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Patterns of Lutheran politics in a post-communist state : the case of Estonia

Kultura i Polityka : zeszyty naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Europejskiej im. ks. Józefa Tischnera w Krakowie nr 6, 66-77

2009

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Alar Kilp*

PATTERNS OF LUTHERAN POLITICS IN A POST-COMMUNIST STATE: THE CASE OF ESTONIA

Abstract

The article addresses two major issues: the legacy of the communist regime on the popular attitudes towards religion and the Church, and the patterns of religious politics and the political behaviour of the Lutheran Church in a traditionally Lutheran post-communist country.

In Estonia, the general alienation from organized religion has, in addition to the experience of the communist regime, also been aided by a weak relationship between the Estonian national identity and the Lutheran church of the pre-communist period.

Religious politics in post-communist Estonia follows four main types—civil religion, an unofficial neoliberal-conservative-clerical alliance, the emergence of a Christian-Protestant political party and a moderate anti-clerical left-wing religious ideology.

In general, Lutheranism in Estonia provides a framework of religious politics, where religious symbols and values culturally unite the whole political community, and allows the 'politics of religion' and 'religious politics' to be interpreted to a large extent according to the private preferences of individual politicians and activist pastors.

Keywords

Religion in party politics, civil religion, post-communism, Lutheran Church and state, religion and national identity, secularization.

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Comparison of religiosity among predominantly Lutheran countries

Among European Lutheran countries, Estonia is close to the average according to religious attendance, but has the lowest level of religious affiliation. According to the European Values Study Surveys (Table 1) Estonia is comparably close only to Eastern Germany with regard to the low level of religious affiliation.

Table 1. Religious affiliation and attendance (percentage of population)

	Estonia	Eastern Germany	Latvia	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Iceland
Religious affiliation	25	34	59	76	88	90	96
Religious attendance	4	5	6	4	5	3	3

Sources: Halman 2001: 74, 78. Data for Eastern Germany is derived from 1999/2000 World Values Surveys, online data analysis of www.worldvaluessurvey.org, conducted in February 2007.

The level of religious attendance in Denmark and Iceland is lower than in post-communist Estonia, Eastern Germany or Latvia. The latter three countries, however, also have significant proportions of non-Protestants among the religiously affiliated part of the population (Table 2). Specifically, the share of Catholics in Eastern Germany and Latvia can explain the higher level of religious attendance as the Catholics, unlike Lutherans or Orthodox, are required to participate in weekly religious services.

Table 2. Main confessions (percentage of the religiously affiliated)

	Eastern Germany	Latvia	Estonia	Finland	Sweden	Denmark	Iceland
Protestants	85	36	54	97	96	97	95
Orthodox	1	28	41	1	1	0	0
Catholics	11	33	2	0	2	1	0
Other	3	3	3	2	1	2	5

Source: Halman 2001: 75.

In all the countries included in this study Protestants are overwhelmingly Lutherans. In Estonia, based on surveys from 1998, approximately 17% of the population had established a formal membership with religious communities and approximately 11% of the population belonged to the Lutheran Church (Ringvee 2001: 640). Protestantism is overwhelmingly Lutheran also in Latvia (Balodis 2001: 19) and Eastern Germany.

Estonia was mono-Lutheran until 1850, but since the 20th century the share of Lutheran church-members has significantly decreased. The share of Orthodox believers—mostly among Russian-speaking minorities—has recently increased to a level almost equal to the Lutherans. Affiliated ethnic Estonians remain predominantly Lutheran. According to the 2000 census, ethnic Estonians form 66.5% of the Estonian population, 24.3% of ethnic Estonians are followers of a particular faith, and among those, 80.5% are Lutherans and 10.2% are Orthodox (Känd 2002: 292, 328). In contrast, according to the 1934 census, the share of believers in Estonia was 91% (Hansen 2002: 12). By 1999 it had declined to one quarter.

The levels of personal religiosity (Table 3) are lowest in Eastern Germany, Estonia and Sweden, but post-communist Latvia, despite the Soviet period, is described by a level of personal religiosity that is not surpassed by any of the Scandinavian countries.

