

PhD candidate, University of Tartu

# RAIN SOOSAAR

## RELIGIOUS MOTIVES IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF EXILE ESTONIAN WRITERS (ON THE BASIS OF THE COLLECTION “THE LAND OF MY YOUTH” (1964))

The article offers the analysis of the motifs related to religion and the church in the collection of autobiographical essays of exiled Estonian writers “Minu noorusmaa” (1964). Twenty-four mostly well-known authors were asked to describe experiences of their childhood and youth that influenced the development of their personality. The essays reflect local life in various Estonian cities and rural areas at the end of the tsarist era and during the interwar period. However, religion is one of the main topics only for two authors out of 24, while five do not mention it at all. For the rest, the treatment of religious topics is limited to a few paragraphs or often only a few references in passing. Typically, religion is mentioned in association with the need to behave decently, death and difficult life situations, family and community traditions, and classes of religion at school, but also describing peculiar, exceptional people.

The treatment of religion and the church as a topic of marginal interest in the autobiographical writings seems to be characteristic not only of exile Estonian writers, but also of other biographers from different backgrounds, both in exile and at homeland. Comparative studies, especially with other post-communist countries, could show how this phenomenon can be related to the fact that, similarly to Czechs and East Germans, Estonians stand out in Europe today for their low practice of religion and low membership of churches.

**Keywords:** exile Estonian literature, secularisation, autobiographies, religiosity

## Introduction

There are three regions in Europe where the religiosity of people and especially identification with churches is significantly less pronounced than elsewhere – Czechia, the area of the former German Democratic Republic, and Estonia. In all these cases, this stems primarily from the legacy of the atheistic communist regime.

However, the fact that secularisation did not reach such a scale anywhere else in former communist countries of Europe may indicate the crucial importance of earlier historical legacy. In the case of Estonia, after establishing the statehood in 1918, the position of the major churches also became vulnerable due to their association with the previous regime. However, while anti-clericalism and irreligion found some supporters among influential social groups, including intelligentsia, it remained marginal in the society as a whole. Even so, already in that time, there were signs that people's bonds with the church were loosening, as indicated by a drop in church attendance and participation in rites, as well as assessments provided by Lutheran pastors.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the theories of religious socialisation, it can be assumed that, if an already sizable part of the interwar youth did not develop strong bonds with religion and the church during their formative years, these bonds remained relatively unimportant also throughout their subsequent lives. Therefore, it was relatively easy for such people to give up church rites and other public signs of connection with the church, if it could prove harmful to their social status during the years of the atheistic regime. Likewise, they could more easily renounce raising their children in a religious spirit compared to those who had already developed a strong emotional bond with the church in their youth.

The study of individual religiosity and religious socialisation is complex due to a lack of sources. However, autobiographical texts have been fruitfully and inventively used for that purpose by well-known historians of secularisation such as Callum Brown, Hugh McLeod and Lucian Hölscher. Unfortunately, only a few such studies have been carried out in the case of Estonia.<sup>2</sup>

The current article has been conceived to fill this gap by analysing the collection of exile Estonian writers' memoirs of their youth, published in Sweden in 1964, titled "Minu noorusmaa" ("The Land of My Youth").<sup>3</sup> It contains autobiographical essays

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1 More on that in essays of Riho Altnurme, ed. *Old religion, new spirituality. Implications of Secularisation and Individualisation in Estonia*. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021).

2 Main contribution to the field is Lea Altnurme. *Kristlusest oma usuni. Uurimus muutustest eestlaste religioossuses 20. sajandi teisel poolel*. (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2006).

3 Valev Uibopuu, ed., *Minu noorusmaa. Koguteos 24 autorilt*. (Lund: Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv, 1964).

by 24 different authors, including most of the renowned exile writers of that time.<sup>4</sup> According to the editor of the collection, Valev Uibopuu, the book's rationale was to provide readers with some personal background of the literary works of Estonian writers, based on the assumption that childhood is an important period from the perspective of personality formation.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the authors largely had free hands as to how and what to write about the years of their childhood and youth. Some authors have given a more or less systematic overview of the first two decades of their lives, while others only convey a few of the most important or most vividly remembered episodes. In sum, however, the collection offers an interesting cross-sectional overview of what the exiled Estonian writers wished to reveal to the public from their formative childhood experiences, providing excellent opportunities for research on secularisation in Estonia. Thus, this article aims to find out to what extent and in which contexts practising faith, encounters with the church in the childhood milieu, and religious socialisation are presented in the essays.

