

## ***OUTSIDE CONVENTIONAL FORMS: Religion and Non-Religion in Estonia***

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper focuses on the features that have influenced the current religious landscape of Estonia, considered to be one of the most secularised countries in the world, and its "special path" to secularisation. To explain the irregularities demonstrated by sociological surveys, the paper argues for a situational and inclinational approach to the study of (non-)religiosity as the majority of religious phenomena remain *outside* the conventional frames of religious commitment that are centred on religious belief and belonging.

**KEYWORDS:** Estonia, non-religion, new spirituality, contemporary religiosity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

After nearly 50 years of ideological, state-driven secularisation during the Soviet era, Estonia, the northernmost and smallest of the Baltic States, could be seen as the archetype of a secular country. According to several surveys, the importance of institutional religions among Estonians and belief in God are the lowest in Europe; in this respect, Estonia is often compared to the Czech Republic and the former East Germany (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012). On the other hand, Estonians hold the highest level of belief in a spirit or life force, which has led scholars to examine the specific circumstances that have contributed to its current religious situation (Heelas 2013).

Estonia provides fertile ground for studying the developments of religion as well as non-religion or spirituality. Although numerous articles have been published about the religious situation in Estonia, most are in Estonian and are therefore relatively inaccessible to international scholars. The present article fills this gap by giving an overview of some sociological data about religiosity in Estonia. Based on both international and local surveys, we describe the main characteristics of Estonia's religious situation and offer some explanations for the patterns of beliefs and identities that seem to be irregularities in the European context.

Because of the high proportion of unconventional forms of religiosity, Estonia cannot be analysed effectively using traditional indicators of religion, such as belonging to a church or

belief in God. The paper also points out some methodological challenges encountered when studying a country where traditional indicators of religious identities or beliefs would describe only a small proportion of the actual richness of religion-related phenomena.

## **HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

According to the 2011 population census, Estonia has 1.3 million inhabitants, 69% of whom are ethnic Estonians (Statistics Estonia 2011). Estonia shares many cultural and historical features with neighbouring countries, but its religious situation has evolved in a distinctive way (Bruce 2000).

Sociological studies uniformly place Estonia in the group of highly secularised countries (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008). To understand the current religious situation in Estonia, one has to look back to the thirteenth century, when the Northern Crusades reached the territory that now makes up Estonia. Although Estonians had had contact with Christianity before, the land was first occupied and the inhabitants converted to Christianity by force during the Crusades, more for political than religious motives (Tamm et al. 2011). In the centuries that followed, the land was claimed by various Catholic rulers. However, since the Reformation, Estonia has been a predominantly Lutheran country. Despite the negative attitudes that arose towards the Church during the national awakening at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church played an important role as the moral backbone of society and the main provider of rites of passage until the end of the Estonia's first short era of independence (1918–1940). According to the 1934 census, 88% of the population were ethnic Estonians, and 8% were Russians; 78% belonged to the Lutheran Church, whereas 19% had an Orthodox identity (*Eesti arvudes* 1937).

Estonia's annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940 brought about the implementation of an antireligious policy. In the Stalinist era, religious policy relied on state control of church leaders and an overall atmosphere of fear. After Stalin's death in 1953, a religious renaissance took place across the Soviet Union, followed by a major offensive on religion under Khrushchev in the 1958–1964 period. Methods used to combat religion ranged from propaganda to secret legislation, from economic restrictions, to the development of secular Soviet rituals. Although the state failed to eliminate religion, it was marginalised to a significant degree, and church traditions were broken along with its connection to society at large. Until the second half of the 1980s, churches kept a low profile and their membership and participation were continuously declining (Rommel 2015).

With the loosening of the state's religious policy at the end of the 1980s, religion once again became visible in society. What happened between 1987 and 1992 has been described as a "religious boom", with numerous religious movements entering Estonia. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, the novelty had worn off and religion once again faded from Estonians' minds (Altnurme 2011).

It must be noted that the identity of the Russian population, Estonia's biggest ethnic minority, which constitutes 25% of the population, is strongly connected to the Orthodox Church, and overall religiosity among ethnic Russians is much higher than with ethnic Estonians. Given this remarkable difference between the two ethnicities, the following article focuses on ethnic Estonians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Half of ethnic Russians in Estonia associate themselves with religion (47% with the Orthodox faith), whereas only 30% identify with no religion (Statistics Estonia 2011). Comparison with the data on ethnic Estonians in Chapter 5 suggests that the distinction between ethnic groups is justified. Unfortunately, limited space does not allow us to address the differences between sexes, age groups, etc.