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Table 3. Personal religiosity (percentage of population)

	Eastern Germany	Latvia	Estonia	Finland	Sweden	Denmark	Iceland
Identify themselves as religious persons	29	77	42	67	39	77	74
Get comfort and strength from religion	28	63	36	59	33	33	75

Source: Halman 2001: 81, 91.

People in Scandinavian countries and Eastern Germany follow less conservative attitudes (Table 4) than people in Estonia and Latvia. The highest proportion of Catholic believers is in Latvia, which may have an impact on popular attitudes, since Catholics of post-communist societies tend to oppose abortion and homosexuality more than Protestants.

Table 4. Conservative social values (percentage of those who find that ... is never justifiable)

	Eastern Germany	Latvia	Estonia	Finland	Sweden	Denmark	Iceland
Having casual sex (never justifiable)	39	59	42	34	27	46	21
Abortion (never justifiable)	14	37	21	11	5	13	12
Homosexuality (never justifiable)	18	77	57	13	9	21	12
Mean	24	58	40	19	14	27	15

Source: World Values Survey Online Data Analysis, www.worldvaluessurvey.com.

In Estonia and Latvia fewer people approve of casual sexual relationships and more condemn abortion and homosexuality than in Scandinavian societies. The persistence of conservative social values in Estonia and Latvia correlates with the shared experience of half a century in the Soviet Union. The Soviet regime was essentially anti-religious, but it was also anti-liberal. As a result, popular values have not liberalized to the extent that it has taken place in Scandinavian countries. Thus, the persistence of traditional conservative attitudes in Estonia has less to do with Lutheranism per se than with the recent experience of Communist rule.

Thus, Estonia differs markedly from Scandinavian countries not by religiosity as such, but by the lack of 'extreme church fidelity' that characterizes the Scandinavians (Karvonen 1994: 121).

Before analyzing the relationship between Lutheranism and politics in contemporary Estonia, two statements regarding the historical church and state relationship in Estonia are due:

First, *Estonians have never enjoyed a close relationship to the Church*. Estonians were superficially Christianized in the 13th century and as a result "paganism in Estonia maintained a respectability it could not have in Scandinavia" (Taagepera 1993: 23). Lutheranism became a dominant creed in the 16th century, but mostly in the German-dominated towns. The Estonian serfs became Lutherans compulsorily (Stricker 2004: 248). The Church remained dominated by German colonizers and identified with the political, social, and cultural domination of German landowners also under Swedish (1558-1725) and Russian rule (1725-1918) (Bruce 1999: 103-104; Hiden 1994: 11). Simi-

larly, the Orthodox Church was perceived as the church of the Russian czar, despite the fact that by 1897 already 13% of Estonians adhered to Orthodoxy (Liiman 2001: 14).

After Estonia was proclaimed independent in 1918, the Lutheran Church strived to get rid of the image of *Herrenkirche* (Goeckel 1995: 202), but the German imprint remained on the Church until the Second World War. The proportion of Estonian pastors in the Lutheran Church increased from 44% in 1919 to 77% in 1939 while the share of German pastors decreased from 54% (1919) to 22% (1939) (Karjahärm and Sirk 2001: 108, 111). In the meantime, however, the Estonian population remained weakly connected to the church. In 1934, about three quarters of the population (74.3%) were members of the Lutheran Church, yet only 17.8% of the population paid the annual membership tax to the Church (Liiman 2001: 18).

Second, *Lutheranism functions as a symbol of political identity*. While only a small amount of Estonians are members of the Lutheran Church, there are several times more of those who call themselves Lutheran. While according to the 2000 census 13.6% percent of Estonians belonged to the Lutheran Church, earlier surveys demonstrated that 40% of Estonians felt themselves to have a Lutheran identity (Smith-Sivertsen 2000: 238). Thus, since the transition to democracy, Lutheranism has become a symbolical resource to a broader extent than the low level of religious affiliation allows one to expect—Lutheranism provides the symbols and beliefs for the solidarity of Estonian culture, it unites Estonia culturally with the Western civilization, and also provides a resource around which Estonians can rally for nationalist causes (Hart 1993: 10-12).