However, it should be kept in mind that the essays do not provide a complete, accurate, and fully adequate picture of the authors' encounters with faith and the church in their childhood and youth. The traditions and conventions of the autobiographical literature that existed at the time must be taken into account, as well as the broader historical and social background. In matters of faith and the church, the authors were undoubtedly influenced by the public opinion at the time of writing. However, since the authors' experience of living under a repressive atheistic regime was limited to only one year (1940–41), it probably did not affect them as deeply as their compatriots who remained in Estonia. This makes these autobiographical essays particularly valuable for the study of secularisation.

In addition, one must be careful in generalising the findings of the study to the entire Estonian population of the authors' generation. Writers from various parts of Estonia, as well as both the city and the countryside, are represented in the collection, but it is not representative in terms of social origin. The authors' parents included farmers, folk school teachers, sailors, and representatives of the urban bourgeoisie, but not industrial and agricultural workers or, interestingly, people with higher education. Importantly, there are only few references to other faiths than Lutheranism in the essays,<sup>6</sup> and all the authors are ethnic Estonians; only one, Triina Saare, had a Russian father. Finally,

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4 19 of the 24 authors are represented with separate chapters in the most authoritative general overview of Estonian exile literature. In total, 35 chapters are dedicated to prose writers in this overview. Piret Kruuspere, ed., *Eesti kirjandus paguluses XX sajandil* (Tallinn: Eesti TA Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2012).

5 *Minu noorusmaa*, 5–6.

6 Kalmus refers to Baptism, Saare to Orthodox church, and Pihla to Islam.

several authors admit that their way of life, beliefs, and interests were very different from those of most of their peers from the very beginning, not least because of their early interest in reading. Furthermore, as noted above, the later experience of living either in exile or in Soviet Estonia undoubtedly in many ways affected the way people remembered and interpreted their own past. With these caveats in mind, the findings of this study still provide rare insights into the religious socialisation of the generation of Estonians who grew up at the end of the tsarist era and during the interwar period.

### **Religiosity of the authors**

Only very few of the authors write explicitly about their own faith in God. Of those who do, some provide examples of religious understandings of the children in order to illustrate their naivety. Magda Pihel remembers how she, as a little girl, did not understand why neither God nor the emperor “had not wanted or had not been able” to ban the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>7</sup> In turn, Salme Ekbaum recalls that when the children stuck their three fingers in their father’s wedding ring and could not get them out, they did not dare to ask Jesus for help because they knew it was their own fault.<sup>8</sup>

Two male authors mention that they had a “religious period” during their childhood. First of them, Raimond Kolk, writes: “My own religious period, when I said the evening prayer, also belongs to the time of the final years of elementary school. It started for no particular reason and vanished by itself, without anyone admonishing me in particular for or against that.”<sup>9</sup> However, there are only a few other direct references to religion in his essay and nothing about his later personal attitude thereof.

The second author, who writes about his own childhood piety, Ain Kalmus (his birth name – Evald Mänd), dedicates several paragraphs to his religious experiences and convictions. In this respect, he is unique among the 24 authors. Even though being a Lutheran, Kalmus was sent to an Orthodox elementary school at the age of eight to become fluent in Russian language: “The children were injected with as much religious propaganda as possible, and since we lived in a boarding school, we were also compelled to go to church. I was quite strongly influenced by the church. I recited the prescribed prayers, crossed myself, learned Russian language diligently and felt homesick, but no deeper impressions of that school year have been preserved”.<sup>10</sup> However, at the age of 16, he had allegedly denounced “faith, God and everything else”, but then experienced

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7 *Minu noorusmaa*, 182.

8 *Ibid.*, 21–22.

9 *Ibid.*, 104.

10 *Ibid.*, 63–64. Later, Kalmus attended a secular primary school.

a religious awakening and eventually became a Baptist pastor. It was not extraordinary for his childhood milieu, as the island of Hiiumaa, where he was raised, was known as the stronghold of free churches in Estonia. According to Kalmus, the awakening was related to searching for meaning in his life: “I found it in a religious experience, in the bright light of which everything that was vague became clear and logical. Trying to explain it years later using modern terms, I would have to borrow Paul Tillich’s words about *ultimate concern* [...] For some, success would become it, for another, wealth, for a third, power. [...] I found the meaning of life in the person of Christ, in his simple teaching, and I have tried to follow it all my life, wavering, stumbling, sometimes getting entirely lost, but always keeping his example in mind”.<sup>11</sup> He also deals with the beginnings of his literary activities and related disagreements with some of his fellow believers who considered writing fiction to be a sign of “love of this world”.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, Kalmus became a fairly acknowledged Estonian author whose novels contain much religious content.

### **Religion in the family and community**

Ain Kalmus is, notably, also the only one who explicitly states that his mother was a deeply religious person.<sup>13</sup>

However, according to vague hints, religion also played some role in the family lives of several other authors.

