

(Non)religion in a Museum: Alternatives of the Estonian National Story*

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Bezvěrectví v muzeu: Alternativní příběhy v příběhu estonského národa

Abstract: The article analyses the treatment of religion and nonreligion in two current permanent exhibitions at the Estonian National Museum in the light of a Estonian national narrative which is critical of religion/Christianity. National narratives are concurrently a process and an outcome and therefore it is important to study how that narrative changes over time, as it reflects changes in society. The article also studies how culture and religion are represented in the aforementioned exhibitions and how they support the recently emerging phenomenon of separating religion from culture.

Keywords: national narrative; Estonia; culture and religion; nonreligion; national museum

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In August 2018, I happened to find myself in a local history museum in the Belarusian city of Polotsk. The institution was housed in a former Lutheran church and a large part of the exhibition dated from the early 1980s. In that sense, it was a “museum within a museum” – the museum itself had become an artifact of how Soviet-era museums conveyed ideas of local cultural history. The peak moment of the exhibition for me was the sight of a triptych by the stairs leading to the second floor, the left side of which depicted aspects related to the forging of Belarusian statehood, while the right side has motifs from the Great Patriotic War (World War II). In the middle of the town of Polotsk in the early 1980s, a white church was ensconced grandly in the focal point alongside modern residential buildings and old distinguished edifices. I was completely astonished. How was this possible, given that Soviet religion policy eased only in 1987?

In talking to a local research staff member, it turned out that all the churches depicted had been at the disposal of various (cultural) institutions for decades, having been transformed into museums, photo galleries and concert halls. The same Lutheran church had become a museum back in 1926, and thus lost its religious function more than half a century before the mural was painted. It was only me who saw them as religious – the artist and many museum-goers probably did not form such associations. Above all, schoolchildren who visited the museum on field trips operated in a different semantic field. But how likely was

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that? Then I recalled the surprise I felt after the Soviet Union crumbled, when I learned that the athletic hall in my hometown of Tartu, Estonia, which I passed every day, had once been St. Mary's Church ...

This scene is a vivid illustration of how situational religion can be: what in one context might be interpreted as religious may not seem like that as the context changes. Yet why is this scene relevant in an essay devoted to discussing religion and nonreligion at the Estonian National Museum? According to indicators of organized religion, Estonia is known as one of the most secularized countries in Europe [Pickel – Pollack – Müller 2012], this often having been seen as an outcome of the Soviets' war on religion. Yet, forced secularization, particularly when it comes to the late socialist period, mainly meant that religious was censored out of the public space [Remmel – Sillfors 2018; Smolkin 2018]. However, since the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, the visibility of (organized) religion in Estonia has not significantly changed and the importance of religion in people's everyday life is low. This situation cannot be attributed to forced secularization alone, as many countries with the same experience are showing signs of religious revival. There has not been sufficient study as to why the situation turned out this way [see Rohtmets 2019] – but one of the elements of the bundle is the problematic role of religion in the Estonian national narrative.

The article will examine how the story of religion and national identity is communicated (and simultaneously created) at one of Estonia's most important institutions for identity creation and preservation, the Estonian National Museum (ENM) current permanent exhibitions. The article aims to analyze the narrative created within these exhibitions: how "own" and its "others" are represented, and how authenticity – "the truly Estonian" – is created.

As the triptych in the beginning demonstrates, not everything that seems religious is necessarily so. Therefore, as it is important to study different expressions of religion, it is equally important to study its "others", in recent academic literature termed as *nonreligion*, that is, "phenomena that are generally not considered religious but whose significance is more or less dependent on religion" [Quack 2014]. Most of the studies on nonreligion originate from the fields of sociology and anthropology, while this aspect of material culture is somewhat neglected. The article therefore examines relationships between religion and nonreligion in a museum space: in which cases they arise and how they are depicted.

This topic is closely related to the (changing) relationship between culture and religion. In tracking the ever-changing religious field – sometimes understood as the process of secularization – the concept of "cultural Christianity" has been proposed, which points to the "sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed" [Demerath 2000] or to "religious commitment linked to a cultural heritage" [Kasselstrand 2015]. Here, "culture" is used in the sense of "more secular" or "diluted". At the same time, in Estonian media and also in interviews with nonreligious people, a differentiation between religion and "culture" has emerged – culture is seen as differentiated from religion, as areligious or even in an opposing vein. These distinctions are mostly implicit, but sometimes even explicitly stated. A good example is the comment of the Minister of Culture Indrek Saar on the Estonian government's recent decision to not return St. Nicholas Church in Tallinn – which had been transformed into a museum

during the Soviet era – to the Estonian Lutheran Church: “The solution will certainly be gratifying for all *friends of culture* both in Estonia and abroad” [EPB 2018].

In studying these matters, I rely on the principles of critical discourse analysis [Fairclough 2003] and I focus above all on texts that introduce exhibit items, with less emphasis on the visual and material aspects.

The Estonian National Narrative

In order to understand the entanglements described above, a brief overview of Estonian history and national narrative is in order before moving to the Estonian National Museum’s exhibitions.

