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Religion: Not declining but changing. What do the population censuses and surveys say about religion in Estonia?

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Religion: Not declining but changing. What do the population censuses and surveys say about religion in Estonia?

Ringo Ringvee*

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates religious affiliation in Estonia, considered to be one of the most secularized countries in the world and in which less than one third of the population affiliates with a religion on population censuses. Firstly, the article scrutinizes these data methodologically, comparing census results with findings from other survey and opinion polls. It finds that census data correlate with those from face-to-face surveys, while postal surveys tend to show considerably higher rates of religiosity and affiliation. Secondly, the article considers the findings themselves. According to census data, 29 percent of the population remained religiously affiliated between 2000 and 2011. However, the census also captures interesting changes over that period that illuminate the situation further. Significantly, Estonia is the first European country in which the traditional majority church has been usurped by a denomination associated with the largest ethnic minority group and which makes a strong connection between cultural and national identities. The article places this finding in the context of Central and Eastern European census data to argue that religious affiliation tends to remain high in societies where religious and national or ethnic identities have close ties, whereas traditional denominations have been declining in societies where these kinds of connections are weak. This factor helps explain variation between experiences of religious change in post-Socialist contexts.

KEY WORDS: Estonia; religion and censuses; religion and ethnicity; religion and nationalism; religion in post-Communist societies; religious surveys; secularization

Introduction

Population censuses and other surveys that include a question about religion are an invaluable but often contested source for generalizations about religion in a particular society. This article addresses the ‘religion question’ in such censuses and explores what its results tell us about the religious situation in a society and processes of social change. In relation to religion, censuses focus on the religious
self-identifications of populations. Over time, they can outline basic trends, give historical and comparative perspectives, and sometimes help with predictions. In the wider context, census data may affect the self-perception of religious communities and religious institutions as well as the general (including legal) framework in which the religious communities and institutions operate. This article focuses on Estonia and its population censuses of 2000 and 2011. In order to scrutinize these data, it draws on other survey and opinion-poll data concerning religion comparing the data they produce in order to consider how surveys and censuses relate to each other. This investigation shows how different the results may be according to whether a question is asked in a postal survey or in surveys conducted via face-to-face interviews. This paper will also explore how the ethnic influence in religious affiliation helps explain why Estonia is, according to the available data, one of the least religious countries in the world. Finally, the discussion is located in wider contexts, particularly concerning the importance of integrated national or ethnic and religious identities to patterns of secularization in and beyond Estonia.

**Religion and censuses in Central and Eastern Europe**

In the last quarter century, all post-Communist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries conducted population censuses. Most have included an optional or voluntary question about respondents’ relationship to religion. However, questions concerning religious identity have sometimes been considered to be highly sensitive and so some countries, for example, Latvia and Ukraine, have not included one. Similarly, Poland did not include a question concerning religious affiliation in its 2002 census, although it later included one in the 2011 census questionnaire (Ludność 2013, 100).

Other than census data, knowledge of the religious composition of a country relies mainly on surveys and membership data provided by religious organizations. This prompts questions of reliability because different religious traditions count their membership according to different criteria. Sometimes the numbers provided by the religious institutions reflect their self-understanding or the public image they want to maintain or obtain rather than the actual situation. This became clear in Estonia when the 2000 Population and Housing Census results were published in 2002. Some religious groups had until then provided lower numbers of affiliates than the census indicated and were quick to correct their official number upward. In the case of surveys and polls the methodology may have considerable impact on the results, as discussed below.

Population censuses in CEE countries show that changes in mono-religious societies with strong ethno-religious traditions have been smaller than in religiously pluralized societies, although in some cases there has been a slight decrease in the percentage and number of religiously affiliated people. In countries that are historically Catholic or Orthodox, church affiliation has maintained its position as a cultural norm, while in Protestant societies secularization as well as processes of religious individualization have taken their toll (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012). Whether small changes reflect more general trends concerning religion or other changes in society (aging, emigration, immigration) is not the focus of this paper. However, in dominantly Catholic Lithuania, for example, 79 percent of the population described themselves as Catholics in the 2001 census. Ten years later, the 2011 census found that the Catholic population was 77.2 percent
A similar trend is seen in the traditionally Catholic Slovak Republic, where the percentage of Catholics has declined from 68.9 percent in 2001 to 62 percent in 2011. In both censuses, the Slovak Republic’s unaffiliated population accounted for 13 percent of the general population (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2011).

