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RELIGIOUS LIFE IN ESTONIA

By Dr. O. KALLAS



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(Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary of Estonia at the Court of St. James's)

WHEN the General Secretary of the World's Evangelical Alliance kindly invited me to speak at this Missionary Reunion about the religious life of my country, Estonia, the name "World's Evangelical Alliance" at once took me back to the days of my boyhood, when a wave of religious persecution passed over our Protestant country, and we were once again experiencing hard times.

Of the 135 pastors of the Church, the great majority, 105 in number, were charged and threatened with prison and punishment because they had ministered to former Lutherans, who longed to come back to their faith. Children of these Lutherans were taken away from their parents and handed over for Greek-Orthodox education. This persecution was felt by me the more because members and friends of my family also suffered under it.

At that time the name of the "World's Evangelical Alliance" was often recalled with gratitude and hope, as this great Alliance had with its demands, protests and appeals to the Tsar brought help in similar crises during an earlier wave of religious intolerance after the year 1870.

You will understand, therefore, how highly I value this opportunity you have afforded me of addressing the World's Evangelical Alliance.

There are two schools of thought in the World deciding the fate of people. One endeavours to divide and the other to unite what humanity has in common.

The first way of thinking in the political life brought us among other things the last Great War; the other, to put it briefly, the League of Nations; and in the religious life the first was the cause of conflicts, lasting for centuries between people who made the sign of the cross with three fingers, and heretics such as those who made it with only two. One of the expressions of the second way of thought is the World's Evangelical Alliance, and I think it is a fine work that the Alliance

is doing. The narrower the world grows the more it needs uniting work, also in spiritual matters.

You want to hear about the religious life in Estonia. I am afraid, however, that in



STATUE OF MARTIN LUTHER

It is close to Kegel, where Mr. Podin lives, and is the only one of its kind (we believe) in Europe

*Address given at the Alliance House, 19, Russell Square, on October 20th, 1927. Reprinted from EVANGELICAL CHRISTENDOM.

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connection with this, I shall have to give you more details about history and social conditions, as would be necessary, for instance, if I were speaking to you about religious life in Holland.

Our country, as a political unit, is a new-comer in the family of nations, and it takes some time before such youngsters catch the eye of the older members, especially in this country where you have Imperial preference also in spiritual matters, and little need of intercourse with others.

I think the World's Evangelical Alliance knows more than others about Estonia, having learned from the Rev. Adam Podin, the apostle, may I call him so, of the Alliance in Estonia, and Mr. Gooch, who lately visited our country. But, nevertheless, some explanation will not do any harm.

I shall now say some words about our political vicissitudes :

Estonia, a country a little larger than, for instance, Denmark or Holland, is situated on the East coast of the Baltic Sea, opposite to the kindred Finland, and a near neighbour of Russia. Some time before Christ Estonian-speaking people were already on their present site and formed independent communities ; in the 12th century German Knights of the Sword subjugated the inhabitants, but the country remained independent until the year 1561. Then followed the rule of different neighbours—Poles, Danes and Swedes, and in the last two centuries, Russians. In the Great War the hope of the Estonians was realised. They regained their liberty, and on 24th February, 1918, when the country was freed from communist troops, the independence of Estonia was declared.

I should like to make some closer observations regarding Estonian conditions.

We were really a German aristocratic republic under Russian rule, with an Estonian population. Until the middle of the last century we had in fact only two political classes in our country—the enslaved Estonian-speaking peasant and the feudal German or Germanised aristocracy (with their adherents), consisting of about 200 families, who possessed about 65 per cent. of the whole country. The part played by the official church through the centuries was generally to support feudalism—materially and spiritually. The Church, up to the Great War, has to be regarded generally

in connection with our agrarian question. Until the 12th century we were pagans with almost the same level of culture as the other nations surrounding the Baltic. Our developed mythology possesses standards which from the christian point of view are more or less moral ; for instance, adultery was punished by burning. Then the country, as I have already pointed out, was conquered by German Knights of the Sword, and christianised, and men were hanged by these apostles of christianity because they had allowed the Danes to baptise them previously. The country became Roman Catholic and the land, cultivated and uncultivated, was taken from the natives, who were enslaved. In the time of Luther we became Lutherans : "*Cujus regio eius religio*" (whose country his religion). The agrarian revolutions which arose out of the "christianising" continued, and the official church supported the feudals, not only by threatening with hell those who revolted against the oppression, but also by other means. The pastor himself was the owner of an estate, as salary, and in the eyes of the parishioners the main difference between the feudal baron and the pastor was, that while the baron punished only physically, the pastor had in addition spiritual weapons. Note the words put into the mouth of a pastor flogging a peasant on Saturday : "To-day I am chastising your body, to morrow I shall heal your soul."