## USING THEORETICAL CONCEPTS TO INTERPRET CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOSITY

The distinctive religious sphere, the decline of religious beliefs and practices, and the marginalisation of religion to the private sphere can be seen as the minimum criteria of a secular society (Casanova 2006). According to these criteria, Estonia is undoubtedly a very secular country. However, most Western societies belong to this group, and the secular label does not in itself tell us much about the current religious situation; nor has it succeeded in predicting future tendencies (Berger 1999).

Although numerous theoretical approaches exist with regard to Western religious phenomena, the Estonian situation does not fit easily into any of these. However, some of these approaches may help to illuminate at least some aspects of religion in Estonia.

### *Pluralisation, and market-related and demand-based concepts*

The proliferation of alternative religious beliefs and practices has prompted scholars to draw parallels to a market or marketplace. Ideas about religious or spiritual marketplaces (Wuthnow 1977; Roof 2001) also reflect broader cultural processes, such as the dominance of the market economy, which has resulted in formal pluralism and the primacy of individual preferences. Although the metaphor of a religious marketplace is useful as a grouping principle, it cannot be taken as a model that accurately describes the functioning of the religious or spiritual field. In addition, parallels between consumption and the market can be misleading: the analogy simplifies the modes of participation by assuming (usually implicitly) the functioning of certain mechanisms inherent in the market. Some authors have pointed out that this type of model describes the religious situation in the United States better than that in Europe, where religious participation is heavily influenced by specific national and cultural characteristics (Berger et al. 2008). Nevertheless, due to the government's rather pragmatic and flexible religious policy in Estonia, Ringvee (2012), for instance, has found the model of the religious marketplace relevant to the Estonian religious situation.

### *The individualisation of religion*

Similarly to market-related concepts, which assume the autonomy of the individual, several scholars have emphasised the individualisation of religion. Since Luckmann's description of invisible religion (1967), it has been increasingly argued that the role of religious institutions has been overthrown by individual religion (Davie 1994; Bellah 2007). In accordance with the individualisation theory, many sociologists of religion have drawn a distinction between secularisation on a societal and on an individual level (Dobbelaere 2002), noting that secularisation on one level should not be applied directly to another. In Estonia, this concept is widely accepted (Altnurme 2011; Jaanus 2012; Ringvee 2014).

The importance of the individual level of religious (or supernatural) beliefs and experiences has been pointed out in several disciplines. Terms such as lived (McGuire 2008), everyday (Ammerman 2006), or vernacular religion emphasise the individual experience of religion "as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995:44). This challenges scholars to "grasp the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of real individuals' religion – as practices, in the context of their everyday lives" (McGuire 2008, 213). Estonian scholars have published excellent studies based on the concepts of vernacular and folk religion (see Kuutma 2005; Valk 2008). Although the intention to describe everyday religiosity helps to map and characterise the individual experiences of religion, these approaches do not aim to describe patterns of religious involvement or help to profile groups appearing in sociological surveys.

***Religion and religiosity outside the traditional religious sphere***

In societies such as that in Estonia, most individuals with their non-institutional religion-related paths and experiences remain outside the traditional religious sphere. The West-centred understanding of a religion as “embodied in a social institution” (Hanegraaff’s 1999, 147) is increasingly challenged, not only in emic (Keller et al. 2013) but also in academic perspectives (Asad 1993), where the term spirituality is often preferred. Spirituality is understood as a loose framework “in which individuals ‘pick and mix’ their religious beliefs and practices in a manner that is perfectly consistent with the fluid subjectivities of modern society” (Turner 2010, 11). Estonian scholars have argued that the younger generation’s religious self-image is already mostly shaped by the new spirituality (Altnurme 2011) and that the new spirituality is on its way to becoming a new mainstream religiosity (Uibu 2015). Nevertheless, the majority of Estonians could be described as atheists, indifferent, or “nones”, belonging to the sphere of non-religion (Lee 2012; Quack and Schuh 2016), which should be understood as a broad term that covers a vast array of attitudes and metaphysical positions, from atheism to the mere lack of religious affiliation. However, in most cases, being “not religious” does not mean a lack of beliefs or practices, since most individuals pursue a privatised religion (Stark et al. 2005), a fact also confirmed by Estonian data (Remmel 2013).