In Hungary, where the Catholic Church is closely tied to national identity (although it has not been able to re-establish its position since the collapse of the Communist regime), the 2011 census showed a notable decline in the number and percentage of Catholics. While Catholics formed 51.9 percent of the population in 2001, in 2011 this number had declined to 37.1 percent. The second-largest denomination in Hungary followed a similar trend, with adherents of the Reformed Church declining from 17.8 to 11.6 percent of the population. However, the drop in the number of adherents of the largest churches also reflects a decline in religious identification in general: while the percentage of the religiously affiliated population was 74.6 percent in 2001, it was 54.7 percent ten years later and, while the number of people who declared no religious affiliation did not change very much (from 14.5 to 16.7 percent), there was considerable growth in the number of people who did not answer the question at all, rising from 10.8 to 27.2 percent. Church leaders, however, claimed that this change in affiliation did not represent reality but was the outcome of different wording of the census question (Hungarian Spectrum 2013).

In the Czech Republic, the 2001 and 2011 censuses showed a drastic fall in the percentage of Catholics (falling from 26.8 to 10.3 percent) as well as of adherents of other religions. Interestingly, the 2011 census also shows not just a decline in adherence to other religious traditions, but also a decline in those selecting the no religion category, which fell from 59 to 34.2 percent. Instead, there was growth among those who chose not to answer the question, increasing from 8.8 to 45.2 percent (Lidé a Společnost Ročník 2012, 26).

Similarly, in Orthodox countries, where religion is part of official and/or unofficial national identities, census data suggest that adherence to the traditional church remains high. In its 2011 census, for example, 86 percent of Romanians identified themselves as Orthodox, and this percentage did not differ much from the 2002 figure of 86.7 percent (Institutul National De Statistica 2002; Rezultate definitive 2011, 6). According to its 2011 census, the religious composition of Bulgaria is also predominantly Orthodox, with 76 percent considering themselves to be adherents of the Orthodox Church, although this represents a decline from the 2001 census in which 82 percent had identified with the Church (National Statistical Institute 2001, 2011, 4).

In southeastern Europe, overlapping national and religious identities have remained important. In Croatia, 86 percent identified themselves as being Catholic in the 2011 census; in the 2011 Serbian census, 84 percent defined themselves as Orthodox. These are also the countries with the most God-believing populations in Europe, according to Eurobarometer polls from 2005 and 2010. However, there are many different reasons besides past Communist rule for the current religious situation in CEE countries (Ančić 2011).

As we can see from the examples above, it is in societies in which religious and national identities are strongly connected that traditional religious identities continue to account for the majority. Similarly, it is in societies that could be labeled religiously mixed, or where the connection between national or ethnic identity and
religion is weak, that traditional religious institutions tend to lose their importance. Estonia and the Czech Republic are the two most prominent examples of this latter trend, along with the territory of the former East Germany (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012).

The Eurobarometer polls from 2005 and 2010 further show that Estonia and the Czech Republic are also the European countries with the smallest percentage of believers in God. In both cases, the idea of being a secular nation is strong and historically rooted (Hamplová and Nešpor 2009, 592–596; Jaanus 2012, 167–168), although there are exceptions among minority religious identities that have a close connection with either geographically based (Moravian) or ethnically based (Russian) cultural identities. Similar trends have also been observed in other societies (Day 2011; Martin 2005).

Estonia

Estonia is a country in northeastern Europe with a population of 1.3 million. It was Christianized during the Northern Crusades in the 13th century, and the majority church since the 16th century has been the Lutheran Church. However, the connection between national and religious identities is missing: the Lutheran Church was controlled by the Baltic German gentry up until the early 20th century and the nation-building processes of the 19th century took place apart from the Lutheran Church. Estonian identity has been connected more to language than to religion. Estonia is often considered to be one of the most secular societies in Europe, alongside the Czech Republic and Sweden, where less than one fifth of the population believes in God, although belief in a more ambiguous life-guiding spirit or power is considerably higher in Estonia than in the rest of Europe (Eurobarometer 2005, 2010).

