

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018



## The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia

Podcast with **Atko Rimmel** (28 January 2019).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

**Christopher Cotter (CC):** *The Estonian case in the study of religion is something that we've not really talked about very much on the Religious Studies Project. But I am speaking to you right now from the [EASR conference](#) in Bern where I've been hearing quite a bit about it. I've heard some papers, and it was even mentioned quite a bit in one of the keynote lectures yesterday. And so I thought it would be fantastic to get [Atko Rimmel](#), who I've known for a number of years now, onto the RSP to talk about the Estonian context, the study of religion in Estonia and some of the complex intersections between religion, non-religion, nationalism in this context that's sort of been dominated historically by two foreign religious secular regimes: the German Lutheran Church and Soviet atheism. So first of all, Atko Rimmel, it's my pleasure to welcome you to the Religious Studies Project.*

**Atko Rimmel (AR):** It's nice to be here. Thank you for having me.

**CC:** *It's an absolute pleasure. Just to say, Atko is senior researcher in Religious Studies and also a researcher in Cultural Studies at the University of Tartu in Estonia. And his work discusses religion, religious indifference, national identity and more, in Estonia, which is set as I've indicated, to be one of the most secularised countries in Europe. He has a number of publications in this broad area, including one called "[Religion Interrupted: Observations on Religious Indifference in Estonia](#)", which is in a book, in which I and a number of RSP friends have chapters, that's called [Religious Indifference: New Perspectives from Studies on Secularisation and Non-religion](#), edited by Johannes Quack and Kora Schuh. And Atko is also the PI on one of the [Understanding Unbelief](#) projects, looking at Estonia. But we'll not be talking too much about that just today. So, many of our Listeners out there may never have really thought much about the Estonian context at all. So, perhaps the way to start would be a broad introduction to Estonia, I guess, in relation to religion. A potted history!*

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. "The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

*Away you go!*

**AR:** Well, Estonia is a small country, by the Baltic Sea – one of the northern-most Baltic countries. And yes, it's known for its very far-reaching secularisation.

**CC:** *Yes. So we'll be talking a lot about that in a moment, but the study of religion in Estonia: is that something relatively new – like Religious Studies, at an academic institution?*

**AR:** Well actually, no. But to answer this question we have to look back into history. So, during the Soviet Union the only possibility to study religion was within the framework of [Scientific Atheism](#). And another possibility was Folkloristics, where folk beliefs were studied as a part of national heritage. And after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Scientific Atheism of course faded away. And the Study of Religion was newly established under the label of Theology which, in Estonia, is an umbrella term for both Theology and the Study of Religion. And this, I would say, in the early days was more influenced by theological thinking. But in the last decade it has moved towards the Study of Religion. And the focus is on religious change, new religious movements, but mostly it's still about Christian churches and their relationship to the state. And apart from that, religion is still studied under the discipline of Folkloristics, which in the Estonian context is another umbrella term that covers anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, but also folkloristics in its traditional sense. Since Estonia is in a bit better position than other Finno-Ugric nations that were incorporated into the Soviet Union, my colleagues have a keen interest towards their religious situation, language and so on.

**CC:** *And of course, we'll be hearing at the end of the interview, I hope, about a certain conference that's going to be happening in Estonia, hosted by the Estonia Association. So it's clearly been something that's developing there. You mentioned the Soviet times there, and I suppose anything that we're going to talk about in the rest of this interview will probably require a bit of historical contextualisation. So the stereotype we have is obviously (5:00) Soviets were not a massive fan of religion – suppression – end of Soviet time – maybe some sort of resurgence. But let's . . . Give me an actual picture.*

**AR:** Well, it's correct that the usual understanding of Soviet anti-religious policy is understood as something monolithic that was uniform from the start to the end. But actually, there were quite big changes in religious policy. And in some periods it was harsher, and other times less harsh. And after the Second World War, during [Stalin](#)'s reign, the question of religion was sort-of secondary. But it changed radically under [Nikita Khrushchev](#), who initiated an anti-religious campaign that lasted from 1958 until 1964. And in Estonia this policy had three main directions: the first one was so-called administration of the churches, which meant that different kind of legislative restrictions and direct

