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POPULAR RELIGION IN THE EASTERN BALTICS DURING THE 17th CENTURY

This paper deals with 17th century popular culture, especially folk religion, and the attitudes of the authorities – the Swedish Crown and the Swedish Lutheran Church – towards it in the eastern provinces of the Swedish empire. I will also shortly discuss how we, in my opinion, should seek to deal with such often evasive topics in present-day historiography. Thus, this paper is an attempt to describe my own research project, which is aimed at a doctoral thesis. I have taken more liberties than may be usual with scientific papers in the hope that a more relaxed approach will allow for a more provocative, and, thus, a more satisfying way of dealing with the issue.

The part of the Swedish empire during the period under discussion, namely, a wide semi-circle stretching from Finnish Lapland to Livonia, consisted of areas of differing social conditions. At the time Sweden had, as a result of her conquests, become a multinational, multilingual and socially heterogeneous conglomeration of provinces, quite like any other great power of the period. During the 16th century evangelic Lutheranism had been introduced into Sweden and made state religion, and her kings had begun a policy of expansion beyond her traditional boundaries. By the end of the 16th century the bid for empire was well under way. Estonia had been conquered, and the opportunistic and ruthless process continued with the aim of turning the Baltic Sea into a Swedish lake. Expansion in the east reached its furthest limit with the conquest of Livonia from Poland in 1629. By that time the Crowns' subjects had come to include such diverse groups as the Saami in Swedish and Finnish Lapland, an increasingly nomadic people with their own language and their own non-Christian religious practices. Further south, in the eastern parts of modern Finland – Savolaks and Karelia – the Finnish peasants were officially evangelic Lutheran Christians, but their religious makeup nevertheless included a wide assortment of non-Christian, Catholic and Russian Orthodox notions and images¹. Before the middle of the 17th century, the Russian frontier was also home to a considerable minority of Russian-speaking, Russian Orthodox peasants. Similarly, Russian Orthodoxy had a strong foothold among the Finnish-speaking Ingrian peasants, whose territory had quite recently been conquered from the Tsar². Still further south, the Estonian and Latvian-speaking peasants of Estonia and Livonia lived under an oppressive manorial discipline in conditions of practical serfdom. Their Christianity had been brought to them by their German-speaking masters, and it, too, included a lot of unorthodox and non-Christian ingredients.

This motley assortment of peoples with differing languages and creeds were all subjects to the Swedish Crown. The creation and upkeep of the empire, however, demanded a constant flow of capital and manpower, which the sparsely populated and peripheral Sweden was ill-equipped to provide. In this competition Sweden could not hope to prevail against her more populous and wealthy neighbours without a thorough and efficient mobilisation of those limited resources that were at her disposal. One way of achieving greater efficiency had been the drive for uniformity in governmental matters, legal practices and – religion, begun already with the ascension of Gustavus Vasa to the Swedish throne in the 16th century. It meant the creation of institutions which would ensure the smooth functioning of the system of government and fill the coffers of the Crown with tax-money and its armies with recruits. It meant building a state bureaucracy, run by trustworthy and obedient officials, the creation of a functioning judicial system with proper courts of appeal and a struggle for the imposition of the rule of law on the still largely independent nobility. At the level of individual parishes the local priest and other authorities were increasingly trusted to act as representatives of public power. For the ordinary peasants this process meant intensifying official control in every level of their lives, from taxation to the judicial system. Finally, throughout the realm it also meant official inroads into their traditional forms of religion, which became a subject for a rather loosely defined and spasmodic campaign of discipline from about the middle of the 17th century onwards. As the Crown began to introduce new methods of government into the more remote parts of the realm, it encountered a bewildering array of local religious beliefs and customs. The reaction was to seek uniformity also in religious life, but the challenge, and therefore the reaction, too, was different in different parts of the country.