During the last 100 years there have been four population censuses that have included a question on religious affiliation. The first census took place in 1922, and at that time 98 percent of the population defined themselves as religiously affiliated. The Lutherans were the overwhelming majority, at 78.6 percent, followed by the Orthodox at 19 percent. The next census was conducted in 1934 and found that the number of religious affiliates had decreased slightly, to 91 percent. According to this 1934 census, Lutherans comprised 77.6 percent of the total population, followed again by the Orthodox population at 18.8 percent (Rahvastiku koostis ja kõrteriolud 1935, 118–127). In 1940 Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and the Soviet regime, and the USSR’s atheist policy had a serious impact on religion. During the atheist campaign of the late 1950s the Soviet regime undermined religious traditions, and particularly the majority church, by ridiculing religion and religious people in mass media and by replacing Lutheran ceremonies with new Soviet-style rituals. A weak connection between the Estonian national and Lutheran religious identities, combined with the Soviet anti-religious policy, contributed to a decrease in membership and participation in religious rites.

Before the 1940s, Estonia was a largely mono-ethnic country, in which 88 percent of the population was ethnic Estonians. The largest ethnic minority was the Russians, who in 1934 accounted for 8.2 percent of the total population. During the Soviet period the population grew by almost one third, due to extensive immigration from other parts of the Soviet Union. By January 2011, only 68.9 percent of the Estonian population was ethnic Estonians. The largest ethnic minority was still the
ethnic Russian group, 48 percent of whom had been born outside of Estonia and who made up 25.4 percent of the total population (Estonian Statistics 2011). Thus, a considerable portion of the ethnic Russian population is composed of people who arrived during Soviet-era immigration.

A shift occurred during the late 1980s, with what became known as a national reawakening in Estonia. The Evangelical Lutheran Church came generally to be seen as having a connection with pre-Soviet era independence (Plaat 2002). In the Estonian context, the years between 1988 and 1992 have been described as the period of ‘the church boom,’ with religious rites becoming popular, religion entering the public sphere (Rohtmets and Ringvee 2013), and religion in general having a positive image in the media (Ringvee 2013a). This was also reflected in various surveys conducted in that period. Thus, for example, according to the World Values Survey 1990, ‘the church’ was the third-most trusted institution in Estonia, with 53 percent of respondents answering that they trusted it ‘a great deal’ or ‘a lot.’ However, by 2008 the credibility of ‘the church’ had decreased and the European Values Study found that it was now trusted by only 44 percent of respondents (Estonian Human Development Report 2010).

Do Estonians consider themselves to be religious?

Since 1990 there have been several surveys and polls that have either directly or indirectly addressed questions on religious affiliation or religious ideas and practices. Some of them have been part of larger surveys (World Values Survey, European Values Study, European Social Survey, Eurobarometer polls) while others have been local. One important survey on religious life is ‘On Life, Faith, and Religious Life’ (Elust, usust ja usuelust), which has been conducted once every five years since 1995. The 1995 and 2000 surveys were carried out by the Estonian Council of Churches, the Estonian Bible Society, and the Estonian Evangelization Alliance, and the third in 2005 by the Estonian Council of Churches. In 2010, the Estonian Council of Churches hired a leading Estonian social- and market-research company, Saar-Poll, to conduct the most recent survey. This not only covered religious attitudes, but also collected data relating to other areas of life and to attitudes on various moral and ethical questions. One of the survey’s questions was: ‘Regardless whether you are a member of a religious association, do you consider yourself to be (1) a believer, (2) inclined to belief, (3) indifferent, (4) inclined to atheism, and (5) a convinced atheist?’

The survey had previously been a postal questionnaire, and results had indicated that the number of people who defined themselves as believers was gradually growing. However, the 2010 survey was conducted via individual face-to-face interviews, and the results were dramatically different: the percentage of believers dropped from 42.1 percent in 2005 to 12.7 percent in 2010. There was also a decline among the respondents who claimed to be members of a congregation or a religious movement, from 28.7 percent in 2005 to 16.4 in 2010 (EUU 2005, 2010) (Table 1).