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. “The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

control over the inner life of Churches; the second one was ethics propaganda for newspapers and lectures; and the third one was the development of Soviet secular rituals, to substitute religious rituals. And I would say that this administration and secular rituals were most effective. And as a result they managed to create an interruption in religious tradition, and to get rid of religion from public space. This, of course, didn't mean that they managed to turn people into atheists. And, apart from the years of the Khrushchev anti-religious drive, atheist propaganda was actually not very visible. And atheism was one of so-called “red” subjects closely associated with the hated Soviet ideology. And also the level of atheist propaganda was quite low. And therefore it didn't appeal to people. And so the result was widespread indifference both towards religion and atheism – like a sort of ideological vacuum, which was filled with all kinds of things when the Soviet Union finally collapsed. And this actually explains why Estonians, while considering themselves not religious, have a plethora of different beliefs and practices and so on, which are usually – in student terms – alternative spiritualities.

*CC: Excellent. Thanks for that. This might be putting you on the spot a little bit. But, just for those of our Listeners who aren't familiar with the dates, could you maybe give us the key dates in the 20th century, in Estonian history?*

*AR: In Estonian history . . . Well, Estonia was at first occupied by Soviet forces in 1940, then again in 1944, then Joseph Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev was pushed aside in 1964, and then finally the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.*

*CC: Fantastic. I just wanted to make sure that we got that in there. I guess if our Listeners have seen [“The Death of Stalin”](#) they might be familiar with Khrushchev.*

*AR: Yes.*

*CC: Excellent. So you've already alluded, there, to the suppression of religion and how this, maybe, largely succeeded in the public space. But a lot of your work, then, has been focussing upon contemporary surveys, and how effective this might have been on individual lives. So, let's get specifically into your own research. You might just want to tell us a little bit about your research journey – the kind of questions that you've been asking – and then, what it can tell us about religious indifference, non-religion. And then we'll get onto this national identity element, as well.*

*AR: Well . . . long story short. I started out as a historian and my PhD thesis was on the institutions that were involved in Soviet anti-religious policy. It was mainly archival work. And by the time it was finished, in 2011, then the research on non-religion was already booming. (10:00) And then I got interested in how this Soviet background influences contemporary Estonian society. And by that time*

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. “The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

Estonians had already discovered this forgotten link between atheism and Estonian national identity. So for the last 4-5 years I have tried to keep a track on what's happening in Estonian society, in connection with religion and non-religiosity. And I'm currently involved in several projects that touch these subjects. And one of them is on the [Relocation of the Sacred around the Baltic Sea](#), which is led by my good colleague from Sweden, David Thurfjell. And it deals with the relationship between secularisation and nature spirituality. Another approach, which you already mentioned, was this Understanding Unbelief. And, in addition, we are – together with colleagues from the Czech Republic – we are compiling an edited volume with a preliminary title: *Atheism and Freethinking in Central and Eastern Europe*, which focusses on the twentieth and twenty-first century. And it's a combination of historical and sociological approaches. And, hopefully, will be the first comprehensive overview of the development of current states of secular developments in that region.

*CC: Fantastic. So how about we dive right into it, then? One of my favourite anecdotes from your presentation yesterday – and this might serve as a useful starter – was when the survey question, “Should the churches modernise?” was being asked. And people who were religious, people who were non-religious were maybe ticking agree, slightly agree, don't have any opinion, vastly disagree. All over the place. And when you actually got to your qualitative work, the story was, “Should the churches modernise? Should they have electricity? Should they have Wi-Fi?” So, even the vocabulary of the questions were sort-of indicating what you might describe as secularisation of language.*

**AR:** Yes.

*CC: So, maybe that's a way into the conversation?*

**AR:** Yes, well. This religious gap, or this era of indifference, it's really interesting how it has influenced society. And one of my research interests is the language my informants use, and I have identified some really interesting features. And one of them is that words or terms, religious terms, they have very negative connotations. One of the most loaded words is probably, “believer”. That has an association with mental abnormality or ignorance. And this is of course one of the successes of atheist propaganda. And I also have heard from my Russian colleagues, when they interview people and ask, “Are you a believer?” The response was “No, I'm normal.”

