

## RELIGION IN THE MEDIEVAL BALTIC

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Religion is often closely associated with politics. This is the conclusion made by those looking at the past of the medieval Baltic. It is not to say that Christianity is or is not superior to paganism or atheism: it is only to assert that the natives (medieval Baltics) did not choose Christianity solely, or even primarily, as a result of intellectual or emotional conversion. They chose Christianity, or rejected it, largely as a matter of politics.<sup>1</sup>

We do not know much about the native pagan religion. We have, to be sure, folklore and archeology, but they alone provide insufficient information for us to be able to reconstruct the debates native rulers and priests would have conducted when new religions were introduced by missionaries, natives returning from abroad, or foreign occupiers. On the other hand, we do know the political consequences of conversion.<sup>2</sup>

It is well known that Christianity appeared in the Baltic region before the arrival of German and Scandinavian missionaries and crusaders. Christianity, however, seems to have been limited to those tribes, and probably to the governing classes of those tribes, tributary to the Russians. Professor Noonan has shown the debatable nature of "tribute,"<sup>3</sup> and Henry's *Chronicle* continually illustrates how weak tributary ties were.<sup>4</sup> Few natives were converts: when the crusaders stormed Kokenhusen, they recognized only the Russians in the garrison as Christians, not the natives. Most natives were still pagans.

Why is it that those tribes which were closest to the Russians politically were also nominally Christian? We have little evidence that the Russians were enthusiastic proselytizers in this area. My theory is that tribes sought protection from the Lithuanians, and that the Russians required an ideological oath of allegiance before they would send a military garrison to help defend the forts. Just as nations today are required to adhere to Socialism or Capitalism, at least nominally to qualify for military assistance, at that time they were required to meet religious qualifications.

This same answer explains why the native tribes adopted western Christianity after the arrival of the crusaders around the year 1200. In the beginning, of course, Christianity was forced upon them: it was conversion or death and destruction.<sup>5</sup> And the natives apostasized as soon as they felt safe to do so, washing off their baptism in the Dauguva and sending it downstream after the withdrawing Saxons.<sup>6</sup> A decade later, however, the Livonians adhered to the foreigners and their new religion when neighboring tribes, which had remained pagan, attempted to expel them from the country. It is possible that they were genuinely converted. But it is more likely that those Lettgallians and Livonians who had been plundered, murdered, raped, and kidnapped by every surrounding tribe for generations saw protection — even power, wealth, and prestige — coming to them as a result of the foreign presence. For the first time ever, they did the plundering, murdering, and raping. And they enjoyed the change of roles.<sup>7</sup>

The Lettgallians living along the Estonian border were the second major group of tribes to become Christianized. And they came to the crusaders voluntarily, asking for protection from their Lithuanian and Estonian neighbors.<sup>8</sup> The crusaders had various opinions about the wisdom of taking on new responsibilities at that moment,<sup>9</sup> but the Sword-brothers, eager to expand their own domains, accepted the "converts" and gave them military aid.<sup>10</sup>

The Estonians, on the other hand, were never completely reconciled to the new religion, and fought furiously against foreign rule.<sup>11</sup> They had long played an important role in Baltic history, and deeply resented their loss of independence. That religion and independence were closely linked in their minds was proved in the Jurioo mass of 1343, when the Estonians attempted to overthrow not only their foreign rulers, but also their religion.<sup>12</sup> For them, Christianity was linked with servitude and disgrace — exactly the opposite attitude to that held by the Livonians and Lettgallians.

The Semgallians were totally practical in their attitude. They alternated between paganism and Christianity, depending upon political requirements. When the Lithuanians threatened them, they were Christians asking for crusader help; when the crusaders threatened their independence, they became pagan again and called on the Lithuanians.<sup>13</sup> The Kurs attempted a similar policy, but had a less favorable geographic position: consequently their revolts were not successful.<sup>14</sup>

The example par excellence is the Lithuanian. The Lithuanians, dominant military power for centuries, remained strongly pagan to emphasize their independence from Germans, Russians, and Poles. On those occasions when Christianity was adopted nominally, it was for political motives. King Mindaugas became a Christian in the mid-thirteenth century when he was convinced that he could increase his personal authority over the tribes.<sup>15</sup> And he gave the Teutonic knights permission to conquer those tribes which had refused to render themselves subject to him.<sup>16</sup> When the pagan tribes defeated the Teutonic knights and threatened to overthrow him, he quickly reverted to paganism and sought to lead the attack against the national enemy.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the thirteenth century, the citizens of Riga rebelled against the Teutonic knights and sought the Lithuanians as allies. Because it would have been impossible for them to ally themselves with pagans and still hope for favorable intervention from the Pope, they asked the Lithuanians to convert to Christianity. The Lithuanians agreed to do so.<sup>18</sup> Everyone knew it was a sham, but it illustrated the political role of conversion.