Popular religion, popular magic

Still, the documents tell a surprisingly similar story from all the eastern parts of the realm³. Popular religious notions were much the same everywhere, despite linguistic and cultural differences. The most archaic features in the religious life of the peasants were pre-Christian. In the Finnish provinces, for example, these included rites of fertility and an array of old gods, spirits and mythical beings, some benevolent, some hostile, who had to be placated or weaned with offers. A notable example that surfaces in contemporary judicial protocols was the so-called "*Ukon vakka*"-rite. *Ukko* was an ancient Finnish god of thunder and rain, and to ensure sufficient rainfall a rite with a special song, beer drinking and ceremonies could be celebrated. These old traditions had often become confused with images introduced by the medieval Catholic religion and rite, so that in folk poetry the Catholic saints mingled freely with more ancient divine beings. Most notable examples of the Catholic influence were the different ecclesiastical feasts and saints' days, which the people continued to observe long after Catholicism was officially gone. In the eastern parts of Finnish Karelia and Ingria Russian Orthodox rite also had a strong influence on the religious imagery and rituals of the people. And, from Savolaks to Livonia, the peasants had their sacred stones, wells, groves and trees that were connected to the fate of the people who came to make offerings to them. This was the religious reality, of which the learned clergymen of the time usually knew very little.

Before the 1660's the official policy towards these forms of religious unorthodoxy was still seeking its form. The medieval laws still in force during the 17th century recognised only witchcraft as a religious, or at least a semi-religious offence. Other forms of popular religion were criminalized with the decree against swearing and breaches of the Sabbath in 1665. This decree was ostensibly a powerful tool against religious infractions: it condemned broad categories of popular beliefs and religious traditions from holy wells to every possible form of popular magic from healing to fortune-telling. All this was grouped under the common name of superstition⁴. So, during the latter half of the 17th century the legal weapons for combating religious heterodoxy in its every form were finally at hand. With the new legislation the secular courts were, along the surviving remnants of the ecclesiastical judicial system, made as fora for pursuing religious uniformity throughout the land⁵.

Attempts to root out heretical and non-Christian religious practices were themselves nothing new. Such attempts had been made ever since organised Christianity had arrived to Sweden during the early Middle Ages. From 10th century onwards the whole of Scandinavia became subject to a conscious process of Christianisation, which then gained completely new impetus when the local rulers began to ally themselves with the superior organisation of the Catholic Church. Nor was animosity towards competing, popular religious interpretations unknown for the Russian Orthodox Church⁶.

The contemporary authorities – that is, the officials of the Crown, nobles in charge of much of the government functions, learned priests – explained their religious attitudes by saying, quite frankly, that religious uniformity was important. It was perceived to be important to the welfare of the empire, because it somehow could be converted directly to greater efficiency, tighter organisation and more obedient subjects. Moreover, many of them shared the belief that only a virtuous people can prosper, that God will not allow the wicked to go without being punished. God would avenge the sins of the rulers by visiting plague and famine upon their peoples, but He would also punish the princes for the immoral and ungodly ways of their subjects. So it was only natural for the authorities to react strongly to religious unorthodoxy.

Still, the court records of the latter part of the 17th century did not fill with accusations, denunciations and attempts by the clergy and the secular officials to uproot the forms of popular religion. There are enough cases to talk about a real campaign to do just that, but it was a vague affair, dependent upon the personal activity of the partakers and without a clearly defined strategy or goals. There are probably many reasons for that, some of them obvious, some less so. In the parishes any campaigning against folk religious practices was usually left to the care of the local clergy. Especially in the eastern parts of Sweden during early 17th century these were often people with less than adequate learning and zeal. Not all the priests were themselves very well informed of the right religion, still fewer actually wanted to cause trouble by actively trying to bring their parishioners into court in these matters. It is also likely that these cases continued to be handled and resolved in the ecclesiastical courts, of whose actions very little material survives. It seems that in Estonia and Livonia religious offenders were mainly pursued through the system of visitations, inspections of parishes by deans or bishops. From Finland there are examples of lower court processes against, for instance, people who kept sacred trees for worship and offerings. From Estonia and Livonia such cases seem to be lacking, the surviving records of the court of appeals in Dorpat do not include cases of breaches against the decree of 1665 in such matters.