**AN OVERVIEW OF EMPIRICAL DATA ON RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY IN ESTONIA**

In general, sociological data relating to Estonians’ religiosity during the last century is scarce. While the censuses of 1922 and 1934 and church reports give at least some insight into the first period of Estonian independence (1918–1940), information about the Soviet era (1940–1991) is problematic. The archive of the Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs contains some information about belonging and religious rituals, but the reliability of this data is poor. From the Soviet era there is only one public sociological study concerning religion and atheism – the survey “Clubs in Our Time” (n=1661), conducted in 1968 (Vimmsaare 1981). In this survey, ethnic Estonians (83% of responses) expressed their opinions on three religion-related statements, in which 41% thought of religion as harmful (considered atheists), 4% as useful (believers), and 54% as neither harmful nor useful (indifferent).

Since Estonia regained its independence, the overall picture has greatly improved: there are many representative surveys pertaining to aspects of religious beliefs, identities, practices, and attitudes. A World Value Survey/European Values Study (WVS/EVS), a cross-national survey, was conducted in 1990 (when Estonia still belonged to the Soviet Union). This was followed by surveys in 1996 (WVS), 1999 (EVS/VWS), 2008 (EVS) and 2011 (WVS). Gallup has surveyed religion in Estonia on two occasions, in 2007/2008 and in 2010. Occasionally, Standard Eurobarometers (SB) have measured issues related to religion (2007.68, 2010.74, 2013.80, 2014.81), and special Eurobarometer surveys have taken place twice – in 2005 (“Social Values, Science and Technology”) and in 2010 (“Biotechnology”). Two REDCo surveys concerning religious education (RE) were conducted in 2004/2005 and 2006–2009 (Valk 2007; Schichalejev 2010).

With regard to Estonian surveys, religious issues were addressed by the social and market research company EMOR in 1992 and 1998. A special survey devoted to the study of religion and religiosity, “Of Life, Faith, and Religious Life” (LFRL), under the aegis of the Estonian Council of Churches, has been taken every five years since 1995. However, until 2010, this did not give representative data because of methodological flaws. In 2014, a survey, “Religious Trends in Estonia”, concentrating on new spirituality, was carried out (RTE 2014). Occasionally, questions about religion are asked by other sociological surveys (e.g., Me, The World, The Media 2011 and 2014). A question about religious preferences was asked in the 2000 census,

including non-religious options like “indifferent” and “atheist”. In the 2011 census, the question was rephrased: “Do you have any religious affiliation?” and the answers offered were “yes”, “no”, or “not willing to answer”. If the respondent said they had a religious affiliation then he or she had the option of defining him or herself as “Lutheran” or “Orthodox”, or as “other” and to give another classification (Ringvee 2014).

Among the few relevant qualitative research projects, there is a survey on religious attitudes conducted by Kilemit and Nõmmik (2004), a study of the change in Estonian religiosity based on life narratives by Altnurme (2011), and ongoing mixed-method studies by the authors of this article concerning new spirituality (Uibu) and non-religiosity (Rommel).

**WHAT DOES THE DATA SHOW? MAIN TENDENCIES AND CONTROVERSIES**

Despite the lack of reliable local longitudinal surveys about religion in Estonia, some developments are visible in the EVS surveys (see Table 1). According to three consecutive waves, Estonia demonstrates relative stability. Most of the indicators have remained largely unchanged for 25 years, aside from people being more willing to declare themselves believers. A very slight increase in belonging is understandable after the disappearance of the Soviet regime. However, regardless of the rise in people’s willingness to identify themselves as being religious, the importance of religion in society has stayed at the same low level as has the percentage of actively committed members of the churches. The best explanation for this stability is the insignificance of religion, which is confirmed by all the surveys conducted within the last 25 years. This could also explain the low percentage of atheists. Eurobarometer 2005 found that Estonians had the lowest percentage of belief in a personal God (16%). According to Gallup, in 2007 only 14% of Estonians claimed that religion was important in their daily lives; in 2010, 16% said the same. As a result of these surveys, Estonia has attracted international attention as being the least religious country in Europe or possibly in the world. At the same time, the importance of religious rites of passage is surprisingly high, indicating that Christianity could still be important as a backdrop to society.