Concomitantly, Toomas Hendrik Ilves (the President of Estonia since 2006), who in 1999 wrote the introduction to the Estonian translation of Samuel P. Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, has emphasized that among the reasons of the recent economic and democratic success of Estonia has been Lutheranism or "rather the sense of responsibility that results from Lutheranism," because Lutheranism stresses the responsibility of the individual for his or her actions and a direct relationship with God without the institutional mediation of the church (Ilves 1999: 16, 19). According to Ilves, four centuries of Lutheran culture in Estonia have made "the contemporary non-believing Estonian businessman more law-abiding and responsible than his colleagues in many other post-communist countries" (Ilves 1999: 19). He particularly emphasizes the difference between the Orthodox and Lutheran cultures: "While the God of Lutheranism is a strict, dissatisfied and demanding Father who asks

from us why we didn't do better, the Orthodox deity is a forgiving and comforting Holy Mary, who pacifies and caresses" (Ilves 1999: 19).

Typology of Lutheran politics in Estonia

1. Lutheranism as a civil religion

Estonian Lutheranism has become a symbol of a broader civil religion. The core function of a civil religion is to unite the whole society and to legitimize, not to criticize or to oppose, the policies of the government. Within the framework of a civil religion, the church and the state may collaborate with each other despite Article 40 of the Estonian Constitution, which stipulates the non-existence of a state church.

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) has wanted the state to distinguish between religious groups by claiming that it has the unique responsibility and task to function as the spiritual guide of the nation (EELC 2005a: 2, 12). Already in 1992, when Mart Laar of Fatherland Union (FU) was the Prime Minister, EELC wanted to receive direct subsidies from the state budget as opposed to getting state funding through the Council of Estonian Churches (CEC) (Riigi 1992). Until the end of the 1990s there was almost a continuous public debate over granting special status to the largest churches: EELC and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC) (Hoppenbrouwers 1999: 170). The issue became particularly intense by 1998 and was one of the reasons for the founding of the Christian People's Party (ChPP), which enjoyed the support of many non-Lutheran Protestant churches.

EELC as an institution has not lent its support to any particular political party nor has EELC approved the foundation of a Christian-Protestant party. After the formation of ChPP in December 1998, the Archbishop of EELC, Jaan Kiivit (1940–2005, Archbishop during 1994–2005) asserted that the formation of a Christian party such as ChPP did not have the approval of EELC (Pikkur 1998).

Among the leading politicians there seems to be 'a broad consensus' that Christian values exist in Estonian politics and that these values are largely the business of the political elite to define. As the political parties are used to competing over social and political values, so they compete also over the meaning of Christian values.

In November 2005 the Consistory of EELC organized a conference over "Christian values in Estonian politics". The President of Estonia, Arnold Rüütel (2001–2006), argued at the conference that Christian values are humanistic values such as honesty, mercy, love of one's neighbour and taking care of the weaker members of the society. Sim-

ilarly, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip mentioned honesty, justice, tolerance, unselfishness and traditional family values as essentially Christian values. The head of the liberal-conservative Res Publica Party, Taavi Veskimägi, claimed, however, that Christian values are conservative by nature and correspond to the ideas of the minimal state and thus avoid extensive public spending at the expense of future generations. In contrast, Jaan Kaplinski, a Social Democrat, claimed that the authentic religion of Jesus Christ is in best accordance with the essence of Social Democracy (EELC 2005b: 8, 18, 22, 37-38).