*CC: (Laughs).*

**AR:** And another thing – that you mentioned – is religious illiteracy. And also this secularisation of language. So this religious illiteracy: since religion in Estonian Society has had really low visibility, people sort-of don't recognise the appearances of it. And they also are unable to express their thoughts

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. “The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

about religion because of the lack of knowledge. And there is a really interesting story. In Turto there is a Marian Church that was turned into a gym during the Soviet era. And the bell tower was demolished and so on. But it still had the very specific features of a sacral building, like large arched windows and so on. I heard from my informants that when they were children, during the Soviet period, that when this building was finally given back to the congregation and turned into a sacral building again, they were really surprised when they learned that it was actually a church building! So we can call it a “religious blindness”, or something like that. And secularisation of language is the third interesting feature which I have found. It's actually not so much secularisation. **(15:00)** It's more like de-Christianisation: when religious terms have run dry of their Christian context. This example of church is sort of a text-book example. Where church is understood only as a building, not an organisation, or a group of people. So it can create a lot of confusion. So, yes. And then I got interested in that, because I had a hunch that non-religious people might not understand the questions in the surveys in the way they were meant to. And to some extent it seems to be true. And also it seems to be true that many questions asked in the surveys just prompt the answers, and have no relevance to people before and after that. So I'm a bit hesitant how meaningful this collected data is. And, of course, it's always a problem but it can have much more serious results in a context where religious illiteracy is more widespread.

*CC: Absolutely. It might help if we get some percentages here. I know that you had them in your presentation. You mightn't have them to hand. But in certain surveys it's quite an extraordinarily high number of, we might say, atheists – you might say non-identifiers, depending what the survey is. But then, on this national identity front, I notice that there was a large population of Russian Orthodox in Estonia. And so, maybe you could comment on the sort of connection between – I don't know – Estonia, and atheism, and Russian Orthodoxy as it plays out?*

**AR:** Yes. The point seems to be that orthodoxy is much stickier than Lutheranism. And the story with Estonians is that one of the things is the Estonian national narrative, which is a construct from 19th century, and tells a story about the Estonians' everlasting fight for freedom. And there are two types of national narratives. One is the Golden Past, another is the Promised Land. And Estonian one is the Golden Past type. But, usually, this Golden Past refers to the time where the country was very powerful, great kings and so on. But in the Estonian case this Golden Past is located into pre-Christian times. And Christianity is sort-of seen as responsible for its demise. And another thing is this connection between Estonian nationality and atheism. And it's a really interesting story. But it has actually very little to do with believing or not believing in the existence of God, and rather it started out as an ethnic conflict. So the background is that Estonians were Christianised in the 13th century, during the [Northern Crusades](#). And after that they were ruled by different other nations, until the 20th

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. “The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

century. And this 19th century Romanticism resulted in the rise of Estonian national consciousness. And by that time, Estonia was incorporated to the Russian Empire, but Estonians were ruled by a Baltic German upper class. So most of the clergy was also German. So the Church was not perceived as Estonian, but more like German. Now, in 1905 there was a revolution in Russian Empire, and in Estonia as well. But in Estonia it took a sort-of nationalist form, so it was a fight for national autonomy. And the revolution was soon crushed and punitive squads started to do their work. And many people were executed. And then many Estonians accused German pastors that they didn't protect their parish members, and rather collaborated with the troops. And, as a result, many Estonians didn't go to Church any more. And, in return, Baltic Germans accused Estonians of atheism. And during the Soviet era, atheist propaganda, of course, made good use of both motives. (20:00) And then it created a new story of Estonians as historically being very sceptical towards religion, or being a religiously lukewarm nation. So in 2005 the [Eurobarometer](#) survey was published, and that revealed that only 16% of Estonians believe in a personal God. And all this information was happily put together. And Estonians started to understand themselves as the least religious – or most atheistic – country in the world, despite the fact that the survey covered only Europe!