As of the Middle Ages, Estonia has been governed by different foreign nations: the Danes and Germans, Poles, Russians and Swedes; the Estonians belonged to the lower class. The Estonian nation as an “imagined community” [Anderson 2016] is therefore rather young. Its roots can be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Baltic Germans who ruled Estonia at that time, as part of the romantic Enlightenment project, began to idealize ancient Estonians and Latvians in the manner of “the noble savage”. One of the most important figures here was Garlieb Merkel, who placed a mark on Estonian history by the Northern Crusades in the thirteenth century, when Estonia was conquered under the banner of Christianization, presenting the time before as the “golden age” when Estonians lived in harmony with their surroundings, and the time after as corrupt. These ideas were seized on enthusiastically and the nascent Estonian intelligentsia took over the nation-building project in the middle of the nineteenth century [Laar 2005] and began to create their own narrative.

The backbone of this story is the Estonian struggle for their freedom and the perseverance of their culture [Tamm 2008]. The position of religion, especially Christianity, in this story is rather complicated, since the narrative is constructed very much in accordance with the dualistic scheme presented by Merkel: idealization of the pre-Christian era, canceled by the violent Christianization of “fire and sword”, and the subsequent “700-year night of slavery” [Tamm 2008: 505–506]. Since the church was seen as the henchman of foreign oppressors, these ideas ensured that no connection between Estonian nationalism and Christianity could be established. In contrast, “the survival of ancient animistic beliefs” was presented as proof of popular resistance against Christianity [Jonuks 2013].

Since national stories are reconstructed all the time, using pick-and-mix techniques, many sub-narratives are created around the main story, and previous motifs are complemented with new elements according to the needs at hand. In the Estonian case, the story offers different “Estonians”: the silent and reticent Working Estonian; the educated and rational *Esthonus sapiens*; the nature-loving Forest Estonian; the Singing Estonian; the Dancing Estonian; the obedient Serf Estonian along with the Pacifist Estonian; the Mighty Warrior Estonian, the IT-crazed Digital Estonian – and so forth. Considering the strained relationship between Christianity and Estonian nationalism, it is therefore not surprising that in addition to the above-mentioned tropes, we can also find the Atheist Estonian.

Anti-religious attitudes in connection to nationalism have recently been pointed out, above all in the context of the migration crisis and (Islamic) extremism [Pew 2018]. In Estonia, the history of nationalism and anticlericalism goes back 150 years, yet it took the

form of “atheist Estonian” only in the early twentieth century [Remmel – Friedenthal 2019]. During this time, the overwhelming majority of Lutheran clergy were Baltic Germans who did not understand Estonians’ national aspirations. The anti-German and anticlerical attitudes became blended, giving the Baltic German clerics an opening to accuse Estonians of “atheism”. The “atheist Estonian” motif faded in the independence period, being supplanted by the motif of harmonious co-existence with nature disseminated by the neo-pagan Taara faith movement [see Västriik 2015]. Historical fiction also became popular as a genre and was largely focused on the ancient struggle for freedom, which strengthened anti-Christian attitudes in the national narrative.

These motifs were seized on in the anti-religious propaganda of the Soviet period (1940–1991), which started painting skepticism and tepid attitudes toward religion as something intrinsic to the Estonian national character [Kabur – Tarand 1961: 11]. The (Lutheran) church in this narrative was relegated to only its previous role of educating Estonians and developing the written language.

Since the restoration of independence, aspects related to religion have been manifested in the national narrative in two ways. First, the end of the 1980s saw the emergence of a neopagan movement *Maausk* (“Earth Belief”) that was conceptualized as an animistic, indigenous nature religion developed “together with Estonians’ ancestors”, presenting itself as the defender of natural sacred sites [Västriik 2015]; it was hence imbued with a generally positive reputation among Estonians. Secondly, the first decade of the twenty-first century saw the resurgence of the motif of the atheist Estonian, with this being directly related to the publication of the results of a Eurobarometer survey in the Estonian media in 2005. The results showed that Estonia had the lowest percentage in Europe of those who believed in a personal God (16%), and although the study covered only Europe, the trope started spreading: Estonians were popularly called “the world’s most atheist people” and this was once more regarded as a component of national identity [Remmel 2013].

The Estonian National Museum

While national memory institutions are often concentrated in capital cities, Estonia’s second city of Tartu has played a role as a city of culture and university town. For historical reasons, Tartu is also home to the Estonian National Museum founded there in 1909, with the task of protecting and preserving the old, fading peasant culture and gathering artifacts contributing to a better understanding of cultural development. Under Soviet rule, the museum lost its facilities and was transformed into an ethnographic museum-cum-archive in the process [Kuutma 2011]. Today, its function is to preserve “the feeling of continuity and tradition” and “to demonstrate our culture’s uniqueness and primeval power of creation to every Estonian and visitor” [ENM 1]. Two permanent exhibitions were created when the new building of the ENM was opened in 2016.