For two of them, being Christian seems to have been related to respectability and morality. Salme Ekbaum mentions that her parents had a “Christian worldview”, meaning that they were trying to be helpful and empathic towards people in need,<sup>14</sup> and there was a picture of Jesus riding a donkey hanging on the wall at their home.<sup>15</sup> Salme Raatma writes about growing up in an atmosphere of love and cordiality, where drinking alcohol, swearing, and dirty talk were unheard of. She does not associate it explicitly with religiosity, but just mentions in passing that her mother used to sing a Christian hymn in the evenings,<sup>16</sup> and her father had thought about studying theology at the university but was unable to do so due to poor health.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Minu noorusmaa*, 65–66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> The hymn was “Nüüd hingvad inimesed” (“Nun ruhen alle Wälder” by Paul Gerhardt). *Minu noorusmaa*, 198.

<sup>17</sup> *Minu noorusmaa*, 195.

In Triina Saare's (her birth name – Nadja Teder) case, references to her mother's religiosity are related to difficult life situations. Before giving birth, she had placed a postcard with the German title "Jehova ist mein Arzt" in front of her bed.<sup>18</sup> When two of her children had died of infectious diseases, the mother had sat depressed for days in the cemetery "and only begged for mercy to pass away and get to where her children were."<sup>19</sup> The topic of children dying from infectious diseases can be found also in several other essays. Besides the fear of one's own death or mourning of childhood friends,<sup>20</sup> it is also mentioned in the context of the conviction that dead children go to heaven,<sup>21</sup> as well as of the belief that a child who stands out amongst others in some way would die early.<sup>22</sup>

Disciplining children with the help of faith-related arguments is also worth mentioning. In addition to being punished by God or not being allowed to go to heaven,<sup>23</sup> the child could also be frightened by stories that the adults presumably did not believe themselves, such as about the devil coming through the chimney and taking away naughty children.<sup>24</sup>

Regular religious practise, however, has not been given much attention by the authors. Church services are mentioned only by five of them,<sup>25</sup> and in one case, the mental image of it was related to deep emotions of the author. Namely, Triina Saare's Russian father had been left behind in Russia during the civil war while the rest of the family managed to return home to Estonia. After that, every night before falling asleep, she dreamed about meeting the father suddenly again at the Toompea Orthodox Church during the Easter night service, just at the moment when the church bells started ringing and people greeted each other on the occasion of the resurrection of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Notably, however, in all the other cases, church attendance is mentioned only in passing. Bernard Kangro claims to have been there already in his early childhood, but

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18 *Minu noorusmaa*, 230.

19 *Ibid.*, 232.

20 *Ibid.*, 253–255.

21 *Ibid.*, 13, 47, 254.

22 *Ibid.*, 218, 247–248.

23 Cf. *Minu noorusmaa*, 48 and 247.

24 *Ibid.*, 169.

25 Besides that, Ast Rumor writes about a grandfather who, keen on amassing wealth, went on a trading trip even on Christmas Eve, when the other villagers went to church. However, this alleged story happened long before the author's own childhood, probably in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Minu noorusmaa*, 11.

26 *Minu noorusmaa*, 236. The father managed to return to his family, but the reunion happened in a homely atmosphere.

in general, their family rarely attended church;<sup>27</sup> the family of Arvo Mägi visited the filial church in Alatskivi “at least once a year”.<sup>28</sup> Magda Pihla mentions that she sometimes used to go to the church with her grandmother, who wore festive and beautiful clothing on that occasion, and that the road to the church was long and dull, yet there is nothing about the church service itself.<sup>29</sup> The fifth reference is similarly indirect. Namely, the father and mother of Ekbaum had gone to take communion at the church on Good Friday. Children had been left at home and were apparently unexpectedly visited by the great-aunt with whom they felt bashful. The story is about the embarrassing encounter with the great-aunt, and the church service is just mentioned to explain why the parents happened to be away.<sup>30</sup>

There is also only one description of a religious family gathering at home on Sunday, with the grandfather reading the sermon from a book and the grandmother leading the singing of hymns, also by Pihla.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, school was still a place where children almost inevitably encountered religion. Ilmar Jaks recalls that in primary school it was used to discipline pupils: “Man was a fallen creature, and a schoolboy in particular. The goal was to escape the great wrath. The only means for this was obedience in class, during break time, on the street, at home, even in sleep.” Brighter were his memories of Christmas, which the religious headmaster associated, above all, with the birth of Jesus, which shone a light on everyone, including even naughty, sloppy and poor pupils: “On Christmas Eve, we would have changed our headmaster with no other; there was no more powerful word in the whole county.”<sup>32</sup> Later, in progymnasium, morning prayers were also held, but for the principal of that school, inculcating patriotism and temperance (*kasinus*) was the priority instead of saving the soul.<sup>33</sup>

Asta Willmann mentions that the school servant played the song “Tähtede taga” (“Über den Sternen” by Franz Wilhelm Abt) on the accordion in memory of a beloved teacher who had died of tuberculosis. Willmann recalls that this song evoked deep sadness in her, which she experienced once again when she had to leave Estonia in 1944. However, she does not mention the religious context of the song at all.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise, if

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27 *Minu noorusmaa*, 71.