	EVS 1990 (n=621)	EVS 1999 (n=701)	EVS 2008 (n=1049)
Religious person	17%	29%	33%
Not religious	80%	51%	57%
Atheist	3%	6%	6%
Religion very important	5%	6%	5%
Religion somewhat important	16%	17%	18%
Religion not very important	43%	41%	45%
Religion not at all important	32%	32%	30%
Belonging to religious organisation	5%	9%	10%
Attending religious services: never		39%	45%
Active member of a religious organisation/do you work unpaid for a religious organisation		3%	4%
How often do you pray: never		52%	51%
Believe in God (yes/no)		36%/43%	39%/51%
God important in life (on scale, the results 6–10)		27%	29%
Personal God vs. spirit or life force	6%/56%	11%/50%	12%/45%
Religious service important: birth	51%	45%	45%
Religious service important: wedding	54%	51%	50%
Religious service important: death	61%	59%	60%

**TABLE 1:** The indicators of religiosity of ethnic Estonians according to different waves of the European Values Survey (EVS).

To describe the most salient features of the Estonian religious landscape, we turn to Estonian surveys, mainly LFRL 2010 (n=1009 [653 ethnic Estonians], face-to-face survey) and RTE 2014 (n=1100 [756 ethnic Estonians], telephone survey). These offer valuable material due to the inclusion of non-conventional aspects of religiosity (e.g., spirituality, and various supernatural beliefs and practices). To a lesser extent, data from *Me, the World, the Media* (MWM 2014, n=1503 [1028 ethnic Estonians], face-to-face survey) has also been used.

### *Fuzziness of identity labels*

A majority of Estonians consider themselves to be not religious. A comparison of the labels picked in censuses, RTE2014, and LFRL2010 (see Table 2) indicates that identities associated with traditional religion and extreme positions are relatively stable: “professing a certain religion” in Census 2000 (24%) and Census 2011 (19%) generally corresponds to the group of “Christians” (21%) in RTE 2014. Christians together with “seekers” (10%) correspond to the groups of “believers” (7%) and those “inclined toward believing” (25%) in LFRL 2010. This indicates that believing is strongly associated with Christianity, which, despite its minor role in society, is perceived as a norm for religiosity – this claim is further affirmed by Christian belief- and practice-oriented labels in MWM 2014. It also points to nominal non-religiosity – everything that is not explicitly Christian is perceived as not religious.

As for the non-religious, the similar size of the group of atheists in EVS waves and MWM 2014 vs. LFRL 2010 and RTE 2014 indicates that for about 6%, the atheist label is a conscious selection, whereas another 6%, despite the addition of a “convinced” option, are waverers depending on other options. Totally materialist convictions, however, were held by less than 2% (LFRL 2010). All other non-religious labels (“inclined towards atheism”, “spiritual but not religious”, “indifferent” and “non-religious, does not care about religious matters”) are very freely and flexibly used, seemingly overlapping to a great extent and thus not mutually exclusive. This indicates that in the context of normative non-religiosity, non-religious identities are of minor importance and should not be treated as engaged (Lee 2014) or conscious identities or positions, but just as labels used in the survey.

Due to the relative arbitrariness of the labels, they do not correspond to worldviews or practices that are conventionally associated with them. Thus, their exact perceived meaning remains obscure. For instance, since atheism is the only non-religious tradition known in Estonia, and because atheism during the Soviet period implied a wide range of attitudes from a philosophical position to antireligious activity, the meaning of the word has expanded exponentially. Now, it seems to signify almost everything outside church walls and thus is often synonymous not only with being non-religious, irreligious and antireligious but also with being indifferent. Thus, the difference between non-religious groups is extremely fuzzy; the analysis of LFRL 2010 shows there are more materialists among the indifferent group than among the self-proclaimed atheists (Remmel 2013). This obscurity is also true of Czech society: atheism is understood as a rejection of (organised) Christianity, its social impact, and its presence in public space (Nešpor 2010).

LFRL 2010 (n=653)		RTE 2014 (n=756)		MWM 2014 (n=1028)	
Believer	7%	Christian	21%	I'm a believer and I follow corresponding traditions (going to church, religious funerals, christening, etc.)	9%
Inclined towards believing	25%	Seeker	10%	I'm a believer, but I don't follow traditions and go to church	9%
		Follower of native "earth" religion	4%		
		Spiritual but not religious	34%	I'm not a believer, but I follow some traditions associated with religion, sometimes I go to church	36%
Indifferent	35%	Non-religious, does not care about religious matters	18%	I'm not a believer and I don't follow any religious traditions	32%
Inclined towards atheism	16%				
Convinced atheist	12%	Atheist	11%	I'm a convinced atheist	7%
Don't know	4%	Don't know	2%	Don't know	6%

TABLE 2: Religion-related labels in different wording (ethnic Estonians)