While earlier permanent exhibitions espoused a national romantic vision and were centered on the Estonian nation, the current interpretation of “Estonia” is in the territorial sense where different nations and stories meet: “There was a desire to provide people with a different sociocultural background, a chance to find an anchor point in Estonian culture for their own identity” [Rattus 2016]. One reason for this probably has to do with the Estonian integration policy – approximately 25% of the Estonian population is made

up of ethnic Russians, whose integration into Estonian society has been a sensitive topic since the fall of the Soviet Union. The approach also reflects the change in the focus of academic historiography in re-independent Estonia from the national romantic Esto-centric world-view towards viewing local history in the context of a broader history, as the stories of other non-Estonian people, not just Russians, are also tied to the Estonian territory. This may be why the exhibition also lacks a pantheon of “founding fathers” or renowned artists and extensive insights into their lives and works. Thus, in spite of the general view that the neutrality of museums is actually concealed subjectivity [Ravelli 2006: 89, 112], the exhibitions at the National Museum attempt to find some middle path, a dialogue, based on the concept of critical museology [Bouquet 2012: 9], where the museum’s position of authority leaves room for other opinions; where visitors have more and more decision-making power alongside curators in both creating and interpreting collections [Rattus 2016].

Another characteristic stems from the relative youth of Estonian statehood. The “golden past” narratives of a number of peoples are often mirrored in the respective national museums with a focus on the history of statehood – such as the Czech National Museum – which in the case of multi-ethnic countries is undoubtedly a middle path. Another possible alternative are museums that deal with the history of humankind (e.g. the British Museum). As Estonians did not have a ruling ethnic Estonian elite to speak of before the twentieth century, the Estonian National Museum first permanent exhibition (opened in 1923), emphasized Estonians’ peasant origins that were presented as a basis for the future high culture and the substance of folk culture [Nõmmela 2009: 117]. A century later, Estonia still has only a scant 50 years of national independence to point to, and thus instead of a grand narrative of the country’s formation, the focus lies on the long and turbulent history, the cultural distinctiveness, the “authentic” and its survival, prefaced by a quotation from the Finnish ethnologist Matias Aleksanteri Castren at the start of “Echo of the Urals”: “A tribe from the empty slopes of the Urals has always been introverted and different from the rest of humankind.”

(Non)religion in ENM’s Permanent Exhibitions

Religion has never played a particularly important role in the ENM’s exhibitions. The first original exhibition contained only one “exhibit item referring to the non-material world” [Johanson – Jonuks 2018a]. When the exhibition hall was opened again in 1994, “‘Estonia’s own religion’ was displayed based on the ethnographic focus, with the most striking artifacts being the fertility deities Peko and Tõnn”. A display case devoted to magic and folk medicine was introduced in the permanent exhibition only in 2004 [Johanson – Jonuks 2018b]. Religion does not play a major role in the National Museum’s two current permanent exhibitions either, although it is present in both of them – sometimes in a similar, but often in a completely different manner.

Echo of the Urals

The first permanent exhibition, “Echo of the Urals”, tells the story of the ancient origins of the Finno-Ugric peoples and their deep link to nature, which pervades the textual, visual and aural components of the exhibition. The backdrop for the items on display are images

of forests; birdsong and flowing water can be heard – a look at the green Eden that the future Estonians left a long time ago: “The central idea of the exhibition is inspired by the differences between the daily activities, rituals and traditional art of Finno-Ugric women and men.” Thus, along with Finno-Ugric clothing, everyday tools and equipment, the exhibition displays “Finno-Ugric settlements on the one hand – a Komi hut, an Udmurt shed, a Karelian sauna, a Sámi house, a Khanty forest camp – and several rituals on the other: coming of age, weddings, honoring the forebears” [ENM 3].

In connection with religion, the exhibition can be seen in two ways: nearly totally areligiously, focusing on solely the visual side of the exhibition, which – save for two Orthodox icons in the Komi and Sami model huts – has nothing *primarily* related to religion. The visuals tell us only of the environment, work, hunting, farming and clothing and other trappings of everyday life, which is difficult if not impossible for contemporary urbanized Westerners to apprehend as religious.

The texts describing the artifacts paint a completely different picture. Tools and hunting implements with no evident tie-in with religion are used for describing myths, traditions and world-views in which the role of religion has been noteworthy and intertwined with everyday life; the museum’s viewpoint is that of an outside or secular perspective [Paine 2012: 102]. Prayers and laments create a connection with those forebears who have passed into the great beyond. Nature is animated, old traditions and magic ensure survival in a wild environment. Despite encroaching civilization, a “primeval wisdom” and “Nordic Weltanschauung” have survived, and “force us to get along well with the gods”. Hence a knife is not merely an “ancient tool and weapon” but is “sacrificed to the more important gods”. Nor is an ax just a tool, rather, “iron is believed to have healing and supernatural qualities and thus axes used to be employed in magic rituals”. What is interesting here is that some of these descriptions are in the present tense, and thus foster an image of a magic animist world that extends from the distant past to the present day, e.g. a humorous description of a Finnish beer mug which assures that “Frothing beer *is* the source of Finns’ ancient creativity, but is also a devilishly dangerous drink”. On the other hand, most practices and beliefs – whether inadvertently or for some reason – are described in the past tense, revealing them as no longer relevant.