The percentage of respondents who defined themselves as believers has become considerably smaller among ethnic Estonians than among other ethnicities (Table 2). Ethnic Estonians’ greater disinclination to define themselves as affiliates of a religious tradition, compared to that of other ethnicities, had already been identified in the 1990s (Liiman 2001, 54). There has been also discussion concerning the value connotation of the word ‘believer,’ *usklik*, in Estonian (Altnurme 2011; Jaanus 2012).
The 2010 survey also indicated that residents of Estonia who are non-citizens are more likely to identify themselves with a religion than is the case for Estonian citizens (EUU2010). The 2004 European Social Survey asked respondents: ‘Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?’ In Estonia, 54.6 percent of respondents were considered to be ‘non-religious,’ while 30 percent were ‘in between.’ Once more, religiosity was higher among other ethnicities than among ethnic Estonians (Kilp2005). The survey also found a considerable difference in attitudes towards the link between national and religious traditions, with other ethnicities regarding a connection more favorably than do ethnic Estonians (EUU2010).

In 2002, the social-survey company Ariko conducted a poll asking the question, ‘How important do you consider religion to be in your life?’ For 10 percent of respondents, religion was ‘very important,’ while 26 percent of respondents considered religion to be ‘quite important’ (Ariko 2002). For over half of the respondents, religion was ‘not really important’ (30 percent) or ‘not important at all’ (21 percent). For 13 percent it was ‘difficult to say.’ In a 2009 Gallup poll, 16 percent of respondents considered religion to be important in their daily lives (Gallup 2009). As the EUU 2010 survey shows (Table 3), there are also ethnic differences in how important religion is considered to be in everyday life.

The results of a Eurobarometer poll released in 2005 found that Estonia had the lowest levels of theism of any country in Europe, with only 16 percent of respondents answering ‘yes’ to the question ‘Do you believe in God?’ Estonia was followed closely by the Czech Republic (19 percent) and Sweden (23 percent). These results provoked some media attention in Estonia because 54 percent had chosen the option, ‘belief in life-guiding spirit or force.’ This prompted the

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**Table 1.** Regardless of whether you have joined some congregation or not do you consider yourself…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A believer</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclined to belief</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent to religion</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclined to atheism</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A convinced atheist</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to say</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 2.** Regardless of whether you have joined some congregation or not do you consider yourself…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estonians</th>
<th>Other ethnicities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A believer</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclined to belief</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent on religion</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclined to atheism</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A convinced atheist</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to say</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EUU (2010).
association of indigenous (neo-) pagan traditions, known as the ‘House of Taara and Native Religions,’ to claim that the majority of Estonians follow the principles of the native religion (House of Taara and Native Religions 2005). It has been claimed recently that the media attention boosted the self-image of Estonia as the least religious nation (Remmel 2013, 88–89).

Reviewing these data, is it therefore correct to describe Estonia as the least religious country in the world and Estonians as the least religious nation? With respect to the afore-mentioned Eurobarometer polls, only 16 percent of respondents were found to believe in God in 2005 and 18 percent in 2010, making Estonia the least theistic and second least theistic of European nations in those years. However, if respondents who said that they believe in some kind of spirit or life-force (54 percent in 2005 and 50 percent in 2010) are included, then the percentage of ‘believers’ is around 70 percent, which would make Estonia far less of an exception within Europe. In five years the percentage of those respondents who neither believe in God nor in a life-guiding spirit or force has grown by 3 percentage points, from 26 percent to 29 percent.

According to a Gallup poll from 2009, 16 percent of respondents in Estonia considered religion to be either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in their lives. These attitudes are also reflected in participation rates that are, again, similar to those found in Sweden and the Czech Republic. Around 4 percent were found to participate in religious services or rituals every week (Eurobarometer 2005), with differences again found between ethnic Estonians and ethnic minorities: in 2010, 2.1 percent of ethnic Estonians attended religious services at least once per month, compared to 4.3 percent of other ethnicities, making an average of 2.8 percent (EEU 2010).

Analysing the European Values Study from 2008, two Estonian researchers, Eeva-Liisa Jaanus and Marge Unt, stated that Estonia could not be considered the most secular place in Europe, which was, according to their analysis, the former East Germany (Jaanus and Unt 2012, 228). However, their analysis did not take account of the percentage of immigrant populations that form two-thirds of the religiously affiliated population, and which is larger in Estonia than in the former East Germany. If the situation in former East Germany and in Estonia are compared, the similarities in the decline of traditional Church are evident. An observation that in former East Germany the ‘de-ecclesiasticalization’ of society had ‘passed a certain threshold, which prevent a revitalization of participation the church’ (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012, 237) may apply as well to Estonia with regard to its traditional ecclesiastical body, the Lutheran Church.