28 *Ibid.*, 160.

29 *Ibid.*, 185–187.

30 *Ibid.*, 28–29.

31 *Ibid.*, 186–187.

32 *Ibid.*, 48–49.

33 *Ibid.*, 54.

34 *Ibid.*, 305–306.

the lessons of religion are noted in the essays, they are related to the Bible stories that were taught there.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, some references to folk beliefs found in the essays should also be acknowledged. It was once remarked that a falling star was considered to be a soul of the dead, but on the other hand, it was also believed that if one wished for something when one saw it, the wish would come true.<sup>36</sup> Otherwise, the folk beliefs are recorded in contexts related to beliefs and stories told by older people. An author recalls that his mother was reprimanded by his granduncle for forgetting to forbid the children to pick flowers on Ascension Day,<sup>37</sup> while two others retell stories heard as children about the king of the snakes,<sup>38</sup> and supplanting of a child by the devil.<sup>39</sup>

### Social and cultural importance of the church

In interwar Estonia, the church continued to play an important role in social life. Regardless of people's own religious beliefs, being a formal member of a congregation and participating in certain church ceremonies continued to be a social norm, especially in the countryside. This is also reflected in the autobiographical essays of "The Land of My Youth", as the church is often mentioned in non-religious contexts, rather emphasising its importance in social and cultural life.

Notably, church-related **rites of passage** are never referred to in relation to their religious meanings but are treated as important traditions. For example, twice it is noted that the father<sup>40</sup> or the grandfather<sup>41</sup> of the author had been schoolteachers, and thus, among other things, used to perform burial rituals and baptisms.

As the rites marked important moments in a person's life, the objects related to them sometimes evoked sentimental feelings. August Mälk writes about the experience he had when, being 42 years old, he found the shirt in which he had been baptised as an infant: "I saw myself in it: the beginning of a man, eyes without light, hands as

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35 About Daniel in the lions' den (*Minu noorusmaa*, 179–180), Jesus walking on water (288), Noah's arc and the destruction of Sodom (297). There is also a story about an intellectually handicapped boy who, during the school inspection by the pastor, confused several biblical characters with each other and included the hero of the Estonian national epic, Kalevipoeg, among them (134–135).

36 *Minu noorusmaa*, 255.

37 *Ibid.*, 133–134.

38 *Ibid.*, 84–85.

39 *Ibid.*, 176.

40 *Ibid.*, 104 (Kolk).

41 *Ibid.*, 275 (Uibopuu).



small as postage stamps.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, a bracelet received as a confirmation day gift was for Salme Ekbaum, a precious memento of a great-aunt, of whom she had ambivalent memories.<sup>43</sup>

Not being confirmed as a youngster is mentioned twice, and it seems to be worth noting largely for its exceptionality. Veli Kudres wrote that, unlike his brother, he categorically refused to be confirmed,<sup>44</sup> while Arno Vihalemm admitted that he was confirmed unusually late, namely, at the age of 25.<sup>45</sup> In both cases, the reasons are not provided.

Especially important for the people of that time appear to have been such religious traditions which were related to **commemorating the dead**. Saare wrote that their family regularly visited grandmother's grave, and candles were lit there on birthdays, Christmas, Easter and the day of the commemoration of the dead.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, the common commemoration of the dead also had a function of strengthening community ties, and during the interwar period it was still inextricably linked to the church. Ain Kalmus, whose native Hiiumaa island was famous for its traditions of seafaring, wrote: "On the day of commemoration of the dead, when there was a prayer for the souls in the church, the pastor read from the pulpit the names of the foreign places where several people who had left home had found their last resting place."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Ekbaum emphasised that a person who had become a stranger to her relatives while living in St. Petersburg in a different milieu had not entirely lost her roots: "She was buried according to the customs of the religion with which she had once been baptised, in the same cemetery where her parents rested [...] Whatever life had baptised her with in the meantime – one circle was completed."<sup>48</sup>

Cemetery memorial days (*surnuaiapäevad*), which had a particularly important role in the local community life in Estonia and Latvia, are mentioned by three authors simply as major social gatherings.<sup>49</sup> For Salme Ekbaum, it was, as it seems, largely for that reason "the brightest day of the year".<sup>50</sup> Still, in most of the accounts related to

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42 *Minu noorusmaa*, 167–168.

43 *Ibid.*, 19 and 34.

44 *Ibid.*, 131.

45 *Ibid.*, 291.