Probably due to the curators’ ethnology background, the authors’ interest in the text lies clearly with folk beliefs and magical thinking; “institutional religion” is rarely mentioned in the texts. Such information can mostly be found in the descriptions of the different fates of Finno-Ugric peoples, where the topic of “religion” is always provided. At first glance, the texts seem to be presented in a completely neutral tone. If we examine, however, the implicit ideas the vocabulary suggests, and how the “authentic” is presented, it becomes clear that the texts are anything but neutral. A good example of this is the writeups on the Permian and Volga peoples:

Today, the Komis and Udmurts are mainly Orthodox. The Komis began to be converted back in the fourteenth century. [...] The active period of conversion of the Udmurts began in the eighteenth century, but compared to the Komis, Christianity here is more extensively interwoven with ancient religious notions, and in some places, old religious customs and prayer sites are still extant. Or, “The religious traditions of the Ersä and Mokshas have a place for Orthodox saints and pagan deities, who are mainly female. The Maris live between the Orthodox Russians and Islamic Tatars but have retained a vital animist faith, with the Mari

religion enjoying official status alongside Orthodox Christianity in the Republic of Mari El. Because of the Maris' unusual religion, they are known as the 'last pagans in Europe'".

As the majority of the Finno-Ugric peoples live in Russia, "as an unbroken chain of Uralic peoples in the tundra and taiga", "Russia" acquires the role of the "significant other", characterized by technologicism, materialistic and political ambitions. This is equated with Orthodox faith in religious matters, while the pagan Finno-Ugrian living in harmony with nature is presented as the counter-element. Reveal a dichotomy between "authenticity" and Christianity, which is acquired through "conversion". This is clearly a transposition of the Estonian national narrative into the context of other Finno-Ugric kindred peoples, as their history is presented as the story of fighting for their culture and survival, and similarly to the Estonian national narrative, Christianity (Orthodoxy) is not a vehicle for bringing culture or preserver of morale, but has the primary role of a means of subjugation: "They became Orthodox Christians and they remain part of Russia today. All of these peoples [that is: the Eastern Baltic Finnic peoples – A. R.] are threatened by assimilation." The animistic "own religion" is treated as intertwined with daily life, more of a cultural than a religious phenomenon while aspects of Orthodoxy are filed under the heading of "religion" – only the two icons in the model huts mentioned above point to a connection between Orthodox Christianity and everyday life. Thus, "religion" is presented as endangering "the authentic", therefore implicitly suggesting the discordance between 'religion' and 'culture' – the fact that "there are few traces of Orthodox faith in the belief systems of the Ob Ugrians and the Samoyedic peoples" deserves a separate emphasis.

The "Echo of the Urals" exhibition's emphatically neutral depiction of the Christianization of the Baltic Finnic people, including Estonians, stands out: The Livs, Estonians and Finns living to the west remained stateless heathens for a relatively long time, but in the thirteenth century, ended up under the rule of German, Danish and Swedish feudal rulers. They adopted Catholicism, and later, Lutheranism, and their area of settlement became the eastern edge of the West.

Here as well, "heathenism" is presented as the essential identity of the people. The power of the feudal rulers was not forced upon them, but it is as if they "ended up" coming under their rule. Estonians were not "converted" but rather Christianity was "adopted". The use of a different language here can be explained by the fact that this very factor allows Estonia to be seen as a full-fledged part of the European cultural space – as opposed to the sole possible alternative – being part of Orthodox Russia, which has a clearly negative image.

Encounters

The other permanent exhibition, "Encounters", is the story of what has happened since the Estonians left the green Eden. The title refers to a complex made up of 12 different exhibitions where people and processes collided, with the backbone formed by the timeline of the history of Estonian culture, "Trail of Time" [Rattus 2016]. The exhibition "speaks of the regular Estonian people who have lived here through the ages. Visitors are invited to peek into their daily lives, to observe the way they have fought to get by, [...] but also the way they have navigated the social norms of their times, the powers that be of any period in history, or the greater processes of world history" [ENM 4].

The existence of different “voices” is underscored by an audio background – vocal narratives that present various positions blend, especially in breakthrough periods, into a cacophony. Unlike in “Echo”, the exhibition cannot be toured in an areligious manner, as it includes objects that have a clearly “religious meaning” for the people of today, mainly ones associated with Christianity, which a comment from an exhibition-goer who passed close to me also alluded to: “Ah, *here’s* the religious stuff!” The comment also shows that religion is presented and perceived, in contrast to “Echo”, as a separate category. Unlike the icon in the Komi hut, nowhere in “Encounters” are primarily Christian objects seen outside the “the religious stuff”, or occur in a concealed fashion. Might this sort of pigeonholing be linked to the Protestant background, which often relegates religion to a certain place (church), time (Sunday) and activity (worship) – an image also promoted by the Soviet politics of religion? The only exception is a small Jesus figure – on display in “Parallel Worlds” – that a girl who was deported to Siberia in 1941 took with her on her long journey.