### Table 3. The importance of religion in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Estonians</th>
<th>Other ethnicities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not really important</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to say</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EEU (2010).
Religious identities according to population censuses

In Estonia, population censuses are conducted by Estonian Statistics, the governmental agency responsible for all official statistics. There have been two population censuses in Estonia since the country regained independence in 1991: the first ‘Population and Housing Census’ was conducted between 31 March and 9 April 2000, and the 2011 ‘Population and Housing Census’ was carried out between 31 December 2011 and 31 March 2012. Both censuses included voluntary questions concerning religious affiliation, asked of everyone aged 15 years or above. To save processing costs, the question was simplified in the second census.

In the 2000 census, 8 percent of respondents refused to answer to the question, ‘What is your religious affiliation?’ The answers provided in the questionnaire included, ‘follower of a particular faith,’ ‘no religious affiliation,’ ‘atheist,’ and ‘cannot define the affiliation.’ If the person chose the option ‘follower of a particular faith,’ he or she then had to give the name of it. The closed list included seven larger Christian traditions (Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Adventist, and Pentecostal), and Islam, the largest non-Christian religion in Estonia. If none of these eight was selected, an opportunity to state another faith was provided (2000 Personal Questionnaire). When the census data were published in 2002, 70 different religions and denominations in total were listed. However, the percentage of the population who declared a religious affiliation was only 29.2 percent.

The two most popular religious classifications were Lutheran and Orthodox (the latter divided into two Orthodox churches, with differing canonical jurisdictions), accounting for 13.57 and 12.8 percent of the population respectively. Lutherans and Orthodox were also the only two classifications that had more than 100 000 adherents. The third largest group, the Baptists, had 6009 adherents, representing 0.5 percent of the population. The largest non-Christian tradition was Islam, with 0.12 percent of the population. More than half of the Muslims in Estonia were ethnic Tatars, who have been the traditional majority of the Muslim population since the 19th century (Ringvee 2013b).

Shortly before the census took place, data concerning membership were collected from religious associations (Au and Ringvee 2000, 139–141). In 2000, there were two Buddhist congregations in Estonia. According to the collected data, one of them had 21 and the other 15 members. Yet, according to the 2000 census, there were 622 people who described themselves as Buddhist. Similar discrepancies were found with the House of Taara and Native Religions, which had estimated their membership at around 200 people. In the census, 1058 people identified themselves with the traditions represented in the House. Since then, the House of Taara and Native Religions has not provided membership numbers.

According to the 2000 census, the vast majority of religiously affiliated people were Christians. The Lutherans formed 46.4 percent of affiliates, and the Orthodox 43.8 percent. As the surveys had indicated previously, there were some particularities based on ethnicity and age. Among the ethnic Estonians only 23.4 percent considered themselves to be religiously affiliated; most of them (80 percent) defined themselves as Lutherans, thus forming 95.7 percent of the country’s Lutherans. Notably, 55.3 percent of Lutherans were over 60 years old, while only 12.25 percent were under 30. Among the younger generation, ethnic differences correlating with religious affiliation became visible in the 15–19 age group, with 11.9 percent of ethnic Estonians considering themselves to be affiliated with some
religious tradition, compared to 32 percent in other ethnic groups (2000 Population Census Database).

The question on religious affiliation remained voluntary in the 2011 census and was asked of everyone aged 15 or older, as in the previous census. In order to reduce data-processing costs, the questionnaire provided fewer options and some categories were removed (‘atheist’; ‘cannot define the affiliation’). The question in the census was, ‘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. If a respondent completed the questionnaire online, then he or she had the option of choosing from between the 70 different religions or denominations that had been mentioned in the 2000 census. If he or she did not find their religion on the list, the respondent had to provide the name of his or her faith (2011 Personal Questionnaire). As the 2011 census began, the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church called on church members to state their religious affiliation in the census (Põder 2012). According to the Lutheran Church there were 180 000 Lutherans in Estonia (Annual Activity Report 2011, 5).