46 *Ibid.*, 241. The latter was the last Sunday before Advent (*Totensonntag*).

47 *Ibid.*, 58–59.

48 *Ibid.*, 32.

49 *Ibid.*, 71 and 223.

50 *Ibid.*, 32.

the death or commemoration of loved ones in the collection, religion and the church are not mentioned.

The **pastor** typically is not referred to as a religious leader but just as a person with a high social status in the local community. In earlier times, pastors had been extraordinarily honoured, as pointed out by Karl Ast Rumor, the oldest of the authors. Although his father was not “close to the church” (*kiriklane*) and even had to give up his position as a *Vormünder* due to conflicts with the pastor, still “the church pulpit was as high as the gates of heaven in his eyes.” Therefore, both parents had hoped that the author’s brother Gottlieb would become either a pastor or at least a doctor, as these professions were considered the most respectable in the “patriarchal Estonia” of those days.<sup>51</sup>

Later, the pastor’s status somewhat declined, but during the interwar period, he still stood out as one of very few people in the village milieu who had higher education. For example, Herbert Salu writes: “The young pastor was a man with rare intellectual interests. In the absence of a better library, he read through the entire school’s children’s library.”<sup>52</sup> In a similar vein, Ain Kalmus writes that he was fond of reading and so borrowed books from the pastor, as it was the only option to get access to them in the vicinity,<sup>53</sup> and Peeter Lindsaar mentions a pastor and an Orthodox priest among his secondary school teachers in Otepää and Valga.<sup>54</sup>

## Portrayals of pious people

Notably, conspicuously pious people are portrayed in the essays almost invariably as marginal, weird and, in some cases, repulsive. For example, it was one of the topics of interest for Ilmar Jaks, who briefly depicted life in the home village of his father, which was situated “fifteen kilometres, a thousand miles”<sup>55</sup> away from his home town of Haapsalu. Jaks was ironical, even somewhat arrogant, as he described the backwardness of the village, which for him was inseparably related to the piety of common people: “Books were not read much. Everything that man needed to know was in the Bible and nature. Acquiring education mostly meant incapacity, betrayal. The agronomist was seen as a failed farmer, a crook who got school education, became a lawyer. The pastor was at least excused by his words, powerful, spirit-given words that even gave the man

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51 *Minu noorusmaa*, 14–15. In fact, both Karl (1886–1971) and Gottlieb (1874–1919) Ast became socialist politicians.

52 *Ibid.*, 226. The pastor was Jaan Kiivit sr. (1906–1971), later archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (1949–1967), who started his work as a pastor in 1933 in Viru-Jakobi.

53 *Ibid.*, 63.

54 *Ibid.*, 137–140, 144.

55 *Ibid.*, 57.

a little more height". However, only a part of the locals frequented prayer meetings in the nearby meetinghouse.<sup>56</sup> Jaks hinted that, among others, girls who had been neglected by boys used to do so: "No one appeared, the summer night was short, and life was short. Let the meetinghouse help. But even God did not always want to hear about a maid whose eyes said one thing, but her lips spoke another."<sup>57</sup>

Notably, the motive of spinsters' religiosity can also be found in Aino Thoen's childhood memoir. Her parents' female servant, called Kata, often prayed in the kitchen and, when the mother was away from home, also at the bed of the child.<sup>58</sup> Besides, she also constantly cited both proverbs and the Bible.<sup>59</sup> Once the child, out of pure compassion, expressed regret that Kata was so poor that she did not even have a husband and children. As a result, she became terribly angry and told the child that she would not go to heaven. "But where, if not to heaven?" wondered the child.<sup>60</sup> In general, Kata is depicted as an unpleasant person with whom the child felt uncomfortable. Once, she ordered Aino to pray for the neighbour's children who had died of scarlet fever in order to praise God that he took them away to heaven at such a young age. The child became afraid, believing that she too might die due to Kata's prayer: "I find Kata terrible with her upturned face, in which her eyes blaze with passionate fire. She prays for mercy, but her face is merciless out of piety."<sup>61</sup>

Another pious person invoking unpleasant feelings was Salme Ekbaum's great-aunt, a refugee from St. Petersburg, where she had lived a happy and prosperous life. However, after the Bolsheviks seized power, she had to return to her simple home village and rely on the mercy of her relatives. Her life was miserable due to social isolation and poverty: "Not that she did not try to bear her fate with the joy of a believer. But it was a thin joy, it hardly warmed her herself, much less others."<sup>62</sup> Admittedly, what made relating to the aunt unpleasant seems not to have been her religiosity, but rather her general inability to adapt to a different environment, and also, particularly for children, her unpleasant odour as well as her habit of kissing them.<sup>63</sup>

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56 *Minu noorusmaa*, 55.