***Low level of practices and belonging***

The figures indicate that conventional religious belonging has been consistently very low among Estonians. According to the 2011 census, only 19% of ethnic Estonians embrace any form of religion (14% Lutherans), with less than 3% going to church each week (Statistics Estonia 2011, LFRL 2010). According to MWM 2014, only about half of traditionally-religious people are relatively actively committed. The largest group, who sometimes go to church, are most likely referring to an annual visit at Christmas that does not entail any religious commitment and can be regarded as just a favourable attitude or fuzzy fidelity (Voas 2009). This is also supported by the fact that the reported importance of religious rites of passage (Table 1) is much higher than the actual participation level: for christenings and funerals, 20%, and for weddings, only 8% (Remmel forthcoming). In conclusion, looking at the different indicators presented above, it may be assumed that about 90% of the population are effectively distanced from traditional religious life. Their actual attitude is "favourable indifference" (Ringvee 2012) based on the lack of contact with religion.

As for alternative spirituality, frequent participation in new spirituality groups is also low – 5%. However, more respondents had some kind of contact with the spiritual milieu: in the last five years, 22% had practiced yoga, spiritual breathing techniques, Reiki, or other spiritual activities (18% more than once) and 32% have read books on spirituality (RTE 2014).

***Strong presence of non-theistic beliefs***

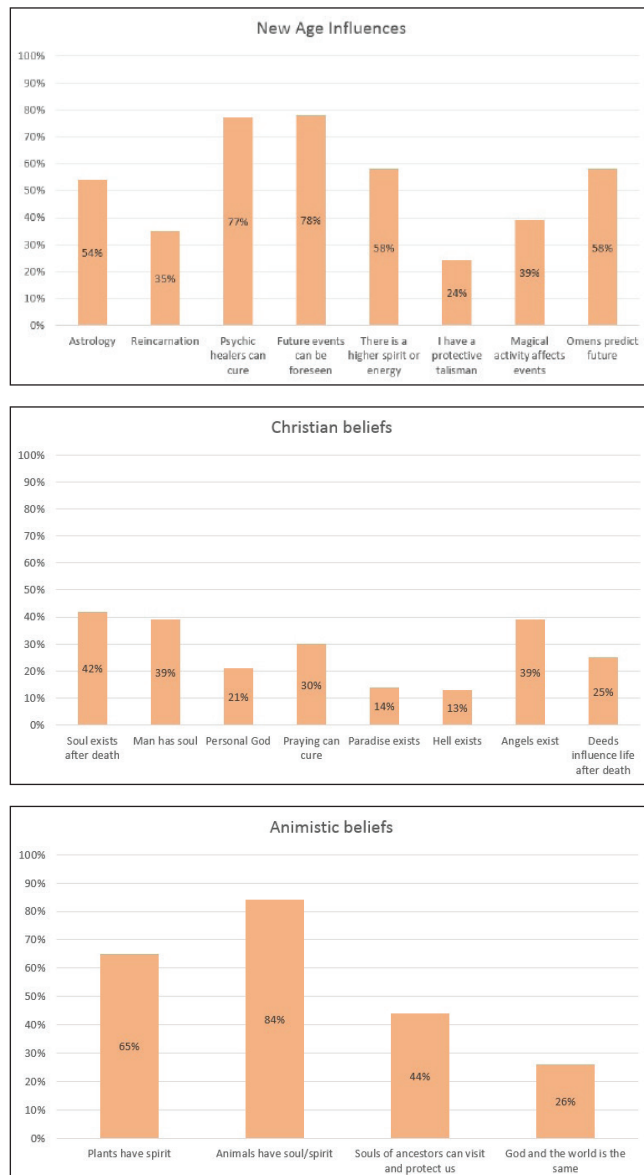
Surveys asking about Estonians' beliefs give diverse results. Belief in a personal God is consistently low (from 12% in EVS 2008 to 21% in LFRL 2010), thus reinforcing the reputation of Estonia as a very secularised country. However, the data from the surveys (Table 3) demonstrate the strong presence of a belief in a spirit or life force since the first EVS in 1990, among the highest in Europe.

EVS 1990	EVS 1999	EVS 2008	Special Eurobarometer 2005 [Russians included]	Special Eurobarometer 2010 [Russians included]	LFRL 2010
56%	50%	45%	54%	50%	58%

TABLE 3: Belief in a spirit or life force among the Estonian populace.