The exhibition’s aesthetics are also Lutheranistically minimalist. Unlike many other museums that copy religious/Christian visuals, yet present secular objects in that “container”, the visual idiom of “Encounters” is ultramodern and practically free of “secular temple” [Berns 2015: 9] connotations. Instead of artifacts in the spotlight in a dim room, cordoned off from the viewer with a velvet rope, there is practically no distance between the artifacts and visitors in “Encounters”. A large part of the exhibition is located in a brightly lit room, in glass columns that resemble pillars for posting public announcements. Only one display item – the remains of the “Kukruse Woman”, a fully conserved burial of a lady who might have been a Christian – is exhibited in accordance with all church dictates, in a separate dim niche, with almost inaudible ambient sound in the background.

Nevertheless, religion does not occur in “Encounters” as a monolithic entity; rather, five “voices” are distinct: Catholicism, Lutheranism, Orthodoxy, the Old Believers as a subset of the latter, and native or folk religion. Catholicism is represented by Medieval indulgences, prayer beads and saint figurines, Orthodoxy by bishop’s clothing, Old Believers by an incense pan, icon and cross necklaces, and the hand-crafted items associated with their unique culture. Folk belief is introduced by magical objects: a bear’s claw, wolf’s tail and two idols related to fertility and protective magic. The most minimalistic is the “visual vocabulary” [Moser 2001: 266] of Lutheranism, whose essence is encapsulated by just one object – a hymnal – yet Lutheranism is also discussed in the adjacent bookshelf that describes the inception of the Estonian-language literary culture and the museum’s most scandalous exhibit item, a virtual version of a destructible “Virgin Mary” icon that demonstrates Reformation-era iconoclasm.

As the exhibition is structured as a timeline progressing from the past to the present, the “advertising pillars” devoted to religion are positioned in a temporally, ideologically and politically specific context, and their visual surroundings create clear connotations. If one starts from the beginning of the timeline where religion is shrouded in the context of graveside offerings and magical thinking, the “religion stuff” only becomes directly visualized in the Middle Ages, surrounded by the weapons of the day, by the six screens and stories devoted to witch trials; Lembitu, the central figure of the ancient “freedom fight” in the thirteenth century, and the Medieval books display case. The soundtrack supports the association with the specific period – the melancholy pealing of church bells, which becomes audible when arriving from the more distant past, and reaching maximum volume

in the Middle Ages, only to fade as one moves toward modernity and scientific progress. The text also supports this interpretation: an information board discussing the thirteenth century, entitled “The advent of Christianity”, notes that “the sound of church bells heralding the start of the worship service spread over the entire parish and determined the common rhythm to life”. Then, “Life in factory” on the nineteenth century replaces it with a new era’s signal: “The factory whistle sounded several times a day: it summoned the people to work and signaled breaks for meals.” In that sense, “Encounters” clearly follows the evolutionist progression of “magic-religion-science” [Johanson – Jonuks 2018b]. Religion as a past phenomenon is also evident in the use of the past tense in the explanatory texts.

The treatment of Christian “voices” in the narrative told by the ENM is significantly different from the “traditional” Estonian national narrative, occasionally even in opposition to it – therefore inevitably depending on motifs in the “traditional” national narrative. Above all, the opposition stands out in the approach taken to the Christianization of the thirteenth century, on which the “traditional” narrative is interpreted as a loss of ancient freedom while “ENM depicts as” the beginning of something new. This which gives a reason for a positive attitude: the “spreading” of Christianity caused Estonia to be “wrested into the common space of Catholic Europe”. This comment has central importance, as the historical belonging to the European cultural space (recall the “eastern edge of the West” mentioned in “Echo of the Urals”) and seeking to return there have been a key identity marker in post-Soviet Estonia. Indeed, the exhibition texts mention on several occasions that through the agency of Christianity, “new cultural phenomena and activity areas reached Estonia, of which the local indigenous inhabitants also *adopted* the larger part”; churches are described as “grand and awe-inspiring”. As a response to the motif of the sudden end of the golden primeval time interrupted by Christianization, it is specifically noted that the “symbols of Christianity appeared on Estonian inhabitants’ items long before the land was Christianized”.

Considering the main motif of the national narrative – the battle for the preservation of the Estonian language and culture – the importance of the Estonian language in developing the positive image is also stressed: “The interactions between the rulers and clerics arriving from abroad and the local peasantry took place in Estonian” and “the most important prayers were translated into Estonian early on.” Such comments undermine the idea that Estonians did not really understand the goings-on in church since they were conducted in Latin – a motif exploited by Soviet atheist propaganda but originating from a Reformation context as a criticism of the earlier Catholicism. The same motif is surprisingly encountered in the opposite formulation on an information board on the subject of the Reformation: “Services were held in Latin, so that most of the church-goers could not understand the words.” Indeed, it is conspicuous that although Christianity is presented in a positive light, nowhere is Christian identity associated explicitly with Estonians. Catholicism is portrayed as old, aggressive and avaricious (indulgences); Orthodoxy is associated throughout with “Russia” and discussed mainly in the third person plural.¹ The influence of Christianity, specifically on Estonians, is mentioned in indeterminate language: “During the Middle Ages, statues of saints, icons and relics *claimed* an important position for