The campaign against folk religion began, as stated, with the drive for centralisation, for a more efficient officialdom, for a more penetrating parish organisation. Only then could the pre-modern state, a somewhat odd union of the crown and the church, begin to try to realise the long-cherished vision of uniformity. Uniformity of legislation, customs, creeds, language – a national culture with no room for ideological or any other form of deviance. However, during the 17th century much of this was still just daydreaming. Despite the harsh language

the actual actions against popular religion were convulsive and irregular to say the least. According to the evidence it was left largely to local priests to take action. If they, for one reason or other, did not do that, no-one would.

The fight against tradition

So, in what kind of context should we view and explain the undeniable, but often lukewarm actions to suppress popular religion? A great point is sometimes made from the religiosity of the age, and we are told how religion penetrated each and every level of society and everyday life. Now, this is certainly true in the sense that almost all public speech of the era was couched in religious terms, and religious images and notions greatly influenced the thinking of both the learned and lay people alike. However, it would seem that this religiosity was not quite similar to what it means to be religious in the modern understanding. Precisely because religion provided a framework for the whole experience of existence, it was too loose a framework to really constrict everyday action. It is also to be noted that the popular understanding of religion was much more nebulous than it is today: for the peasants, a strictly defined religion did not exist. Had they been forced to define religion in their own words, it would have come to include all kinds of magical practices we have been taught not to count as religion at all.

I think there is an important distinction to be made here. As stated before, the appeal to uniformity, discipline and divine judgement was quite unarguably the way the contemporary authorities explained their policies, when they chose to explain them at all. However, it is rhetoric and as such typical to the age when even the most pompous utterances were typically followed with very little action. The pre-modern state was still impotent, the Crown was very often quite unable to realise its policies, and quite unable to command enough respect and obedience from its subjects. Nobody could be more openly religious in their statements than the temporal princes when speaking the language of power. Many of them most probably were genuine believers as well, but when the time came to implement their solemn promises, threats and pledges they had made in the name of God and the one and only Truth, the political realities usually made themselves felt. So, when they said that they really believed that the fortunes of their realm were dependent of the virtuousness of them and their subjects alike, and quite possibly also believed what they said, everything they still did was to issue a decree about virtuous life with no swearing or ungodly offerings at sacred stones. And that was it. As practically always when 17th century matters are taken under closer inspection, a gap between the embellished language and the real practices becomes visible. This leads one to think that maybe the most concrete reasons are not to be found in what the contemporaries said. It is better to go down to the evidence, and look at what they actually did.

In looking for the answer I do think that it would help to re-evaluate the role of the Church somewhat. In practically any given age it is probably easier to see the Church as a somehow unique organisation with a quite unique agenda of its own. Here, however, I am suggesting that we would not treat the Church that way. Instead, we should see religion more as a trade and the Church as a guild-system of specialists on this particular field. As such, the interests of the clergy are quite the same as any other guild-tradesmen, that is, to secure the benefits, influence and position of the guild-members and to exclude competitors. The attempts to eradicate popular beliefs seem to have been everywhere in Sweden connected to the establishment of church parishes and intensification of parish life. So, it would follow that the appearance of the indicators of a campaign against superstition – folk religion in general – would be less dependent on the strongly worded initiatives of the authorities and more dependent on the creation of more tightly organised parishes, where better educated priests start to act to make the peasants better Christians and, therefore, better subjects as well. Attempts to remove competitors would follow automatically from this scheme, because that is what guilds do everywhere. It remains to be seen whether further research will be able to confirm the veracity of this theory, as this is a process that is very difficult to track⁷.

Folk religion as a form of peasant resistance

There is a further important aspect of folk religious practises that must be remarked upon. Popular culture of the day formed also an outlet for the feelings that could not be uttered in public. Throughout the 17th century people were condemned for the crime of *laesae majestatis*, a comfortably loose-fitting category, within which many different kinds of disobedient and insubordinate public speech or actions could be brought to trial. We do not have to doubt that behind the official reality, as expressed in official documents, there existed a wealth of rumours, jokes, stories, rhymes and songs through which the peasants expressed and gave vent to their feelings. Folk religious practices also had a part to play here.

The peasants were not doctrinaires. They evidently had very little understanding for the demands of orthodoxy. Even as they knew that the priests and officials wanted, that they, too, would stick to the official line and drop any other kinds of religious notions, they largely kept their own mind. This did not mean an anti-Christian attitude, because for the peasants such categorisations carried very little meaning anyway. When they were asked, they termed themselves Christians, both because they knew that it was the expected answer, but also because it was quite likely what they felt, too. That their version Christianity included many

ingredients that their priests would not have counted as Christian at all, was of no importance to them⁸.