LFRL 2010 also demonstrates widespread belief in religious/spiritual phenomena, proving that despite being considered one of the least religious nations in the world, Estonians have rich spiritual worldviews (see Diagram 1). In the RTE 2014 questionnaire, 54% were reported to have their “own religion, independent from churches and religions”, 60% believed in “some sort of higher power that guides your life and protects you in case of danger”, and up to 67% of Estonians agreed that “with spiritual self-development, including conscious autosuggestions and spiritual practices like meditation, I could change myself, my life, and the world around me”. Unexpectedly, 62% of self-proclaimed atheists also agree with this statement, which demonstrates the relativity of self-chosen labels.

DIAGRAM 1: Estonians’ beliefs according to LFRL 2010.





### *The common characteristic of “ratherism”*

One notable result, visible in different questionnaires, is the high proportion of people choosing the option “rather agree” or “rather disagree”. For example, this was a strong tendency in LFRL 2010, where respondents’ beliefs were mapped on a four-unit scale (“completely agree”, “rather agree”, “rather disagree”, “completely disagree”, plus the option “difficult to say”). Although strong (dis)agreement was more common with traditional Christian beliefs (belief in God, hell, or heaven), even with the claim of the belief in a personal God, 38% of Estonians rather agree or disagree (14% and 24%, respectively), and 16% said it was difficult to say. The proportions of the rather options are especially high with questions regarding astrology, the spirit of animals or plants, or supernatural powers for healing or fortune-telling. For example, 71% of respondents rather agree or disagree that some people have a special power to foresee events (59% rather agree and 12% rather disagree – interestingly, only 5.5% strongly disagree with this claim). Thus, the majority of Estonians do not fully reject supernatural forces, agents, or world order but have a “ratherish” attitude to them (Heelas 2013).

## DISCUSSION

In the following, section we offer some explanations about the features of religion in Estonia that have been identified above.

One reason for Estonians’ low religiosity and the prevalence of non-religion could be **the important role of the Estonian national narrative**, one of the most influential stories shaping Estonian identity and understanding of the past (Tamm 2008). The rise of national consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the formulation of a national treatment of history, with the central element being Estonians’ fight for their freedom and culture. Due to the lack of Estonian academic history-writing at the beginning of the national awakening, national historical consciousness was mostly constructed by authors of historical novels in the manner of Romanticism, presenting the Church as the henchman of foreign oppressors. As a result, Christianity, seen as equivalent to religion, was not linked to national identity and is instead treated if not as entirely hostile, then at least as “not one’s own”, thus explaining the nation’s religious tepidity (Altnurme 2013). This motif was revived and even radicalised (the most atheistic nation) during the international interest after Eurobarometer 2005 and is now an inseparable part of Estonian identity (Remmel forthcoming).

To explain the exceptionally high percentage of Estonians believing in phenomena such as spirit or life force, it has been proposed that a spiritual revolution took place in Estonia after the collapse of Soviet atheism (Heelas 2013). However, another possibility is to see it as **the continuous presence and high impact of non-theistic folk beliefs**, related to the imagery of pre-Christian religion (e.g., belief in the spirits of animals, plants, or a spirit/life force instead of a personal God – see Diagram 1) and supported by the national narrative. Significantly, 61% of Estonians agree that the indigenous earth religion is the genuine religion of Estonia, although only 4% declared that they themselves follow this religion (RTE 2014). Also, as early as 1990, in the last years of the Soviet Union, the belief in a spirit or life force was as high as 56%, compared to only 6% of people who expressed belief in a personal God (EVS 1990). Therefore, the belief in a spirit or life force was most probably not introduced by a new spirituality but instead has links to existing belief systems that rely on traditional Estonian folk beliefs.

Unlike distinctly Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in a personal God, declared by around 20% or less), folk beliefs survived the Soviet atheist campaigns relatively intact. This peculiarity can be explained by the utilisation of the national narrative in Soviet antireligious propaganda, emphasising the motif of Estonians as being inherently tepid about religion and anti-Christian

by contrasting a native folk religion with alien Christian beliefs that had been forced upon the people. As a result, widespread folk beliefs were largely ignored by atheist propaganda, which focused mainly on bashing churches and clergy. Thus, these beliefs were spared from negative connotations, since they were not considered beliefs in terms of reaching the supernatural sphere. Significantly, Estonian folk beliefs and earth religion are not necessarily part of the religious sphere but rather a part of Estonian cultural and spatial identity, and strongly connected with Estonian nature (Kuutma 2005). Some folk beliefs also involve well-preserved practices like visiting folk-healers (Kõiva forthcoming). These beliefs were continuously present in Soviet times and expanded on a massive scale in the 1980s, even before the religious boom.