¹ The positive treatment of the Old Believers differs clearly from the others. No doubt the reason is that the Old Believers, living on the Estonian side of Lake Peipus and largely Estonian-speaking, are perceived as “us” and therefore described very much alike to the way Estonians describe themselves: hardworking, persecuted and peace-loving.

themselves in *the lives of the local people*” or “From the sixteenth century to the present, the Lutheran Church played the most important role in Estonia”, even though later on the same sign, the influence is delimited to the past: “Lutheranism retained a central role in the local religious life until the end of the nineteenth century.” A maximum acknowledgement, on a pillar about contemporary religious life, states: “Although only one-tenth of Estonian inhabitants practice the Lutheran faith today, it is an important factor that shapes Estonian culture and core values” – and it is also one of the few places where Christianity is not spoken of in the past tense.

Thus, the implicit idea is that Christianity is foreign for Estonians (“rulers and clerics from *abroad*”) or remote: “Important church holidays were marked with grand processions where holy relics and icons *were carried* and stories from Scripture *were performed for the people*.” Estonians and Christians are even placed into opposition in many places: “The chronicle of Henry relates the story of *Estonian* incursions to the Swedish coast and their ships loaded with bells and imprisoned *Christians*” or the story of the consecration of the first Estonian flag in the nineteenth century, where it was blessed first at Otepää Church and then the party traveled to Lake Pühajärv where it was “sprinkled with water from the lake that is holy to Estonians”.

Therefore, the two motifs related to Christianity and Estonians are: a religion that came from foreign lands and always remained somewhat foreign, yet which in the past proved beneficial in some matters. What is telling is that everything used as support for arguments for Christianity’s positive role is essentially nonreligious: “Estonians went to church on sacral feast days, but the feasts *also provided the opportunity for festivities*.” Such comments occur throughout the texts particularly in connection with Lutheranism, whose role was developing Estonians into a cultured people: “All people have to be taught to read and the Bible has to be translated into the vernacular. [...] This resulted in *the rapid spread of literacy and the development of the written language*.” The most telling is the treatment of the Bible, whose importance is not expressed in the religious or the moral but rather within the context of grammar: “The Bible was the most important Estonian-language book, which *established the form of the written language until the early nineteenth century*.”

The word “secular” is explicitly mentioned only twice: in connection with the publication of the “first Estonian-language secular horror stories” in the late eighteenth century – here, entertainment is placed in opposition to religion. The same motif is found in a video that places church and tavern in the same kinds of opposite roles, describing Medieval entertainments; less directly so in the description of literary culture, where “secular” works are described as “gripping”, “readable”, “essential”, etc., while the epithets used for religious literature “emphasize the utmost sentimentality and physical sufferings”, “pious”, etc. The other reference to “secular” is related to the first song festival in 1869, which lasted two days (and is still a major nationwide event held every five years), and on the second day, “secular songs” were sung. What is telling about this event is the description of the first day, which consisted of “liturgical choir songs” where the author of the text deemed it necessary to add: “*which people knew and were able to sing*”, suggesting that this is unusual at the present day.

It can therefore be stated that nonreligion can be found in the ENM’s permanent exhibition mainly in tacit form. The “atheist Estonian” motif receives a brief mention by the pillar devoted to contemporary religion: “Estonians are singled out as being among the most

lukewarm peoples in Europe regarding religion”, tellingly associated with a third leitmotif of the religion theme, the yearning for authenticity related to magical, prelapsarian thinking: “This is only the case, however, when belief in God is surveyed. Estonians’ belief in spirits, life force or the power of sensitive individuals to heal and foretell the future is one of the strongest in Europe.” As with “Echo”, “Encounters” also tells a very national romantic story where authentic belief system, despite Christianity, has survived: “Although members of the Christian congregation, [...] they nevertheless believed in the animating power of nature. They preserved their relationship to deceased forebears and sang in the form of *runo* song, a cosmology that was different to that in the Bible.” As a result, “the memory of the ancient time in the genetic code of people in Estonia, their language, culture and local landscapes”.

The motif of the continuity of ancient folklore gives “great symbolic importance” to the neo-pagan Earth Belief movement and explains why a sacrificial stone from the first millennium B.C., a link “between new and old times”, is placed in the contemporary part of the exhibition: “A number of ancient places of worship like sacred groves, springs and sacrificial stones *may* have religious significance *even today*.” Although religious meaning is not excluded, the contemporary “Estonian religion”, similarly to the treatment of Christianity, is presented as mainly non-religious: “Above all, these are *culturally* important symbols”, relegating the sacrificial stones into the sphere of a secular tourist site. Culture is differentiated once again from religion, yet it is in accordance with the rhetorics of Earth Belief, which does not style itself so much as a religion, but rather as a cultural affinity and continuity, a preserver of the Finno-Ugric world-view and closeness to nature, thus also supporting the idea of a distinctiveness between religion and culture.

