Religion in Europe: Estonia

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Religion, faith, and spirituality play a significant role in the lives of millions of people across Europe. These forces shape individual values and cultural mores, traditions, history, and art. A continent that is chock full of grand places of worship and important sacred sites, there is no doubt that Europe was, and is, a fascinating place for developments in world religions. The small country of Estonia, sandwiched between Latvia and Russia, is an especially interesting case. A 2011 BBC news article on religion in the country concluded that, “the Church [is] struggling to define its role in a place where Christianity, and organized religion in general, come [at the] bottom in most people's list of priorities.” (BBC News 2011).

This statement has been confirmed by several comparative studies that indicate that Estonians place the least amount of importance on religion of any country in Europe and rank among the least religious people in the world. A worldwide Gallup poll conducted in 2007-2008 revealed that 86% of Estonians report an insignificance of religion in their daily lives (Uibu 2011, 2). A Eurobarometer survey reported that only 16% of Estonians believe that “a god is still there” (Uibu 2011, 2). Only 5% of Estonians attend church at least once a month (Uibu 2011, 2). Further, religious institutions wield little political decision-making power and hold a low amount of social influence.

Despite these findings, Estonians are highly spiritual individuals, and hold spirituality as central to a good quality of life (Teichmann, Murdvee, and Saks 2006). Fifty-four percent of Estonians believe in some sort of spirit or life force, and 75% believe that some individuals possess healing or divination powers (Uibu 2011, 2). Eighty-eight percent hold a Karma-like belief that an individual’s actions will “come back” to them within
their lifetime (Uibu 2011, 2). Researchers who have explored this spirituality find an incredible diversity of beliefs ranging from those with pagan roots to those with New Age or scientific characteristics. This openness to diversity in beliefs makes it hard to delineate spirituality in the context of Estonia, but also means that there are many fascinating combinations of beliefs for anthropologists to explore. Nearly infinite permutations of concepts of the self and the world abound as a result.

Marko Uibu of the Central European University has explored how Estonians view the “self” and the world in the absence of guidance provided by organized religion. Uibu finds that the general rejection of organized religion, which is viewed by many Estonians as a colonial anachronism, has resulted in a boom in personal spirituality. Unfettered by dogma and tradition, people become free to explore and compose their own set of spiritual beliefs. Rather than following an organized group bound by rules, Uibu observes that individuals seek “religious marketplaces” or “channels” that provide topical resources and camaraderie (2011, 6). These marketplaces can be websites, shops, even places in nature where people can meet, discuss ideas, and exchange ideas about their beliefs.

Uibu finds that Estonians highly value a diversity of beliefs and strive for a tolerance of beliefs others might term “deviant,” for example, viewing yoga or meditation as spiritual (2011, 16). As a result, a variety of spiritual practices exist with Estonians being open to various non-traditional ways of exploring spirituality. This openness makes it hard to describe spirituality in the context of Estonia but also means that there are many fascinating combinations of beliefs for anthropologists to explore. Nearly infinite permutations of concepts of the self and the world abound.

Estonian spiritual diversity complicates the work of the anthropologist who seeks to define the boundaries of spirituality, particularly because people tend to use descriptive words such as “esoteric”, “spiritual”, or “alternative” interchangeably (Uibu 2011, 5-8). Anthropologists need to be much more precise with their meanings and terms. Despite this and in fact because of it, Estonia is a haven for behavioral researchers who study how people select
and integrate various practices or beliefs into their conception of spirituality, how individuals define themselves, and how they interpret the world.

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Religion in Europe: Spain

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Spain is a country so deeply rooted in religion that the very mention of the country is almost synonymous with piety. For centuries, scholars and historians have detailed the religious mosaic of Spain, from the Islam of the Moors to Sephardic Judaism to the modern monopoly of Catholicism. Yet increasingly, due to the forces of globalization, immigration, and economic development, Spain is becoming a nation of many flourishing religions. Recent work in the area by sociologists and anthropologists no longer finds Spain to be homogenous hotbed of Catholicism, but a place where religious identity of many strains can be asserted.

