

des 20. Jahrhunderts im nationalen Narrativ keine zentrale Rolle spielte. Die vorchristliche heidnische Religion war für viele Autoren eine Quelle der Inspiration, in ihr wurde der Stoff für Metaphern u.Ä. entdeckt, doch hatte der prähistorische Glaube keine einschneidende Funktion bei der Schaffung der nationalen Identität.

Aus historiografischer Hinsicht ist festzustellen, dass viele Konzeptionen, die ihre Anfänge im nationalen Diskurs der Zeit des nationalen Erwachens hatten, auch heute noch wirksam sind. Die Sammelaktionen des 19. Jahrhunderts schufen einen günstigen Hintergrund für die Erinnerung und für die Wertschätzung der Volksüberlieferung, was im 20. Jahrhundert noch vertieft wurde. Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass gerade die Betonung des Nationalen in Darstellungen der Religion der Grund dafür war, dass der Volksglaube Anerkennung fand und gesammelt wurde – und letztlich auch dazu beitrug, dass seine Elemente in der lebendigen Tradition erhalten blieben. So kann man auch am Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts beobachten, wie der auf der Überlieferung beruhende Volksglaube zunehmend zu einem Teil der nationalen Identität wird.

SUMMARY

Estonian Nationalism and its Conception of Prehistoric Religion: The Nation as Designer of the Image of Religion

When the Enlightenment spread among Baltic-German scholars at the end of the 18th century, it created a different approach to the past compared to the medieval and early modern age when folk customs and religion were regarded as abominable superstitions. Since the Enlightenment, local people in pre-conquest Estonia were considered to be more noble and moral than the Medieval German crusaders. Thus, a local variant of the concept of “noble savage” spread in the Baltic provinces. As a result, the idea of deep cultural differences between the era before and the time after the German conquest originated. This idea was widely used by subsequent national activists and ideologists. As a more specific result, one should point at Garlieb Merkel’s understanding of pagan religion. According to Merkel, prehistoric religion did not differ from Christianity and thus the crusade in the early 13th century should not be considered to have been a religious conversion but rather a religious enlightenment. Similar statements have occasionally been produced by Estonian clerics throughout the 20th century.

During the 19th century the study of Estonian religion was shaped increasingly by a conclusive national perspective. In the whole period, national identity was being created characteristically on the basis of the oral tradition. Yet the time of national awakening at the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century was one of the most important periods for exploring the history of Estonian religion in general. In that era, the discourse on prehistoric religion was shaped for the whole 20th century. Since then, the national aspect has played a decisive role not only in ideological publications, but in the shaping of academic studies as well. By the early 20th century a concept of Estonian religion was formed according to which prehistoric religion was preserved in folklore, reaching back into an indefinite past and later identified with pre-conquest liberty. An axiom was established, according to which everything that was seemingly non-Christian was determined as pre-Christian, i.e. it predated the 13th century.

The relationship between nation and religion is most clearly represented in the *Taara* movement during the 1920s and 1930s because national ideology was one of the most important commitments of the movement. Metaphors were borrowed from Enlightenment discourse, and prehistoric religion was said to have been harmonious and altruistic until forcibly destroyed by Catholicism.

Additionally, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the formation of an academic school of religion study that still was shaped by a national approach, although the focus was less on Estonian-ness and more on a linguistically framed broader Finno-Ugric nationality. Shaped as academic studies, in using the method of national psychology, popular in the 1930s, qualitative evaluations were made concerning historical Finno-Ugric cultures. Oskar Loorits, the most prominent and productive scholar of Estonian folk religion, made even further conclusions about the similarities in world-view and way of thinking of Finno-Ugric peoples. As a result, he saw Estonians as passive, conservative and peaceful Nordic forest-people. This view opposed the contemporary national narrative that stressed the courageousness and capability of the Estonians in defending their homeland and in organising revenge campaigns against their neighbours.

From the perspective of the history of religious studies it can be argued that several concepts originating in the period of national awakening are still in use today. Of course, the emphasis on nationality has shaped the study of Estonian culture and religion, but it has also led to collecting, valuing, preserving and reinterpreting folk tradition. As a result of the activity of several scholars, such as Loorits and Matthias Johann Eisen, folk religion has become an integral part of national identity. However, it is mostly the allegedly non-Christian (i.e. non-Lutheran) part that has been valued. Although the pre-Christian image of folk religion has been stressed ever more, it can be argued that its elements are predominantly creations from later Christian centuries.