Even among the crusaders, religion and politics were more closely intertwined than we often realize. Early in the crusade Bishop Albert I used the Virgin Mary as a symbol for raising funds and recruiting volunteers. As the crusaders landed in Riga, they would be led to St. Mary's for Mass, at which time they would give money and volunteer to serve in the episcopal army. The Swordbrothers sought a share of these monies and volunteers by enticing the new arrivals to St. Georges. The conflict was settled only temporarily by the intervention of a papal legate.<sup>19</sup>

This use of religion as a symbol of commitment to a master or ally stands in contrast to the uses of religion in the modern world. In the medieval Baltic the question was physical survival; in the modern world religion is more often used for cultural survival. Religion is a rallying point for minorities who wish to assert their differentness from dominant groups whose leaders no longer feel the need to guarantee political submission by that particular test. Today's leaders prefer adherence to political and social ideals, and only when they feel those inadequate do they attempt to force minorities into religious uniformity.

In light of this evidence, we should look again at the cultural and political role of religion. Every group which adopts a new religion or retains an old one does so for diverse motives, but often the most important is to express itself. If threatened by other cultures or political systems, a group adopts a contrasting religion whenever possible, or adopts one imposed upon them when not. It is more than coincidence that minorities everywhere in the world have survived because of adherence to a religion. The Baltic peoples are no exception. And, because tribal survival was threatened during the medieval period, the political efforts of those peoples were reflected in their attitudes toward religion.

1 Some of these ideas I owe to Archibald Ross Lewis of the University of Massachusetts, who was the director of my dissertation at the University of Texas several years ago. More I owe to a recent conversation with a Baltic intellectual of wide repute who held an idealized view of Christianity because of its clear superiority over the pagan religion.

2 Natives were required to pay taxes, give military service, and accept advocates who would collect taxes, lead the militia, and supervise justice. No longer could they decide matters such as war and peace, or regulate religion and social customs themselves.

3 Thomas Noonan, *The Evolution of Medieval Russian-Estonian Relations: Novgorod and the Chuds, 850-1350 A.D.* Paper presented at the 3rd Conference on Baltic Studies, Toronto, May 11, 1972.

4 The Livs were "tributary," but they were not Christians. The Gerzika Lettgallians were partly Christian, but there was a Russian garrison there. *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, trans. James A. Brundage. (Madison, 1961), pp. 43, 90; for the capture of Kokenhusen, see p. 76.

5 "The army... with both horses and ships, fire and sword, laid waste the crops of the Livonians. When they had seen this, the Livonians renewed the peace in order to avoid greater damage, and called the clergy to them. About fifty were baptized at Holm on the first day, and about a hundred were converted at Uexkull on the following day. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

7 "The Lithuanians were then such lords over all the peoples, both Christian and pagan, dwelling in those lands, that scarcely anyone, and the Letts especially, dared live in the small villages... The Livonians and Letts were food and provender for the Lithuanians and like sheep in the jaws of wolves, since they were without a shepherd. Sending a shepherd, named Bishop Albert, God freed his Livonian sheep and the now-baptized Letts from the jaws of the wolves." *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91; afterwards, these tribes took full revenge. Henry, who had much sympathy for the natives (so much so that a debate has raged over his origin), nevertheless wrote, "The Livonians and Letts, who are more cruel than the other nations... did not know how to show mercy. They killed countless people and slaughtered some of the women and children. They wished to spare no one in the field or in the villages. They stained the streets and every spot with the blood of pagans," *Ibid.*, p. 138.

8 The Lettgallians at Tholowa threw lots whether to go to the Russians or the Germans and ask for help in return for conversions. *Ibid.*, p. 75.'

9 Bishop Albert feared the ambition of the Sword-brothers. See Friedrich Benninghoven, *Der Orden der Schwertbrüder* (Cologne - Graz, 1965), p. 105.

10 *Henry of Livonia*, p. 83.

11 This conflict began in 1210, and ended only in 1227, after which the Estonians were so crushed that they could not take advantage of the subsequent quarrels among the crusaders. They suffered much from their traditional enemies, the Letts, who "killed all the men whom they caught: they spared neither the rich nor the aged; all were condemned to the sword." The women were usually taken away as slaves. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

12 Peter Rebane "The Jürüo mass." Paper delivered at the 3rd Conference on Baltic Studies, Toronto, May 11, 1972.

13 William Urban, "The Military Occupation of Semgallia, in the Thirteenth Century," *Ibid.*

14 The Kurs often revolted, and even assisted in the destruction of great armies of Teutonic knights. They wanted, as the chronicler said, "to be without lords." *Livländische Reimchronik*, ed. Leo Meyer. (Reprint of 1876 edition, Hildesheim, 1963), p. 129. But they could not even threaten the great castles such as Goldingen, and after each revolt new armies came to force them back to submission. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-8.

15 "When the master had heard the king's words, he spoke kindly, saying to Mindaugas, King of the Lithuanians, 'If you become a Christian, I will give

you great honor. I will win a crown for you, unless I die.' The king was greatly pleased by this. He promised the master part of his land and bore good will toward him." *Ibid.*, pp. 80 - 1.

16 *Liv,-Est,-und Kurländische Urkundenbuch*, ed. Friedrich Georg von Bunge. XII vols. (Riga, Reval, 1857-1875), I. CCLII.

17 *Reimchronik*, pp. 146 • 7.

18 *Urkundenbuch*, I, DLXX.

19 William Urban, "Saint Mary and the Dragon-Killer," *Marian Library Studies*, II (1970), pp. 89-94.