But the world of folk beliefs and religion was not only for passive observance. It included also secret knowledge, through which one could actively and decisively affect the world outside. This knowledge was usually termed magic by the learned. It included a wide variety of tricks and practises, handed down from generation to the next and further embellished by individual practitioners. It was common knowledge that some people were more adept in using magic, and some of them even made their living as more or less professional magic-users: fortune-tellers, healers and conjurors. Towards the end of the 17th century this profession became increasingly hazardous. The magicians usually relied on their reputation and they circulated wildly inflated stories about their own powers. When these stories caught the ear of some enemy or a representative of the public power, accusations of witchcraft or at least superstition were usually the result.

Those who were familiar with magic could even try and get their way with the officials by it. There are examples from Finnish lower courts that people tried to influence the court proceedings through magical tricks, such as slipping a talisman under the seat of the judge. Here we find again the way the spheres of religion, magic and official life intermingled or, rather, were not separate at all in the peasant mind. There was no distinction between environments suited for magic and those not suited: magic was there to be used to influence all kinds of occurrences over which one normally had little or no power, from weather and sickness to officials of the Crown with their inflexible and uncaring demands.

So, throughout the realm, the peasants happily mixed every possible kind of religious notions into an ever-fluctuating concoction of Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, Catholic and pre-Christian ingredients. On Sundays most of them went to the local church, where they would hear the priest sermonising. Even though they knew it was forbidden, they might try to make some offering or magical trick there as well, because the church, as a sanctuary, was a potent place to make offers and magic. After the sermon they would go home, where they had their own, secret and special places for offers and rites. And they would continue to observe Catholic feasts and saints' days long after Catholicism had been declared the work of the Devil. Through this, independent religious life, they were probably able to more fully satisfy their religious needs. They could possibly never quite get over the feeling that the non-observance of also those older and officially vigorously condemned practices might be punished by the invisible powers which surrounded them and commanded the most important factors in their life: the weather, the beasts of the forest and the harvest.

The centuries of folk religion

The history of under-the-surface phenomena, such as popular culture in general, provides a challenge for the modern historian and historiographer. Ethnographers have long been interested in popular culture for its own sake, especially its "higher" forms, such as folk poetry. In describing their subject, they have usually given very little concern to the process of historical change. This can not, however, be a historians approach. For the historian, popular culture, popular religion and popular magic can only be tools which can be used to say something significant about the society in general. Within the context of the society and its development during the 17th century, a study of folk religion and the official reaction towards it can, I hope, be used to illustrate the ideological policy of the Crown from the side it has not often been looked from. There was a reality behind those official statements, decrees and sermons, a reality that was often quite apart from the ideas of the policy-makers, a reality that has to be uncovered if we are to fully and correctly understand the developments in pre-industrial societies and their impact to our own time.

It has to be stressed once again that popular culture in general was and still is an extremely volatile construction. Due both to its nature as oral tradition, as well as pressure from the authorities, it was subject to continuous change. A salient feature of such tradition is therefore its historicity, and in this sense it is very well suited to historical inspection. That this history may be difficult, sometimes even impossible to track is another story altogether, but make no mistake about the nature of the thing we are looking at. The study of popular culture has to be given a historical scope, and popular culture itself has to be given back its historical dimension⁹.

The end of the 17th century was a period of emerging scepticism in Europe. In Sweden, the end of the century saw the abatement of the witch-trials, and the doctrine of a Satan actively working in the world began to be replaced by a view of the world involving less participation of the supernatural agents. Even while the doctrine of active evil had been invoked to condemn also popular religious practices, they more and more became to be seen as superstition and mostly harmless folly, rather than as declarations for the forces of darkness. Popular religion, now increasingly simply labelled as naive superstition, became to be scorned for other reasons than a perceived connection to the Deceiver. But, as we can see, folk religion has not gone away. It is with us today, in forms we might not necessarily at first recognise, but it is there nevertheless. We encounter it in the popular beliefs of our own time we quite comfortably and without further ado classify as superstition. We encounter it in the pages of newspapers, in those classified advertisements where healers, occultists, mystics and astrologers offer their good