In a comprehensive look at the fluctuations of religion in contemporary Spain, Alfonso Perez Agote paints a picture of a country experiencing a dynamic shift in the religious profile of citizens. Perez Agote analyzes the changes in Spain’s religious sphere through three “broad social dynamics”: individual secularization, separation of Church and State, and settlement of large immigrant populations. Taking secularization first, Perez Agote finds that since the 1930’s, the secularization of Spain has progressed rapidly in three distinct phases. First, in the 19th century, individuals “interested in modernity” turned against the Church in protest to their “monopoly over truth”. Following after the Civil War of the late 1930’s, the second wave concerned general economic development and saw a decline in Catholic religious practice and belief in teachings. Perez Agote elaborates:

“Religion retreated to the private sphere. . . The weakened link was characterized by a fall-off in practice and the forming of personal beliefs that did not adopt the Catholic creed as a whole, but rather integrated certain elements without worrying about leaving others out. This was not secularization through opposition and negating religion and the Church, but an
Perez Agote describes the third wave of secularization as a natural extension of the second:

“This third wave is not an opposition to or fight against institutional religion and the Church, as was the case with the first wave. Nor is it a process of loss of interest in something known and near, as was the case with the second. It is, rather, a remoteness and ignorance with regard to religion and the Church. In Pérez-Agote, 2009, we define this process as exculturation (Hervieu-Léger, 2003), a process whereby culture loses its Catholic roots.” (2010, pg. 227)

The second dynamic Perez-Agote identifies is the struggle for separation of Church and State. The struggle has a long history, dating back to the 15th century when Spanish monarchs began the practice of claiming ecclesiastical rights and attributes. Since then, the pendulum of religious involvement in state politics and power has swung to both extremes, notably in the ancient regime of the Spanish monarchy (no separation) and the National Catholicism of Franco (complete separation, but not in a democratic sense).

Finally, the third dynamic Perez Agote describes is fracture in religious homogeneity caused by a large influx of immigrants. In the 10 year period between 1998 and 2008, the percent of foreign nationals in Spain increased by 9%, only half of whom were Catholic (Perez-Agote 2010, pg. 230). Interestingly, 1.5 million of those foreign nationals were evangelicals, 600,000 of whom were of Roma origin (Perez-Agote 2010, pg. 230). Perez-Agote notes that these immigrants have not undergone the secularization of religion that many Spanish nationals have, and therefore levels of practice, belief in God, and ties to identity and self-worth differ substantially. At their most basic level, these religious institutions serve to integrate immigrants into Spanish society.

Relatedly, Fransisco Diez de Velasco claims that visibilization of religions other than Catholicism is becoming increasingly common and even oriented towards minority religions such as Islam. He claims three factors that are causing this visibilization. First, there is the heritage factor, which creates the various
permutations of highly visible minority religions positioned as alternatives to one large, homogenous religion. Second, there is the legal factor, which details Spain’s division of religious groups into 5 categories. Third, there is the numerical factor, which complicates collection of quantitative data on religion in Spain due to identity and cultural components.

It is worth delving into the legal factor that Diez de Velasco presents, as it is revealing of the change that has occurred in religious freedom in Spain, and in the distance it has yet to go. He explains that the 5 legal categories religions are assigned to are based on a model containing a “germ of discrimination” (Contreras in Diez de Velasco 2010, pg. 247) whereby religions in these categories enjoy differential treatment by the state. At the first level, receiving privileged funding via income tax and given recognition in the Constitution, is Catholicism. The next category is comprised of religions (called “confessions”) that signed a cooperation agreement with Spain in 1992; these are Islam, Judaism, and Evangelical Christianity. These religions also receive privileged funding, but from a state organization called Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia. The third category contains “well known faiths or those that have clearly taken root” and are recognized by a state commission called the Comisión Asesora de Libertad Religiosa, but receive no special funding or inclusion in the state educational system (Diez de Velasco 2010, pg. 249). The fourth category is composed of religions registered in the Registro de Confesiones Minoritarias, and receive no formal recognition beyond their entry in the Register. Finally, the fifth category is reserved for unregistered religious entities, typically seen as cultural organizations.

Diez de Velasco shows us, through his discussion of the three factors of visibility of minority religions in Spain, how much religious affiliation and identity has changed in Spain. Perez-Agote’s work expounds on this even more, revealing that as modernization and globalization, economic development, and immigration have come to Spain, the role of religion in Spaniards’ lives is morphing and diversifying.

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