding of the past. In this narrative the Church was presented as the agent of foreign oppressors and hence "not one's own" (Tamm, 2008). Incidentally, among Russian minority population in Estonia comprising close to 25 per cent of the population, religious belonging is much higher. Orthodox Christianity is an important element in the consolidation minority group identity and Estonia has the distinction of being the first European country to have a minority group religion having more followers than the historically and culturally dominant faith. The exceptionally high percentage of Estonians believing in the phenomena of spirit or life force as revealed in surveys is indicative of the continuous presence and influence of non-theistic folk traditions and beliefs in Estonia related to the imagery of the pre-Christian religion. Despite the Soviet atheist campaigns, folk

beliefs not only survived but continues to wield significant influence on the religious world view of the population at large. However, the anti-religious programme of the Soviet Union clearly has been the most influential factor in the lack of conventional religiosity in Estonia. It had a distinct impact on two generations of Estonians who were raised without the knowledge of religion as a part of everyday life. Consequently, the majority of people were not socialized into institutional religion even today and there is a reluctance to accept religion and religiosity outside the personal sphere. What is witnessed is a situational and functional participation in the spiritual milieu which is goal-oriented and motivated by the desire to seek solutions for specific problems.

Conclusion

By defining values, informing identities and addressing the deepest insecurities of people living in volatile times, religion serves a very useful role in connecting communities. Though religion and religious practices were openly shunned during Soviet times, the case of Estonia reveals that it continued to remain alive and relevant in people's lives in multiple ways and varying intensity though not in the conventional sense. However, the Soviet-era anti-religious drive did result in an environment of spiritual illiteracy with a very low level of belonging to Christian beliefs. But what is significantly evident is the presence of situational and inclination based religiosities within a spiritual milieu that addresses the ordinary concerns of human existence and offers solutions to specific problems. What is particularly evident is the fact that the mainstreaming and legitimising of the alternative – spiritual ideas is taking place through the central democratic values of plurality and individualism. While spirituality has come to be accepted as something natural and intrinsic to humanity, institutionalized religion continues to be associated with force and violence and hence evokes aversion. The Estonian example clearly reveals that a narrow understanding of religion in the conventional sense fails to do justice to the understanding of the full range and depth of contemporary religions including “situational” or “low intensity” belief systems. Hence there is a strong need to come up with better concepts and terminology to describe the “lived” spirituality of people in a country that is otherwise considered to be among the least religious countries in Europe. It is in this context that the understanding of religion as a “cultural tool box” gains salience.

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Религия и религиозность как культурный инструментарий: понимание религиозного ландшафта Эстонии*

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Аннотация. Примечательно, что как институциональные, так и идеологические аспекты религии стали явными факторами в социальной и политической жизни современных обществ. Возрождение и консолидация религиозных институтов и особенности в социальной и политической жизни современных обществ дали новую возможность изучать религию и религиозность даже в так называемых светских обществах. Балтийское государство Эстония представляет интересный пример четкого понимания религии в ее неинституциональной форме как культурного инструмента для решения обычных проблем человеческого существования в социокультурной среде общества и в неинституциональной и синкретической идиоме духовности. Эта статья направлена на представление широкого обзора религии как культурного инструментария в изучении современной религии, особенно в контексте обществ, которые имеют очень ограниченный опыт работы с институциональными формами религии.

Ключевые слова: религия, религиозность, постсоветский, Эстония, новая духовность.

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