services. We encounter it in that endless multiformity of modern religious life, as the crumbling centralized and monopolistic Churches give way to the mushrooming splinter groups, factions and cults. The reaction of the learned today has much in common with the attitudes of earlier times. Superstition is scorned, despised and ridiculed. More cannot be done, as the lack of legal sanctions and control has liberated also religious popular culture to freely flourish again. That modern scepticism should carry so much resemblance to the much less well-informed and more intolerant attitudes of an earlier age serves as an ironic end-comment to this paper.

¹ Note that when discussing the eastern Church, the term “Russian Orthodox” is used. The official doctrine of the Swedish Lutheran Church during the period has also been described as a Lutheran Orthodoxy.

² Sweden had acquired from Russia the provinces of Ingria, roughly the area around the bottom of the Gulf of Finland, and Kexholm, roughly the western and northern shores of lake Ladoga, in the peace of Stolbova in 1617.

³ The most important source material for this study are judicial protocols. The records of ecclesiastical administration of Finland and the Baltic provinces are kept in Stockholm. In Helsinki the Finnish National Archive has a wealth of lower court protocols from the Finnish provinces. The Latvian State Historical Archive in Riga is home to the protocols of the court of appeal in Dorpat (Tartu) and the Historical Archive of Estonia in Tartu also has some material preserved from the local lower courts.

⁴ Vidskepelse in Swedish, Aberglaube in German.

⁵ For a general outline of the attitudes toward magic, see Oja, Linda: Varken Gud eller natur. Synen på magi i 1600 - och 1700 - talets Sverige. – Stockholm, 1999.

⁶ During the 16th century there were attempts to root out local beliefs also on the Russian side of the border in Karelia.

⁷ One of the most thought provoking recent works about the theory of religion in general is Boyer, Pascal: Religion explained. The evolutionary origins of religious thought. – New York, 2001.

⁸ Juhan Kahk makes the point, however, that sticking to folk religious practices carried also consciously anti-Christian overtones. See Kahk, Juhan: The Crusade against Idolatry, in Ankarloo, Bengt and Henningsen, Gustav (eds.): Early Modern European Witchcraft. – Oxford, 1990.

⁹ A central work in this sense is still Peter Burkes’ Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe. – Cambridge, 1994.

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НАРОДНІ ВІРУВАННЯ В СХІДНІЙ БАЛТИЦІ В XVII СТОЛІТТІ

В статті йдеться про народну культуру XVII століття, особливо про народні вірування в східних провінціях Швеції. В ті часи Швеція підкорила велику територію, що простягалась від східної Фінляндії до східного узбережжя Балтійського моря і стала могутньою державою. Створення і утримання імперії вимагало постійного притоку капіталів і людських ресурсів, забезпечення яких Швеція шукала за допомогою підвищення ефективності державного апарату.

Один із шляхів підвищення цієї ефективності влада, зокрема, вбачала в досягненні релігійної та ідеологічної однаковості в державі. Для селян це означало, що влада все більше цікавилася формами і практикою їхніх традиційних вірувань. Практично всі форми народних вірувань були остаточно визнані незаконними за указом про богохульство від 1665 року.

Після цього розгорнулася досить невизначена і непослідовна кампанія, спрямована проти більшості форм народних вірувань, які зазвичай називали забобонами. В той же час народна магія також стала ціллю контрзаходів з боку влади. Проти неї застосовувались штрафи і матеріальні покарання, інколи – смертні вироки. Проте для селян не існувало різниці між магією і релігією.

Автор доводить, що для того, щоб зрозуміти причини кампанії, спрямованої проти народних вірувань, потрібно зосередитися більше на фактичних діях влади, менше – на її публічних заявах. Здається, ця кампанія, принаймні у фінських провінціях, співпадала із загальною тенденцією на посилення парафіяльних організацій і парафіяльного життя. Так чи інакше, щоб зрозуміти цей час і суспільство, потрібно також звертати увагу на часто нечутну ідеологічну боротьбу, яка точилася в різних провінціях Швеції.