Closeness to nature, which stems from the “primeval animism”, has an interesting output in the form of a cross-tree on display at the exhibition. These “*are* (i.e. even today) community places of worship where the sign of a cross is carved into a tree when taking a deceased to the burial ground from the surrounding villages and settlements”. Here it is deemed important to note that “carving a cross into a tree is not part of the Christian funerary rites. The custom is presumably older than the Christian religion”, due to which a cross pine tree characterizes “the particularity of Estonians’ religion, where Christianity and animism, inanimate and animate nature become interwoven”. Estonians’ closeness to nature in “Encounters” takes an interesting material form – things that are presented as “Estonians’ own” are mostly made of wood, while “foreign” objects are made of iron. “Iron” in the meaning of something foreign and hostile was used already in the era of national awakening in the nineteenth century, for example in a poem penned by Jaan Bergmann on the subject of the thirteenth century conquest, *Ustav Ülo* [*Faithful Ülo*] (1878), where “iron” is used in a meaning for knights in armor: “Iron, leave the traveler alone!” [*Bergmann 1901*].

As part of “Encounters”, younger visitors have the run of a Do It Yourself Hall, where the most important design element is a comic strip like series of images drawn on to a row of cupboard doors arranged in a circle, inspired by stories told or specific items in the main hall, representing important moments in the history of Estonian culture in comparison with world history. This part of the exhibition has a significantly more national-romantic influence, as signaled by the visual elements, the headings of the images and the text in the speech bubbles of the characters.

Similarly to the main exhibition, “religion” makes an appearance from the Middle Ages – mainly in a political, and often in a pejorative vein. Estonia is described, for

example, as having been “officially *Christianized* in 1227”, illustrated by soldiers riding in, in the wake of a cross symbol. A number of dead are depicted in front of the military, and individual kneeling survivors are depicted as thinking “*Laula, laula pappi!*” (“Sing, priest, sing!”), a reference to a scene described in Henry’s *Chronicle of Livonia*, one of the most important early written sources on the Christianization of Estonia, concerning Estonians’ cruelty toward an imprisoned cleric. The status of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a major power is mentioned in the world history content, the duchy being “the last European people to be *baptized* in 1387”, although the image depicts people teeming in the direction of a bearded figure holding a sign of a cross, with the thought bubble reading: “Perhaps the knights of the Order will now leave us alone.” Chronologically the last religion-related image that depicts the wave of religious conversions of the mid-nineteenth century, covers the topic in a similar fashion, as an expression of economic needs, at the same time distinguishing Orthodoxy from Estonian identity: “We joined *Russian* Orthodoxy; perhaps we’ll get a plot of land.” Even the “Bible 1739” image, referring to the translation of the book into Estonian, presented in the main hall as the beginning of Estonians as a cultural nation, leaves the image open to multiple interpretations, as it also depicts two female figures in Estonian folk costumes, one of them cheerful but the other being very gloomy.

Discussion

In the transitional society that followed the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, the political, economic and cultural transformation led to substantial changes in values and attitudes. Rämmer [2017: 27] notes that the transition is manifested as a conflict between the values and attitudes that are perceived as Soviet-era or Western. In most walks of life, the changes can be identified with rather short time periods [*Lauristin – Vihalemm 2017*] while in the attitudes toward Christianity the development has been different. After the fading of the initial euphoria in the early 1990s, a fairly long period prevailed until the beginning of the 2010s, when no major changes occurred – this could have been because religion was deemed unimportant [*Remmel – Uibu 2015; Rohtmets 2019*]. The narrative on religion tended to be critical, and churches were accused of collaborating with the Soviet regime. In recent years, resistance to the regime and the diversity of church life, and the role of churches in the re-establishment of the Estonian Republic has started to be emphasized. Religion is still clearly in the role of a victim in this treatment, and this is seen as an excuse for its own actions and omissions [e.g. *Usk vabadusse, 2011*]. This narrative now seems to be yielding to a new narrative, while portraying the Soviet regime in a negative light, it emphasizes how much was accomplished even amidst the constraints [e.g. *EELK 100, 2017*]. Furthermore, the social and political visibility of Christianity and alternative forms of religion have increased significantly in Estonian society [*Remmel 2017*].

The narrative presented by ENM about religion is not separate from these developments. Tamm [2008] describes the newly established Republic of Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s as being characterized by the idea of restoration, at both the political and the cultural level, which led to the revival of one the most prominent narrative templates of Estonian history, the thematic backbone of historical memory: “The Great Battle for Freedom”, formulated in the 1930s and remaining unbreakable even during the subsequent Soviet period. National narratives and their motifs are still undergoing constant change

and emerging depending on the situation and need; and sometimes even the master narrative changes [Lorenz – Berger 2006]. In respect to religion, ENM does not offer the classical version of a national narrative, but on the contrary, it tries to avoid it. It is not certain, however, whether the narrative told by ENM – with “authenticity” at the center instead of “freedom” – is the replacement of a template. It is possibly one stage of a change, as the main nodes of the narrative – the key events or main motifs – are the same, only re-coded. Thus, the role of religion also changes, from a factor that led to the loss of the pre-conquest freedom to laying the groundwork for today’s culture. This “alternarrative” is clearly part of the transformation from the Soviet to the West, with religion-critical elements being replaced by a positive attitude towards Christianity for the sake of belonging to the Western cultural space. Indeed, museum texts speak more about the time in which they were written than about the time they describe.