The results from the 2011 census concerning religion were published on 29 April 2013. The percentage of the population who considered themselves to be adherents to a particular religion was the same as ten years earlier, remaining at 29.3 percent. Similarly, the percentage of those whose religious affiliation was unknown remained at 16.5 percent, although the number of those who chose the option to refuse to answer the question almost doubled, from 8 percent in 2000 to 14.4 percent in 2011. Over half of the population – 54.1 percent – said that they had no religious affiliation, and 82.9 percent of this figure was ethnic Estonians. Although the percentage of adherents remained at 29 percent, there were some significant changes in religious composition between the 2000 and 2011 censuses. For example, the religious affiliation of Estonians declined from a quarter (24.3 percent) in 2000 to a fifth (19.46 percent) in 2011. Thus, less than half of the total affiliates (45.5 percent) were ethnic Estonians, although in 2000 they had formed over a half (55.28 percent) (2000 Population Census Database; 2011 Population Census Database).

Another significant change found by the census was that, for the first time ever, Lutherans were not the largest religious group in Estonia. When the results were presented, the census project manager at Estonian Statistics noted that 2011 marked the turning point in Estonian religious composition. She highlighted that, although Lutheranism was the main religion for ethnic Estonians, there was a larger number of Orthodox living in Estonia (Beltadze 2013). The number of Lutherans had declined by 43 724, decreasing from 13.57 percent of the population to 9.91 percent; 16.2 percent of the total population of those older than 15 years of age defined themselves as Orthodox. This shift had been indicated already in the previous census, due to the age profile of Lutherans. It was also predicted by the European Social Survey in 2004, in which 54 percent of believers defined themselves as Orthodox (Kilp 2005, 124) (Table 4).

The age profile of Lutherans recorded in the 2011 census supports other evidence of a downward trend among ethnic Estonians, who form 96.5 percent of Lutherans. In terms of ethnic composition, 76 percent of the Orthodox population was ethnic Russians and 11.6 percent was ethnic Estonians (2011 Population Census...
The Orthodox Church as an ethno-religion has been an important identity marker for the Russian population. In the 2011 population census, 47 percent of ethnic Russians older than 15 years of age defined themselves as Orthodox.

The role of ethno-religions as an identity marker is evident in Estonia, and it could be seen as a form of cultural defence as well as part of a collective identity (Bruce 2002, 31–34; Day 2011; Hervieu-Léger 2000, 157–162; Storm 2011). However, in Estonia religiosity is higher among ethnic minorities and within the immigrant population than is the case in, for example, the UK (McAndrew and Voas 2014). According to the 2011 census data, ethnic minorities form over half of the religiously affiliated population in Estonia.

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) reacted to the census data quickly, and was strongly critical of the religious-affiliation question – though the EELC Chancellor admitted that the growth of the Orthodox affiliation was predictable given that the majority of this group is ethnic Russians, a group which considers its faith to be part of a national or ethnic identity. The Chancellor argued that the population census gives a distorted picture of the religious situation in Estonia and that generalizations could not be made on the basis of it. He also suggested that the methods (including the voluntary nature of the questions, as well as not counting children) marginalize the role of religion in Estonia and that people who chose not to answer the religious-affiliation question might be religiously affiliated nevertheless (Viilma 2013). Estonian Statistics responded to this criticism with a press release in which they defended the method of data collection used in the census. With regards to claims made about those who did not answer the question, Estonian Statistics pointed out that no conclusions could be drawn other than that these people did not want to answer the question (Estonian Statistics Website 2013).

In the on-going media discussion, which lasted for several weeks, Emeritus Professor Ene-Margit Tiit, the head of methodology for the 2011 census, said that membership status was not requested in the census, that the question actually concerned how people identify themselves and that discussion of the census results reflected an attempt by religious circles to imbue these findings with their own preferred meaning. In response to criticism relating to the 14 percent who chose not to answer the religious affiliation question, Tiit (2013, n.p) responded by saying:

> How many of these people who were not willing to admit adherence to any religion in the population census but who feel connected to some belief or religious identity could be clarified in a follow-up survey. Definitely there are such people.
> But to collect such information is not the task of the census.

