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“EVERY BIRD HAS ITS OWN SONG”

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING AND THE MAKING OF ESTONIAN ORTHODOXY, 1840S – 1930S

The first century of Estonian Orthodoxy (1840s-1930s) was shaped by a number of religious and social forces: the turbulent politics of confession and conversion in the tsarist provinces of Livland and Estland, the Estonian national movement and the revolutionary events of 1905, and the consolidation of the interwar Republic of Estonia and the autonomous Orthodox Church of Estonia.¹ Congregational singing was a vital part of all of this; it was how Orthodoxy was made Estonian and how Estonians were made Orthodox.

In this essay, I look at *riimilaulud*²--the strophic, rhymed congregational songs that became an iconic aspect of Estonian Orthodox practices during this period. These songs were an essential part of Orthodox Estonians' religious formation and enabled laypeople, clergy, and elites to localize Estonian Orthodox musical practices and to distinguish their music from other Orthodox musics as emblems of spiritual and national autonomy. *Riimilaulud* helped believers participate in the liturgy and gave them a body of Orthodox texts and vernacular tunes for paraliturgical or domestic use. They were an essential part of Estonian Orthodox oral, aural, and literary culture: Orthodox Estonians committed them to memory and used them to enhance special feasts or commemorate anniversaries and public holidays by composing new verses. One reason these songs are so important, then, is that they give us insight into believers' religious creativity and affective experience during these times of profound socio-religious change.

Riimilaulud were at the center of passionate debates among clergy and elites about the relationship of canonical Orthodoxy and Estonian identity as well. These songs situated Estonian Orthodoxy in relation to neighboring Finnish and Russian Orthodoxies in interesting, oftentimes paradoxical ways. Furthermore, *riimilaulud* highlight what were rather fluid musical and theological boundaries between Eastern and Western Christianities in tsarist Livland and Estland and Republican Estonia. Here, I offer examples of well-

1 Research for this essay was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship and a Charlotte W. Newcombe Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. All translations here are my own.

2 Throughout this essay I use the term *riimilaulud*, although these songs are also referred to as *salmimõõdu laulud* (versified songs), *koguduse laulud* (congregational songs), and *riimitud laulud* (rhymed songs).

known Estonian Orthodox *riimilaulud* and open a window onto the discourses surrounding these songs. In what follows, I pay particular attention to the historical voices of Orthodox Estonians in order to document how these songs, the beliefs they shaped, and the religious associations they created shed light on the meanings of Estonian Orthodoxy during a period when Orthodoxy and Estonianness took on tremendous ideological significance.

IDENTITY AND DOCTRINE IN ESTONIAN ORTHODOX CONGREGATIONAL SONGS

In February 1916, priests, singers, and congregants from across Estonia came to Tallinn to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Cathedral of the Transfiguration. Konstantin Kokla (1878-1946), a priest from Tartu who served at the anniversary celebrations, gave this account of the singing there:

On Saturday [February 20, 1916] at the Vespers service there were again many people in the church. The service was conducted by the priest Kokla, the sermon—Father Laar. Eventually, the priest asked the people to sing the prayer "Redeem, oh Lord" together. Everyone sang heartily, strongly.

It finished. Then it was announced that tomorrow, Sunday, visitors to the liturgy and evening mission session should sing a congregational song from song sheets.

Many members of the Tallinn congregation gathered around Father Laar afterward and remarked:

"You work miracles! We would not have been able to guess that in our church the entire congregation would be able to sing."

Singing this single prayer showed that people can and want to sing, but also that there must be a congregational singing leader for things to turn out well.

"Come to church tomorrow evening, then see and hear more," answered Father Antonius [Laar].

"Do you expect that people will be able to sing from the song sheets?"

"We in Jurjev [Tartu] sing, and it should be no different for you."

"But is this permitted?"

"Who has forbidden it?"

"Well, we just don't seem to sing."

"You don't sing because you haven't adopted the practice."

"We aren't prepared for it."

"People have long been prepared...The ones who aren't prepared are those who must put this into practice. Many are stuck to their own foreign-derived prejudices."

"If everyone sings then it would be so Lutheran-like..."

"But the content would be Orthodox, and this is the main thing. We must cultivate people's hearts through the Orthodox essence. Therefore the outer way or manner is important in the extent to which it lies closer to people's inner character. An Estonian has always sung and will sing in the future as well. And when we leaders of congregational life do not impart the essence of the faith to