Yet about the year 1900 a German pastor had to be escorted by soldiers to his Estonian parish church to preach the gospel of love. (There were 18,000 literate people in this parish who objected to one estate owner having the right to appoint against their will a pastor for whom they had to pay.) The same thing happened again in 1918 during the German occupation of Estonia.

And in 1906 in the Baltic States, when the peasants, after an unsuccessful agrarian rebellion, were punished by Russian Cossacks, who whipped, hanged, and shot them, the punitive expeditions were partly upheld by some Lutheran (mostly German) pastors. (The Greek Orthodox priests did not take any part, because they were not affected by agrarian questions.)

About 1840 the Russification of Estonia commenced. We had only few Russians in Estonia and their language until 1885 was practically unknown, when it was introduced

as the official language. The Russians used religion as a means of Russifying. They came with two catch phrases:

- (a) The Greek Orthodox Faith is the faith of the Tsar, who will defend you against your feudal barons ;
- (b) He who adopts the Orthodox Faith will receive land.

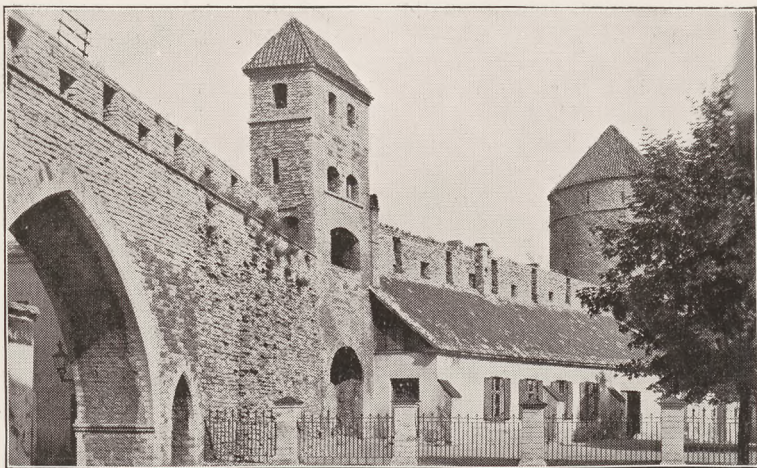
Estonia had been, as the saying went, "the heaven of the nobility and the hell of the peasants." Some tens of thousands of peasants preferred to have part of the heaven, in the form of land, already on earth, and became Greek Orthodox. Characteristically enough, often only the head of the family changed his faith, and not the family, because the head of the family had to sign the documents to get the land.

After this, the Lutheran Church to a certain extent changed its attitude towards its members and became a medium of struggle against the Russification of the country, a refuge for the persecuted Estonian and German languages, and a supporter of ele-

mentary education in competition with the Orthodox Church. Note a saying of the nobility: "We are bad Christians, but good Lutherans." But the converts to Orthodoxy either got no land or got too little, and they or their children soon desired to return to their former faith—Lutheranism. When the Government would not grant permission, couples remained unwedded and children unbaptised. Others, as previously mentioned, were taken from their parents and

handed over to Greek Orthodox families, and, if they had been baptised previously, the parents were sent to prison, where they possibly found, among other criminals, the Lutheran pastor who had baptised their children.

About one generation back permission was given to revert to Lutheranism. But this permission would have been taken more advantage of had it come earlier. In the meantime new questions had arisen which robbed the religious questions of some of their interest



REVAL. Estonia.
The old City walls.



REVAL. Estonia.
The seaboard and modern City,

—social and political questions. And besides this, the Greek Orthodox faith became less and less a means of Russification.

The social conditions in Estonia had undergone a change. Estonian, the mother tongue of 91 per cent. of the inhabitants, had been raised and transformed into a literary language. We started our Republic in 1918 and had to fight a two-fold war with the Russian Bolsheviks and German Imperialists, in which we were helped by the Allies, and especially the English, not to mention the Finns. We had suffered under religious and national privileges—we abolished these privileges.

Our constitution, Article 6, declares: There cannot be any public privilege or prejudice derived from birth, religion, sex, rank or nationality.

Here you have a short *résumé* of our more or less official church. She was a harsh judge rather than a good friend, acting more on the principles of the Old Testament than the New.

So we bred many antagonists of the Church, though less of religion; but there are, especially among our educated youth, and our socialists and theorists, those who have become both. But in spite of all, the temple of the soul—religious feeling—did not cease to exist. This feeling was fostered and developed on the foundation of the character of the nation by circles inside and outside the church, by the exceptions among the pastors—and there were many—and by the sects. Of the latter I would especially mention the Moravians (Graf Zinzendorff, 1736), who preached not only by word, but also by their works and humble demeanour the gospel of love, and

who were good and wise enough to allow the parishioners to participate in the church life, to follow the natural inclination of every individual to help to build up his own religious house. We believe now that the religious question will be developed on a natural basis. As we have shaken off the oppression of centuries, all the positive powers are rising, also the longing for religion. The majority of the nation has never been against religion, but against the church as an agrarian means of coercion or a political means of Russification.