In a qualitative study related to the 2001 census in the UK, Abby Day (2011) has shown that religious identity may have little to do with religious beliefs but instead reflect social or cultural identities and the importance of belonging.
Beside the rapid decline of the Lutherans, the census results also reflect some other interesting religious changes. Although the percentage of Christians remained almost the same between 2000 and 2011 (28.74 percent and 28.36 percent respectively), there was some increase in the ‘undefined Christians’ group, while established Christian denominations such as Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, and Catholics lost 25 percent of their affiliates during this period. At the same time, the array of religious traditions listed under the category of ‘other’ grew, with 20 new categories added. Although some religious groups had experienced considerable growth during the ten years between censuses, the percentages of affiliates in these alternative traditions were small. Only 15 of 90 religious groups had more than 1000 affiliates (2011 Population Census Database).

One of the groups to have experienced considerable growth during the last ten years is the indigenous neo-pagans. In the 2000 census, two neo-pagan indigenous traditions were listed under a single category (taara- ja maausulised) and, in total, 1058 people considered themselves to be affiliates of one of these two traditions. In 2011, this category was divided into Taara-belief (taarausk) and ‘Earth-faith’ (maausk; the English phrase used by the community is ‘Native Religion’), and the results tripled: there were 1925 Native Religionists and 1047 Taara believers. The indigenous religious tradition became the largest non-Christian religion, overtaking Islam, which had occupied this position in the 2000 census. Nevertheless, there was also a slight increase among the number of people describing themselves as Muslim. More notable, however, was the growing diversity within this population as a result of the decline of the Tatar community. According to the 2011 census, 40 percent of Muslims in Estonia had a Tatar background, whilst in 2000 they had accounted for more than half the Muslim population.

Other populations also grew significantly. The number of people identifying as Buddhist almost doubled, from 622 in 2000 to 1145 in 2011. In 2000, seven people had identified as Pagan; in 2011 the number had increased to 341. The number of Satanists tripled from 43 to 120, and there was an increase in Hare Krishna devotees, from 48 in 2000 to 121 in 2011. Alongside the growth of Orthodox affiliations, there was a considerable increase elsewhere in the Christian tradition, with the Christian Free Churches growing from 883 to 2189 affiliates (2011 Population Census Database).

Conclusion

In several ways, Estonia resembles other post-Communist CEE countries that also lack a single, socially dominant church. It differs from Catholic Poland and Lithuania as well as from Orthodox Romania and Serbia, but, though it resembles Hungary to some extent, its greatest similarity is with the Czech Republic and the territory of the former East Germany. In all of these countries, the traditional majority Church has not reclaimed the moral authority that it had during the pre-Communist era, and, for historical reasons, the traditional relationship between religious and ethnic and national identities has not re-asserted itself (Martin 2005, 49–51, 112–114). At the same time, however, processes of religious change in Estonia reflect more general trends in Europe, characterized by declining religious identification and belonging. Estonia is an extreme example of a secularized Protestant society, where secularization has caused a fundamental religious change. Having a religious identity, or defining oneself on the basis of religion, is
becoming increasingly irrelevant for ethnic Estonians, whose identity is based much more on language and land. Until this century, Lutherans were the largest denomination in Estonia. However, when the age profile of Lutherans is taken into account, the decline of Lutheran Christianity seems to be as irreversible, as in eastern Germany (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012, 237; Wolf 2008, 123). At the same time, however, the percentage of the religiously affiliated population in Estonia has remained stable, at 29 percent, although by now ‘believers’ from other ethnicities outnumber Estonians.

In the European context, religious change has been an important theme for a long time. However, population censuses suggest that Estonia is the first European country where the traditional majority church has been outnumbered by another religious tradition as a result of an overall decline in religious affiliation. The majority who identify as Orthodox are ethnic Russians, most of whom have a background shaped by migration processes from the Soviet era. From this new situation several significant questions emerge, concerning the implications for secular society and the extent to which these shifts affect the role of religion in public life and governmental policy relating to religion. Such questions are particularly acute given that the majority are religiously indifferent. Until these questions are addressed, Estonia can be considered as a kind of laboratory for religious change.

Population censuses that include a question on religious affiliation remain an invaluable resource for predicting future trends, compared to which other surveys and polls could and should be compared and triangulated. Moreover, although population censuses do not give information about the content of belief, they do give information concerning the social importance of religious traditions among the population and are able to quantify how many people in a society ‘believe in belonging’ (Day 2011).

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