This does, however, point to a certain degree of conflict, as there are a number of hints that still point to the rather ambivalent role of Christianity in Estonian history. Moreover, the mistrust of Christianity and “the West” is not only a characteristic of Soviet culture but is also a hallmark of “authenticity” or Estonian-ness. In that respect, the changes seem somewhat cosmetic and the implicit attitude does not vary much from the earlier treatment. Religion (resp. Christianity) is portrayed as a phenomenon of the past, with which Estonians have a semi-compulsory relationship and hence have never fully embraced it; religion is related to political ambitions and violence as well as with education and charity. Christianity is therefore seen as an accompaniment to something more important that is essentially not religious. A possible alternative could have been to emphasize the role of literature or music inspired by religion, but such intimations are non-existent in the ENM exhibition. Folk religion is treated similarly, its role is creating a link with “the authentic” and in reaffirming Estonians’ special bond with nature, a positive characteristic in the backdrop of today’s ecological debates.

Yet, looking at how the ENM’s two permanent exhibitions treat Christianity and folk religion, one sees completely opposite approaches, illustrating the relativity of the boundaries of (non)religion. The folk religion covered in “Echo of the Urals” is based on adding religion to areligious objects of quotidian culture – a knife is associated with a sacrifice to the deities; a belt has a magical protective meaning. Religion and its “others” are interwoven, referring to simultaneously religious and nonreligious/practical meanings and the uses of objects. In “Encounters”, however, the polar opposite approach can be seen. The religious significance of objects that are primarily religious (Christian) has been removed and the objects are viewed through their nonreligious function, associated with politics, culture, etc. One can concur with Hirschkind [2011: 643]: “that the boundaries of our categories religious and secular do not pre-exist [...] but are continuously determined and reciprocally redefined”.

As Berns [2015: 9] notes, when objects are described as historicized or aestheticized, a process of secularization is often implied. Yet, as the memory image in the beginning of the essay shows, secularization is dependent on prior knowledge. In that respect, the description of the Bible as chiefly an influence on the literary canon is highly reminiscent of the definition of a “hole” supplied by the semiotician Yuri Lotman [2006: 180], “which is not at all identical to the simple absence of material. It is the absence of material in a structural position that presumes its presence”. Thus, nonreligiosity in such a situation

can be described as a “religious hole” – that is, the lack of religion in a situation which implies its presence. Yet, without a prior knowledge of something being religious, it is difficult to “secularize” it and there is merely a simple “absence” of material. Considering the fact that apart from the older generation, most Estonians have not been socialized into religion and have almost no knowledge about it, therefore the question of how much visitors actually perceive “religion” and the national narrative in ENM exhibitions, is an intriguing topic for further studies. Perhaps because of the “absence” of religion, the ENM’s exhibitions are also silent about direct opposition to religion and Estonia’s reputation as an extremely secularized country. Unlike the flag of the free-thinkers association, or the interactive screen that indicates the consistent decline of religious identification displayed in the Czech National Museum in Prague, the “religion-related field” in “Encounters” displays primarily religious objects. Perhaps that silence signals how differently the importance of nonreligion in Estonian culture is viewed as opposed to the Czech Republic, where free-thinking played an important role in the development of statehood.

In ENM, and notably in “Encounters”, nonreligion is less visible, but perhaps more pervading through culturalization of religious field, during which religion, step by step, becomes less religious. First, showing “religion” on separate stands to indicate its importance also leads to think of it as a separate entity, the “religion stuff” – especially since the rest of the exhibition (almost) does not show recognizably religious items as interwoven with everyday life. Second, religion is shown as having mainly a historical dimension. Third, since religion is not seen as actively participating in the contemporary world, the religious “container” is equipped with a secular (often mainly aesthetical) contents, such as grammar in the case of the Bible described above. This process is mirrored also outside museum spaces. Through historicizing, religion loses its active dimension and items and phenomena initially caused by religion prompt experiences and interpretations, where religion does not play a role. For instance, church buildings are primarily perceived as sites for concerts and other “cultural” activities as the potential religious aspect does not concern most of the visitors; their function as sacral buildings becomes secondary. The murals in churches do not cause “religious” feelings and are not interpreted religiously by visitors. Finally, as art, architecture, grammar etc. are considered essentially cultural phenomena but perceived as not religious, religion is implicitly differentiated from culture. Thus, culturalization of religion or relegating it to the sphere of culture concurrently points to de-culturalization process as religion is distanced from contemporary culture.

ENM expositions, especially “Encounters”, therefore set out to provide a new narrative that is compatible with the values of contemporary transitional society, but still linger on the old version of the narrative. Although attempting to demonstrate the positive role of Christianity as a means for guiding Estonia into a Western cultural sphere by emphasizing the nonreligious aspects of religion, ENM expositions concurrently support the recently emerging phenomenon of separating religion from culture.

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