**The anti-religious programme of the Soviet Union** is the most influential factor for today's (non-)religiosity. The ultimate goal of the Soviet experiment of atheisation was to eradicate religion and turn the populace into militant atheists. Although this effort marginalised the churches and relegated religiosity to the private sphere, the lack of visibility of religion also rendered conscious atheism irrelevant (Rommel 2015). Thus, to the great chagrin of atheism activists and party officials, the outcome was not an atheist society – the prevailing attitude was indifference towards both atheism and religion. As a result, there is a nearly 30-year disconnection in the religious history of Estonia, during which the topics of religion and atheism were paid minimal attention both in the public and private sphere. This affected two generations who grew up without religion or knowledge about religion as part of everyday life. Nevertheless, a change in the general attitude was achieved by the Soviet programmes – even today, religion and religiosity are subject to many prejudices, and there is a definite reluctance to accept religion outside the personal sphere (Schichalejev 2010), resulting in the very low visibility of religion.

The disconnection, talked of above, along with the influence of the national narrative, explains why **the majority of people are not socialised into (institutional) religion**. A strong decline in primary socialisation happened in the 1960s, when the continuity of religious rituals was broken by the antireligious campaign. Despite this, about half of Estonians are baptised (about 40% of those who have been baptised are more than 50 years old). However, the proportion of Estonians who take confirmation is very low (17%), which indicates that actual contact with the church is weak (RFRL 2010). Rommel (2013) has pointed out a strong correlation between religiosity and religious/non-religious upbringing: nearly three-fourths of respondents calling themselves atheists did not have any contact with religion at home. By contrast, nearly half of religious respondents had some religious education, and nearly a quarter had intensive religious education at home. Similarly, Hamplová and Nešpor (2009), in their study among Czechs, conclude that religious socialisation (childhood church attendance and mother's affiliation) is a reliable predictor of religiosity in adulthood.

Weak socialisation into religion and the insignificance of religion in society affect not only belonging and identity but also the ability to understand and recognise what religion or religiosity is. Based on an empirical study among Estonian pupils, Valk (2007) argues that it has resulted in a lack of knowledge about religion. In accordance with this, another study suggests: "Although people nowadays have religious experiences, they are largely unable to express and interpret them" (Altnurme 2006, 306). Thus, the key characteristic of the Estonian religious situation is **religious illiteracy**. The disappearance of knowledge about religion is supported by spiritual teachings and practices that tend to avoid presenting themselves as religions and instead use a secular vocabulary – e.g., from science or medicine (Hammer 2004).

Another feature arising after the period of forced secularisation could be called **the secularisation of language**. Due to the atheist propaganda that associated believers with mental deficiency and religion with brainwashing (the opiate of the masses), words associated

with religion have gained negative connotations (Jaanus 2012), which explains the avoidance of religious labels. In addition, due to the lack of visibility of religion in everyday life, the meanings of words associated with religion seem to have been lost, changed, or become ambiguous, since there are no realities that correspond to them anymore. For instance, the word church has been diminished to refer only to a building, and going to church has acquired a mundane meaning, such as entering the building for a concert (Rommel forthcoming). Both religious illiteracy and the secularisation of language can explain the irregularities and apparent contradictions in the surveys.

Because of the insignificance of religion, the prevalence of religious illiteracy and prejudices against religion (and the supernatural as such), the survey data about Estonians indicates that their religiosity is commonly unrelated to well-formulated and stable religious identities. It can be characterised rather as **inclinations in situational, on-off religious identities, practices, and beliefs**. Therefore, the religious situation in Estonia emphasises the need to talk about inclinations rather than supposedly constant (non-)believing or belonging. Inclinations become visible not only in the confusion over identity labels but also in the common occurrence of “ratherism”. Altnurme (2011) has described the existence of mythic patterns that inherently have more flexibility than religious faith systems. The high volatility and diversity of results in belief questionnaires demonstrate that no strong norm is perceived that would be dictated either by a dominant religion or the materialist-atheist ideology. Similarly, previous studies have pointed out that beliefs in the supernatural or paranormal are more common in those respondents who do not position themselves close to either end of the religious-atheist continuum. Religious beliefs and practices have a “curvilinear effect on belief in the paranormal, and by showing that those most likely to believe in the paranormal are people who are religiously moderate and non-exclusive in their spiritual outlook” (Baker and Draper 2010, 422). Meanwhile, the widespread existence of folk beliefs in individual belief systems supports the inclination and willingness to use spiritual-esoteric solutions. On the other hand, the hostility towards religious and spiritual phenomena at the societal level constitutes a barrier against turning to religious-spiritual solutions (Uibu 2015).