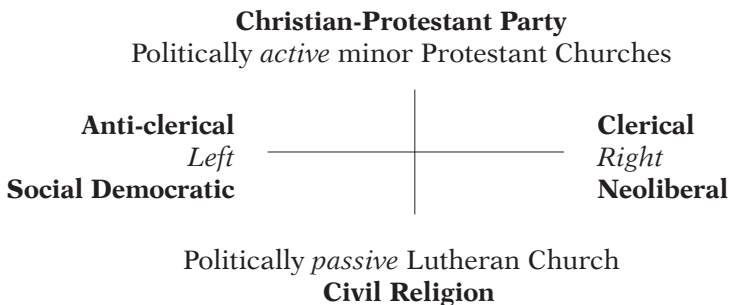
Among the leaders of the dominant political parties—which do not include the small Protestant party—there was no consensus over the content of Christian values in Estonian politics. They all, however, tended to agree that these are values which function in the society as a whole, are not particular to believers or church-members, and that the Church does not have a monopoly in defining their content.

Without the disapproval of social or political actors, EELC, however, can make specific political statements within the framework of civil religion. One month before the EU accession referendum in September 2003, the Consistory and the Council of Bishops of EELC made a public declaration in favour of the accession with only one of the 12 deans of EELC voting against the declaration (Luterlik 2003). The declaration positioned EELC among the supporters of the EU at a time when anti-EU positions had become extremely unpopular in the public debate (Kilp 2005: 36-37).

In March 2007, in reaction to the decision of the Swedish (Lutheran) Church to bless same-sex partnerships in church services, the archbishop of EELC, Andres Pöder, argued that homosexual behaviour is perceived as a sin and the blessing of the partnership of same-sex couples is inconceivable in the EELC (Ammas 2007). This attitude of EELC, however, does not contradict the prevailing attitudes among the Estonian population and among the political parties in parliament.

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Figure 1. Typology of Lutheran politics in Estonia



2. Neoliberal-clerical alliance

The neoliberal-clerical alliance does not aim at influencing social values, but is seeking to enhance the status and interests of the institutional church. In contrast to a civil-religion type of politics it pursues its goals through particular political parties.

By the parliamentary elections of 1999, the Estonian party system had six major cleavages, which did not include the “clerical/anticlerical” or “religious/secular” cleavages (Grofman, Mikkel and Taagepera 2000: 348). Neither has party politics polarised over religion since then. Although clerical-minded politicians are found mostly among right-wing parties, which also endorse neo-liberal economic policies, the clerical/anticlerical divide exists mostly among politicians, not between political parties.

Among right-wing political parties, the Fatherland Union (submerged with Res Publica in 2006), which has followed Christian Democratic principles since the first half of the 1990s, has appealed to nationalistic and conservative, cultural and family values (Freston 2004: 46), but not to the religious divide in the electorate (Goeckel 1995: 215). Neither has FU publicly defended values specific to EELC (Betlem 1998: 5, 8). Similarly, Res Publica has also identified itself with the Christian Democratic ideology, but has laid its main emphasis on liberal economic policies and conservatism.

Politically active ministers of EELC have been overwhelmingly members of FU, which in March 1999 was named by the hierarchy of EELC as the most friendly political party (Smith-Sivertsen 2000: 237). The current archbishop of EELC, Andres Põder, was a long-time member of FU and withdrew himself from party membership only briefly before being consecrated as Archbishop in February 2005. The overall number of Lutheran pastors elected to the Estonian Parliament (Table 5) has recently decreased, yet the option of running for parliament on the electoral lists of political parties has remained popular.

Table 5. Lutheran Clergy in elections to the Estonian parliament

	As candidates in party lists	Elected to the Estonian Parliament
1992	8	3
1995	10	0
1999	16	1
2003	11	1
2007	8	0

In the 2003 parliamentary elections 9 (out of 11) ministers of EELC ran on the electoral list of FU, among them four deans of EELC (out of 12 deans!). In the 2007 parliamentary elections, five ministers of EELC (out of 8) were running for parliament on the list of Fatherland and Res Publica Union (including two deans), two ran on the list of the Christian Democrats, and one on the list of the Estonian Greens.