When we got our freedom nearly ten years ago the enemies and friends of the Church were both against an official Church, the one side because they did not love the church, the other because they loved the church and

wished her to develop naturally. Many socialists were elected in our First Parliament, mainly for agrarian and industrial reasons. In support of their theories they voted against the teaching of religion in the



Rev. Adam Podin (left) and Mr. W. J. Wiseman (Agent of the B. and F. Bible Society for N.E. Europe) visiting the lepers on the Island of Oesel.

schools, although their children partly continued to attend the teaching in question. But it was with the help also of the socialistic electors that the teaching of religion was again established in the schools in 1923 by a plebiscite. The teaching of religion is compulsory in the schools, but voluntary for the pupils.

According to statistics for the school year 1923-24 more than 86 per cent. of our pupils receive religious instruction (*i.e.*, take part in the lessons). The teaching can be confessional or interconfessional; the confessional teaching is preferred.

The Lutheran church, since our agrarian

reform, which created the small holdings, is no longer bound up with agrarian questions, nor is the Greek Orthodox church any longer identified with russification. (The Greek Orthodox church is not now dependent upon Russia, but is autokephal and connected with the Okumenical Patriarch in Constantinople.)

The different sects have full freedom to develop their beliefs—the special truths they profess. And the layman, who up to the present has had to keep the rule of *Taceat in ecclesia* (silence in the church), can now take part.

In our University (founded 1632) the Faculty of Divinity before the war ignored the fact of the existence of the Estonian-speaking people. Now the Professors of Divinity teach the future pastors the psychology of the surrounding nation also.

In passing, just a few words about our psychology: It is the common Western European, especially Northern, psychology. Really we are a nation less of the eye than the ear. We wish to have in the church more the spoken and sung word than ceremonial and pictures. The reason for this may be found in our robust and sturdy frame, which does not bow and scrape easily, and our reserved character, which shrinks from showing its feelings in public, and which is shocked when the Russian bride and bride-

groom have to kiss each other during the wedding ceremony in the church.

Another reason can also be found in the surrounding nature, which is of subdued colouring, but which offers during the long winter evenings sufficient opportunity for thinking, discussing and philosophising, since here it was that our book of wisdom, our comprehensive folk-lore, with 25,000 tales, 70,000 songs, and 15,000 melodies was created. Why not introduce this spirit into our churches also? You see, we are more predisposed to the preaching and singing Lutheran church than to the Greek Orthodox, and the latter has been forced in many respects in our country to admit the procedure of the Lutheran church so as

not to lose her adherents.

We hope now that our church has laid aside the unworthy part of an *ancilla rerum politicarum*, she will grow into a real folk church.

To quench our thirst we often had to drink impure water; we are longing for clean water.

Interest in religious questions is rising. As a layman I am tempted to say that there is too much interest in them. Give us less dogmatic discussion, fewer plans for organising the Church, and more fruit. It is by their fruits that the average man accepts or rejects dogmas.

But this interest has to be understood in that we have to pass also through this more theoretical period of religious life.



REVAL. Estonia.

The old City walls—another view.

Our church organisation was externally forced upon us, as it was the church of the governing classes. Now the circumstances have been changed fundamentally. The state church has become a folk church, where the independent parish (about 140) as a religious unit forms the first cell. It will be a matter for some discussion as to how these cells will grow together, and whether these parishes will have to group themselves round one centre, the consistorium, or whether it would be better for the development of the religious life if the parishes preserved their independence and combined only into voluntary "free synods." The dogmatic controversies which are now in vogue have also to be understood historically and psychologically. During centuries religious truths were forced upon us. For sceptics was meted out less persuasion than punishment. And now all at once we have got absolute liberty to believe or not to believe. It is natural—also in the church for religious truths to be discussed otherwise they could not be assimilated, acquired personally. We think that time will decrease these theoretical questions. The more stabilised a state, the fewer political parties with their theories. The

welfare of a country depends less upon words than deeds. But this has to be learned by experience, and that takes time. Is it not something the same in the religious life? The more intensive the religious life the less dogma is to the fore, and as a layman understands it, the more prominent the corner-stone of the church, St. John's Ἀγαπή ἀλλήλους ("Love one another") with its living results of helping each other. When we compare our spiritual life and yours in this country, we have to admit that you come nearer to realities and know in many respects that language is older than grammar. We appreciate your school because you uphold there the principle, "*non scholæ sed vitæ*" ("not for the school, but for the life"). To come into nearer touch with your culture we have introduced English into our schools as a preferred language.

As regards your churches, it seems to us they are not only for Sunday going, but embrace also workdays, and show their fruits in the everyday practical life in works of love and help. Maybe you will find ways to help us to learn in this country how to apply the dogmas to the practical prosaic needs and wants of the suffering human race.