We see a transition from the traditional religious commitment-obligation model towards the demand-based or situational model in the modes of participation. People can pick religious and supernatural solutions if these seem applicable and useful. For example, Estonians tend to turn to spiritual teachings with a specific need and in certain moments – such as when they feel off track in their lives or cannot handle crises using only non-religious/materialistic frameworks (Uibu 2015). Similarly, non-religion in the context of prevailing non-religiosity does not have a high relevance. Atheist attitudes are mostly actualised when religion-related topics such as the role of Christianity in Estonian history, the necessity of RE, or discussions about personal beliefs suddenly enter the public sphere (Rommel forthcoming) – when the norm of non-religion is perceived as being violated or under attack.

The Estonian example has led to **several methodological concerns and suggestions**. International surveys like EVS are remarkably inert from a methodological perspective and focus on the conventional characteristics of institutional religion. Because of the fluidity and fuzziness of religion and the inability to address locally-specific features, the surveys tend to describe only a limited range of religious phenomena. Although the understanding of religiosity in locally-designed surveys is often similarly conventional, they are more successful in revealing culture-specific forms of religion.

In addition, the surveys still fail to address the specifics of non-religiosity. Despite being a prevalent position in society, non-religion remains a residual category in surveys – a deviation from normative religious belonging, which has now ceased to be a norm. For instance, the question about religious belonging in the 2011 census in Estonia turned out to be a fiasco,

giving almost no information about 71% of the population (54% had no religious affiliation and 17% declined to answer). Only 29% of the population reported any religious affiliation.

Indeed, it is very difficult to find quantifiable indicators of religion in secular or post-secular societies. There are several problematic aspects. For example, with mostly latent beliefs, the survey itself stimulates respondents to take a stance and formulate beliefs or attitudes that might otherwise be totally irrelevant or unimportant to them. As has been argued, “studies on polling show that people are prepared to express opinions about almost anything, whether or not they have any knowledge of or interest in the topic, . . . but that is not the same as finding those issues particularly important” (Voas 2009:161). These problems are visible in the irregularities and illogical response patterns of Estonian surveys as well – for example, in the fact that more than a quarter of the respondents who describe themselves as “non-religious, does not care about religious matters” say in another question that they have a great interest in religion. Similarly, a quarter of “atheists, who deny God and everything supernatural” say they believe in fate and a protective higher power (RTE 2014).

Another question is how to measure and conceptualise non-religious, irreligious, spiritual but not religious, and other similar identities and practices in the context of the prevailing religious illiteracy and nominal non-religiosity, i.e., in a society where religion and religiosity, due to their low visibility, are not everyday realities. Not surprisingly, it is argued that the phenomenon of fuzzy spirituality and syncretic-individual religions has not gained full attention because of the lack of adequate methodology (Woodhead 2010; Heelas 2013). Without respondents’ universally acknowledging terminology and having a sense of belonging, in predominantly secular societies like Estonia’s, conventional studies often fail to indicate the real range and significance of (non-)religious ideas and practices. Therefore, the Estonian example emphasises a strong need to find new methods and theoretical approaches.

## CONCLUSION

As with other authors aiming to explain irregular cases in Europe, such as in former East Germany (Pickel 2012) or in the Czech Republic (Hamplova and Nešpor 2009), we have taken up the challenge of reviewing some key trends in representative surveys to offer some explanations about Estonian data.

Estonia is undoubtedly among the least religious countries in Europe – the majority of religious phenomena remain outside the conventional frames of religious commitment, centred on religious belief and belonging. The situation is further complicated by overwhelming religious illiteracy and the secularisation of language as a legacy of Soviet rule. Given the lack of primary socialisation into religion, and the diminished authority of religious institutions due to the historical aversion to Christianity, the visibility of religion is low and religious-spiritual beliefs and participation take fluid and ambivalent forms.

Our findings demonstrate the fuzziness of (non-)religious identities, the relative arbitrariness of the labels used in the surveys, and the low level of religious belonging. The high variety of beliefs probably has no effect in everyday life due to the insignificance of religion and religiosity, which is also a reason for the distinct feature of ratherism. Therefore, we find it justified to talk about inclinations rather than religious identities, and situativity rather than constant (non-)believing or belonging.

In accordance with other scholars, our data suggest religious change instead of extreme secularisation. By asking conventionally-used questions to measure religion, it is possible to reach the conclusion that Estonia is the least religious country in the world. However, closer study reveals that the situation is much more complex.

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