57 *Ibid.*, 56. Jaks's ironic attitude towards Pietist piety is also expressed in his comment on the book "History of Ridala Awakening" (M. Busch, *Ridala ärkamise ajalugu*, Ridala: 1928) on the same page.

58 *Ibid.*, 247. It is not clear whether this applies in general or only during the serious illness of the child, which is the main focus of the story.

59 *Ibid.*, 253.

60 *Ibid.*, 247.

61 *Ibid.*, 253–254.

62 *Ibid.*, 28.

63 *Ibid.*, 23–24, 28–29.

Arvo Mägi, in turn, mentions religious awakenings of imprisoned thieves in his childhood milieu, “especially when a widow with a farm enticed”. This inspired him to write the short story “God’s Peace”.<sup>64</sup>

There are also accounts of bullying of pious people. Peeter Lindsaar describes his religious secondary school teacher in Valga as “being with thoughts like somewhere in another world”, whom both students and fellow teachers treated as a ridiculous weirdo. There was no order in his classes, and some boys committed mischief which surpassed all sense of decency. Although Lindsaar clearly associates the teacher’s oddness with his religiousness, bullying could also partially stem from his feckless character.<sup>65</sup> However, Karl Ristikivi remembers that one of his co-pupils from village school was bullied explicitly for coming from a pious family: “Her father is a lay preacher, and she always has to suffer because of the sin of her parents. This silent suffering and great patience surround her in my memory with a special shine that none of us could notice at the time.”<sup>66</sup> Another description of a religious person by Ristikivi is more neutral, linking piety with following certain strict moral rules. The fact that these were not always fully adhered to is worth mentioning as a sort of fun fact: “My godfather, Mäe Karla’s stepfather, was a man with a serious Christian spirit who recited a prayer before every meal. But he could sometimes, when he came from the town, from the fair or just from the store, put a packet of cigarettes in his stepson’s hand before he was even ten years old.”<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusions and discussion

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that only five authors out of twenty-four do not mention religious or church-related topics at all. Thus, during the youth of the generation that grew up before the Soviet occupation, the church was apparently still important enough that it was at least worth of mentioning even in short autobiographical texts. Likewise, while the religious indifference of several authors can be presumed, no explicitly anti-religious or anti-church statements can be found in the texts.<sup>68</sup> Typically, religion is mentioned in association with the need to behave decently, death and difficult life

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64 *Minu noorusmaa*, 164.

65 *Ibid.*, 139–140.

66 *Ibid.*, 206–207.

67 *Ibid.*, 210. Ristikivi notes that although children’s smoking was prohibited at school, their parents considered it acceptable. Ristikivi himself differed from his classmates in that he neither smoked nor drank alcohol.

68 In this sense, only Veli Kudres’s unelaborated remark that he categorically refused to be confirmed may deserve attention.

situations, family and community traditions, and classes of religion at school, but also describing peculiar, exceptional people.

However, the Christianity portrayed in the essays is not uniform, but rather reminiscent of Callum Brown's description of Great Britain before the First World War: "Two different ethoses dominated British Christianity. The first was of a relaxed and undemanding religion that called for decency and good works, avoidance of excess and a certain level of obedience to ecclesiastical authority," related to the Church of England and, to some degree, the Church of Scotland. "These churches enjoyed popular acceptance in part because of their willingness to *be undemanding* of adherents – to accept mildness of manner, good behaviour and periodic outward devotion as sufficient evidence that a person was 'religious'. The second ethos was evangelicalism. This was favoured by most of the Protestant dissenting churches, as well as some in the Church of England and Church of Scotland. It was by its very nature louder and more intrusive. [...] It demanded people strive much harder in their religious life, be attentive of churchgoing and church obligations, stricter in morals and behaviour, and to be seen to be so."<sup>69</sup>

In general terms, this description is also applicable to Estonia. The essays in the collection "The Land of My Youth", however, seem to indicate that a relatively weak bond with the first-mentioned version of Christianity appears to have been the social norm here, containing primarily relatively rare attendance of religious services, taking part in church-related rites of passage, and sometimes also associating the moral norms prevalent in the society with Christianity. Furthermore, in some families, the Bible was read, or church hymns were sung more or less frequently.

However, if someone's piety went beyond that, resembling what Brown calls the "evangelical ethos", people at large tended to look askance at it. Indeed, there are several portrayals of deeply religious people in the collection, but they are usually depicted as different from the rest. Some authors associate their piety with a difficult fate in life, and prejudiced attitudes towards them can also be noticed. A positive approach to religiosity comes only from the Baptist writer Ain Kalmus, and his essay has a notable apologetic tone. In particular, this can be observed in the explanation of what religion meant to him, made by invoking the authority of Tillich, which was cited above.