CC: (Laughs).

AR: However, Estonians are actually not the only ones with this claim, and similar motives are present also in the Czech Republic, in Denmark, in Sweden, and in the Netherlands. So I question which country will be the least religious or most atheistic. It's probably going to be a new Olympic Games discipline or something like that!

CC: Yes! And I wonder what the prize will be?

AR: (Laughs). God!

CC: You also had a leaflet in your presentation that said, "If you are an Estonian. . ." and listed a few things. It said, "you do not believe in God . . . unless it's [Eurovision!](#)" (Laughs).

AR: Right!

CC: Now I've only really got one more question before we talk about that important conference. But presumably, this isn't getting the whole picture. You were showing a lot of nuance yesterday, and a lot of the beliefs and practices that these so-called non-believers, non-identifiers subscribe to. So maybe you could add a bit more nuance to this contemporary situation?

AR: Well, I will say that when we are talking about non- believers or atheists, then it basically boils

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. "The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>



## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

down . . . that means that we are taking their identity as primary indicator, when we are talking in this way. Then, of course, the meaning of atheism in the Estonian case is sort-of different than in the Western context. It doesn't mean the explicit denial of God, or something like that. Rather it refers to just not being Christian. And since atheism is the only known secular tradition in the Estonian context it has a very, very wide meaning.

**CC:** *Excellent. So we are at about 25 minutes, which is a perfect time for me to just say that obviously we're recording at the EASR in Bern, in Switzerland. But the [2019 EASR](#) is in Tartu in Estonia. So perhaps you could maybe sell the conference a little bit? Just in terms of why might people want to come? But also, you could give us a hint of the intellectual thrust of the conference.*

**AR:** The topic of the conference is “Religion: Continuations and Disruptions”. And, you know, conferences are very much like birthday parties. When you like the people, then you go! And at the same time they are like sort of style parties. And the topic gives the debates this general direction. So this topic was, of course, inspired by Eastern European recent history – which is actually a continuation of different disruptions. And this notion applies to religion as well. And religion and the understanding of religion is constantly changing. So we thought that it would give a good direction for our style party, to become fruitful basis for discussing whatever changes occur in regard to religion. But other than that, [Tartu](#) is just a very lovely town. And by the way, our restaurant street is just 50 metres from the conference venue! And for the conference party we have a place called [Gunpowder Cellar](#), which is really an old gunpowder cellar that is turned into a restaurant and claims to be a pub with the highest ceiling in the world. Which is around 11 metres.

**CC:** *So, the highest ceiling in the world and the lowest religiosity in the world!*

**AR:** (Laughs). Exactly! They go together, hand-in-hand!

**CC:** *Fantastic! One final question. (25:00) This conference that we're at right now, the theme is “Multiple Religious Identities.” So, maybe, just a final thought from you on how the Estonian context and that conference theme of multiple religious identities maybe speak to each other? Or not?*

**AR:** Of course they speak to each other: they are both religion-related. But, of course, there are continuations of religious identities, and all this overlapping and constant changing. So I would say this: our conference in Tartu will be a mental continuation of this topic here.

**CC:** *Excellent! Well, Listeners, if you want to continue with a mental continuation, in about a year's time we should have a number of podcasts from Tartu for you! But, for now, thanks for that really expansive, but also quite specific, teaser for the situation in Estonia and for your own research. So do*

**Citation Info:** Rimmel, Atko and Christopher Cotter. 2019. “The Study of Religion and National Identity in Estonia”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 28 January 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 20 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-study-of-religion-and-national-identity-in-estonia/>

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 October 2018

*check out Atko's profile. And thank you very much!*

**AR:** Thank you!

---

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at [editors@religiousstudiesproject.com](mailto:editors@religiousstudiesproject.com). If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. The views expressed in podcasts are the views of the individual contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROJECT or the British Association for the Study of Religions.