CHAPTER 27

New Religious Movements and New Age in Estonia

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Introduction

Estonia is a small country in the North-Eastern Europe with the territory of 45,227 square kilometers and with a population of approximately 1.3 million in 2013 (Estonian Statistics 2013). According to the Eurobarometer polls less than one fifth of the population believe in God, and thus Estonia is one of least god-believing societies in Europe. However, the same polls indicate that among Estonian population the belief in life-guiding power or force is the highest in Europe (Eurobarometer 2005, Eurobarometer 2010).

According to population censuses from 2000 and 2011, twenty-nine percent of the total population aged 15-years of age or older considered themselves affiliated with some particular religious tradition (Estonian Statistics 2011). The two largest denominations in Estonia have been the Lutherans and the Orthodox. According to the 2011 population and housing census, there has been an important change in religious composition in Estonia as Lutheranism, the traditional majority denomination, has lost numbers to the Orthodox. In 2011, Lutherans formed 33.8 percent of the total affiliates while the Orthodox formed 55.1 percent (Estonian Statistics 2011).

The 1992 Constitution of the Estonian Republic guarantees freedom of religion and the legal framework for religious associations as legal entities is set by the Churches and Congregations Act (1993, 2002) (Ringvee 2008; Kiviorg 2011). All religious associations that are registered according to the Churches and Congregations Act are equal before the law despite their membership numbers or historical presence. There has to be at least twelve founding members for such a religious association.

In December 2013, there were 560 registered associations in the Estonian Register of Religious Associations. The majority of these religious associations are congregations that are part of larger churches or unions of religious associations. However, among them were also six Roman-Catholic Orders and an Opus Dei prelature as well as two Orthodox nunneries. The Estonian religious scene, however, is more complex than the official statistics or numbers of registered religious associations may indicate. Some religious communities are registered as regular non-profit associations while some religious groups do not have any legal entity status. Besides religious organization and groups,
there are also individual religious/spiritual entrepreneurs at the life style market (Ringvee 2012a). In 2009, there were 524 such spiritual teachers and other religious or spiritual entrepreneurs active in Estonia including fortunetellers, witches, astrologers, tarot card readers, yoga and meditation teachers and a wide spectrum of others (Altnurme 2011: 80). Paul Heelas has argued that Estonia is one of those countries where the spiritual revolution has taken place (Heelas 2013: 173–177).

According to surveys, the Estonian population has very heterogenic worldview and there is a strong tendency toward church free religiosity and New Age spirituality (Altnurme 2011). A survey from 2010 indicated that 36.6 percent of the respondents either fully agreed (7.5 percent) or inclined to agree (29.1 percent) with the claim that there is reincarnation; 78.4 percent of the respondents agreed (20 percent) or were inclined to agree (49.7 percent) that there are sensitive persons with the capability of healing; 40.5 percent of the respondents agreed that they do not adhere any religion but they have their own belief (13.6 percent agreed fully, and 26.9 percent inclined to agree with that claim) (EEU 2010).

**Historical Overview**

Estonia has a complex history. From the thirteenth century until 1918 Estonia was ruled by foreign powers, including Denmark, the Teutonic Order, Sweden, Poland, bishops of the Roman-Catholic Church, the Baltic-German nobility and Russian Czars. From the sixteenth century onward the Lutheran Church became the dominant religious institution in Estonia. In the early nineteenth century the missionaries of the Moravian (Herrnhut) Brethren arrived to Estonia. Soon they became an important religious movement among native Estonian peasants. The Brethren (vennastekogudus) formed a parallel religious structure to the official Lutheran Church with their exclusive religious meetings and became important social organizers in the peasant society. As the Moravian revival among peasants was accompanied with social unrest, the Moravians were banned from 1743 to 1764 (Raun 2001: 53–54).

In the nineteenth century the Russian Orthodox Church started its mission in Estonia. The Orthodox Church was the State Church of the Russian Empire and there was hope among native Estonian peasants that by affiliating themselves with the Orthodox Church it would protect them also from the Baltic German gentry who controlled the traditional Lutheran church. Mostly for these socio-economic reasons, there were two waves of changes in affiliation among native Estonian peasants in the 1840s and 1880s.