It is also noteworthy how little attention has been paid to religion and church in the texts of the collection. In some essays, they are not mentioned almost at all; in most of others, there are only some isolated references, usually in passing. Only for Kalmus and Thoen is religion one of the central topics of the essays.

How to explain this? Most of the authors whose essays are collected in "The Land of My Youth" avoid explicit statements about their personal relationship with the faith,

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69 Callum G. Brown. *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*. (Harlow [etc.]: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 49.

but, probably, it had a truly marginal role in the milieu where they grew up. Ilmar Talve (1919–2007), an ethnologist and novelist who did not contribute to “The Land of My Youth” but published his memoirs later, stated explicitly: “On Pentecost, I was confirmed in Tapa church with many of my classmates. I no longer had any firmer position on the matter of faith or church that I could call my own. I was not a churchly Christian, but I was not anti-religious either. I had no reason to refuse the confirmation, and it would also have been unthinkable, at least regarding my father and mother.”<sup>70</sup> It is plausible that several authors represented in the collection “The Land of My Youth” had a similar attitude, and this is what prompted them to pay so little attention to religious issues. That would also explain why, in several essays, the social and cultural importance of the church is placed in the foreground, while its connections with religion are barely mentioned. Such an interpretation chimes well with the fact that it was widely complained in the Lutheran church about the decline in the practice of faith in interwar years, and especially among the youth.<sup>71</sup>

However, in some cases, people who avoided religious topics in their autobiographical writings could actually be deeply religious. It is true, for example, of Karl Ristikivi, one of the most renowned exiled Estonian writers, whose autobiographical essay in “The Land of My Youth” refers to religion only in relation to some of the peculiar people in his native Varbla parish. However, his exile diaries reveal that Ristikivi himself was a deeply religious person, often calling upon God’s help in various life situations.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, not writing about faith does not necessarily mean that this topic was of little importance to each and every author themselves. However, it seems safe to conclude that the tradition of exile Estonian autobiographical literature of that time paid little attention to religious themes. The same seems to apply to Estonian autobiographical literature about interwar years in general.<sup>73</sup> This, in turn, may be related to the fact that

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70 Ilmar Talve. *Kevad Eestis. Autobiograafia I* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 1997), 149.

71 The evidence is patchy, as there are no reliable data for the country as a whole. As for Urvaste, the home parish of one of the contributors to the collection, Bernard Kangro, it has been claimed that in the municipality of Uue-Antsla, only 11 families out of 160 used to read the Bible regularly on Sundays, and 19 more in major feasts in the 1920s: Georg Kimmel, “Ühe kodumaa kihelkonna usu ja kiriku olude kirjeldus” (manuscript, available at the University of Tartu library, 1923), 42. In addition, an anonymous pastor claimed in the church’s official weekly newspaper in 1927 that while 78 of his 127 confirmands had been taught at home at least some prayers, only six had been read through at least one of the Gospels, and only in one home were “proper morning prayers” held: “Seda ja teist. Huvitav ja pörutav statistika,” *Eesti Kirik*, 26 Jan. 1927: 8.

72 Karl Ristikivi. *Päevaraamat*. Tallinn: Varrak, 2008. See, for example, pp. 303, 374, 375, 380.

73 The theme of religion and church receives similarly little attention in the collection of autobiographical texts written by exile Estonians and biographical interviews conducted with them: Tiina Kirss. *Rändlindude pesad. Eestlaste elulood võõrsil*. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 2007. Notably, Ene Köresaar also hardly mentions religion and the church in her study of the interpretations

already in the authors' formative years, faith and the church were treated as a topic of secondary importance by the public.

It appears likely that the modest public attention to religion and the church, accompanied by superficial personal attachment to Christianity of many young people who grew up during the interwar period, may have significantly contributed to the spread of secularisation among Estonians during the consequent communist regime. In order to corroborate this premise, it would be useful to compare the autobiographical texts written by Estonians with those of people who lived in other communist countries. Possibly, in countries where the church before the communist takeover had a more important role in society and also greater attention was paid to the religious socialisation of young people, it was more difficult for atheistic regimes to sever people's ties to the church. On the other hand, comparing Estonian autobiographical texts with those of the Czech Republic and East Germany could provide an answer to the question of to what extent the exceptional secularity of these countries today could have stemmed from similar reasons. Besides, comparing Estonian and Latvian autobiographies could also be fruitful due to the remarkably similar historical background of these countries.<sup>74</sup>

## KOPSAVILKUMS

### Reliģiskie motīvi trimdas igauņijas rakstnieku autobiogrāfiskajos rakstos (pamatojoties uz kolekciju "Manas jaunības zeme" (1964))

Šajā rakstā apskatīts ticību un baznīcu tēmu atspoguļojums igauņu trimdas rakstnieku atmiņās, balstoties uz 1964. gadā Lundā izdoto autobiogrāfisko eseju krājumu *Minu noorusmaa* ("Mana jaunības zeme"). Esejās rakstnieki tika aicināti rakstīt par bērnības un jaunības pieredzi, kas ietekmēja viņu personības attīstību un iedvesmoja viņus vēlākajos darbos. Krājumā apkopoti 24 autoru ieguldījumi, gandrīz visi autori ir prozaiķi, kas tiek uzskatīti par bēgļu literatūras klasiķiem.