3. Protestant political party

The Estonian Christian People's Party (ChPP) emerged into Estonian politics in 1998 and changed its name to the Estonian Christian Democrats (ECD) in 2006. ECD has ideologically been identified as 'nationalist-Protestant' and a 'hard Eurosceptic' (Freston 2004: 46). The main political appeal of ECD, which has so far been unsuccessful in gaining seats in the Parliament, has been based on religion. The program of ECD says that its aim is "to create a better society based on Christian values and to apply these values at all levels of society". ECD evaluates social and political events and processes on the basis of the Word of God. Unlike FU and Res Publica, ECD is a member of the European Christian Political Movement that unites more religiously oriented political parties.

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4. Anti-clerical religious left

The last variation of religious politics in Estonia reacts to a perceived collaboration between EELC and the political parties in favour of neo-liberal economic policies. The main representative of the 'anticlerical religious left' has become Jaan Kaplinski of the Social Democrats. In criticizing Church activities, Kaplinski (2003) has argued that Estonian Christianity has lost its essence by entering into increasing collaboration with neo-liberal parties. He says that the right-wing political forces need the church in order to distract the attention of the people away from increasing social stratification, injustice, the cult of success and wealth, and to argue that the main cause of the increases in "drug addiction, HIV, crime and other social vices" lies "in the absence of faith in God, low levels of church attendance and missing religious education classes at school." According to Kaplinski, the fault of the Church lies in being silent, and having thus legitimized the policies of the liberal government. Additionally, Kaplinski (2005) stresses that there has also always existed another kind of Christianity, the Christianity of the poor, the humble and the oppressed, critical of the government and the coalesced Church. The authentic Christians should oppose the conservative state-church tradition, where riches are counted as a blessing and all that is related to socialism and solidarity is of the devil.

Conclusion

Lutheran politics in Estonia has manifested itself in two major ways—in providing symbols and values that unite culturally the whole of Estonian society, and in religious politics that have become a matter of private preferences among individual politicians and activist pastors. The division into spiritual and earthly realms that Lutheranism has traditionally followed also exists in modern Estonia where Christian values in politics are defined mostly by leading politicians and not by the Church itself. The introduction of a distinctively Christian Protestant party has not enjoyed any success in Estonia and should be understood not as an essentially Lutheran kind of politics, but as a reaction by non-Lutheran Protestant churches to the activities of the Lutheran Church.

Acknowledgments

The research conducted for this article was assisted by Targeted Financing Grant SF0180128s08 of the Estonian Science Foundation. The author is grateful to Rein Taagepera and Martin Mölder for helpful comments on the draft of the article.

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Streszczenie

Paradygmaty polityki luterskiej w kraju postkomunistycznym: przypadek Estonii

Artykuł omawia dwa podstawowe zagadnienia: wpływ reżimu komunistycznego na obecny stosunek obywateli do religii i Kościoła oraz paradygmat polityki religijnej i zaangażowania politycznego ze strony Kościoła luterskiego w kraju postkomunistycznym, tradycyjnie luterskim, jakim jest Estonia. Jej obywatele w większości znajdują się poza instytucją zorganizowanej religii – spowodowane jest to doświadczeniem reżimu komunistycznego oraz słabym związkiem estońskiej tożsamości narodowej z Kościołem luterskim przed epoką komunistyczną. Polityka religijna w postkomunistycznej Estonii przybiera cztery podstawowe formy: religii obywatelskiej, nieoficjalnego związku neoliberalno-konserwatywno-klerykalnego, chrześcijańsko-protestanckiej partii politycznej oraz umiarkowanej antyklerykalnej lewicowej ideologii religijnej. Ogólnie rzecz ujmując, luteranizm w Estonii definiuje i tworzy ramy polityki religijnej, w której symbole oraz wartości religijne stanowią kulturowy łącznik pomiędzy członkami wspólnoty politycznej. Kościół luterski poprzez swoje działania powoduje, że polityka religijna („politics of religion” i „religious politics”) może być definiowana w dużej mierze w zależności od indywidualnych preferencji poszczególnych polityków oraz zaangażowanych politycznie pastorów.

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Słowa kluczowe

Religia, polityka partyjna, postkomunizm, religia obywatelska, Kościół luterski, państwo, tożsamość narodowa, sekularyzacja.