Uzkrītošs ir reliģisko un baznīcas tēmu atspoguļojuma trūkums krājumā. Tikai diviem autoriem tā ir viena no centrālajām tēmām, vairums citu aprobežojas ar īsām, garāmejošām atsaucēm, un pieci rakstnieki reliģijai vai baznīcai nav pievērsuši nekādu uzmanību. Īpaši reti autori raksta par saviem personīgajiem reliģiskajiem uzskatiem un pieredzi.

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of history in Estonian autobiographical texts written in the 1990s by Estonians living mostly in the homeland: Ene Kõresaar. *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafiline minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*. (Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 2005), 37–68. Lea Altnurme, also admitting the spread of secularisation, nevertheless emphasises the continuing importance of church traditions in Estonian autobiographies about interwar years (op. cit.).

<sup>74</sup> A work similar in many ways to the collection "Minu noorusmaa" was published by Latvian exile writers already immediately after the Second World War: Pēteris Ērmanis, Arturs Plaudis, eds., *Trimdas rakstnieki I–III*, (Kempten (Allgäu): Viļa Štāla apgāds, 1947).

Izņēmums ir Ains Kalmus (*Ain Kalmus*, īstajā vārdā *Evald Mänd*), baptistu mācītājs, kurš cita starpā stāsta par saviem reliģiskajiem meklējumiem un reliģisko atmodu. Papildus tam tikai daži citi autori min lūgšanu bērībā, baznīcas meklēšanu, Bībeles lasīšanu un baznīcas dziesmu dziedāšanu mājās vai arī ģimenes kristīgo pasaules uzskatu un morāli.

Arī dažādi (bet ne vairums) nāves un sarežģītu dzīves situāciju apraksti ir saistīti ar reliģiju. Tostarp esejās vairākkārt pieminēts bērnu nāves risks no infekcijas slimībām, saistībā ar to tiek minēts jautājums par viņu iekļūšanu debesīs. Citos gadījumos reliģijas un baznīcas tēma esejās parādās saistībā ar reliģijas izmantošanu bērnu disciplinēšanā, reliģijas mācībām skolā, ģimenes un kopienas tradīciju kontekstā, kā arī aprakstot savdabīgus vai marginālus cilvēkus.

Raksturīgi, ka baznīca bieži tiek pieminēta nevis saistībā ar reliģisko dzīvi, bet gan pēc tās kultūras un sociālās nozīmes. Kristība un iesvētīšana tiek minētas kā plaši izplatītas tradīcijas, nepievēršot uzmanību to reliģiskajai nozīmei. Kapusvētki ir pelnījuši atzīmēšanu kā liels cilvēku salidojums. Mācītājs atmiņās parādās pirmām kārtām nevis kā reliģiska personība, bet gan kā augsta statusa persona, īpaši saistībā ar to, ka viņš bija viens no retajiem cilvēkiem laukos ar augstāko izglītību un arī starp retajiem, kas laukos lasa grāmatas.

Ateistiski un antiklerikāli viedokļi esejās vispār neparādās. Taču šķiet, ka autoru ģimenēm parasti bija vājas saites ar baznīcu vai reliģija bija salīdzinoši vienaldzīga. Zīmīgi, ka intensīvi reliģiozi cilvēki esejās bieži tiek attēloti negatīvi. Raksturīgs ir kalpones tēls no Aino Toenas (*Thoen*) atmiņu stāsta, kas sava reliģiskā fanātisma dēļ uz bērnu iedarbojās atbaidoši un biedējoši. Citu autoru esejās dziļi reliģiozi cilvēki bieži parādās kā dīvaini, sociāli izolēti, vai arī tiem ir grūts liktenis.

Rezumējot var secināt, ka krājuma iznākšanas laikā igauņu trimdas rakstniekiem bija ierasts ticību un baznīcu traktēt kā no autobiogrāfiskā viedokļa nesvarīgu tēmu. Tas nenozīmē, ka katra autora personīgajā dzīvē ticība noteikti bija mazsvarīga. Piemēram, pazīstamā romānista Kārļa Ristikivi dienasgrāmatā bieži tiek pieminētas viņa lūgšanas Dievam, taču viņa krājumā “Mana jaunības zeme” publicētajā esejā reliģija pieminēta tikai dažas reizes, raksturojot citus vietējos iedzīvotājus.



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