Ringo Ringvee,
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DRES
DRES (Droit, religion, entreprise et société)
CNRS- Université de Strasbourg UMR 7354
MISHA 5, allée du général Rouvillois
CS 50008
67083 STRASBOURG cedex
dres@misha.cnrs.fr

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Religious involvement in public sphere in a secular state – institutions, interests, and attitudes.
Ringo Ringvee

In the following I am going to explore the involvement of religious institutions in the public sphere in secular Estonia. The focus of this article is on three aspects or factors on the relations between state and religion – on institutions involved, interests behind the actions, and attitudes that frame the practice. I use the case of the development plan for the protection of historical natural holy places as an example of one possible outcome of the interaction of three factors mentioned.

Institutions
In 1992 a new constitution was adopted by national referendum in Estonia. Article 40 of the 1992 Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and stipulates that there is no State Church in Estonia. The institutional separation of religion and state, however, has not meant strict separation of the two. The idea that there are areas of common interest where the cooperation may take place between the two was finalized in 2002 as the protocol of common interests between Estonian Government and the Estonian Council of Churches was signed (Protocol 2002). At the same time it should be noted that according to several surveys Estonia is one of the most “un-churchered” societies in Europe. The secularization of Estonian society is reflected in low religious adherence as well as low participation in religious services on weekly basis (Jaanus 2012). According to the year 2000 population census less than one third of the population considered themselves as adherents of some religious traditions (Population Census 2002).

Involvement of religious institutions in public sphere is shaped by different factors including the legal framework, political interest and public attitudes on the issue. Secularity of Estonian society is outcome of different historical aspects including the missing link between national and religious identities dating back to the second half of the 19th century.

In the 1990s a rapid political social and political changed took place in Estonia. In 1992 the neoliberal governance practice was introduced to Estonia characterized by fast privatization, political and economical orientation to the Western powers and markets. The basic idea of the governance practice in Estonia since the early 1990s has been the belief that the markets should and would regulate themselves (Ringvee 2013). This policy was applied also on religion. Churches ad Congregations Act from 1993 set the liberal legal framework for religious associations as legal entities. All religious associations registered according to the law had same rights, privileges and duties. The egalitarian approach in legislation has been norm ever since.

Interests
Religion has been historically a minor factor in Estonian political life, and due to the overwhelming secularity religion does not have much political capital. Religion is considered as a private matter, and religion in public sphere is considered often

1 University of Tartu.
problematical, although religious institutions have been generally passive on social or political matters. However, in the context of neoliberal governance and market policy there is also a place for religious lobbying in Estonia. The lobbying has been effective as much as it does not make damage to the political survival and/or sounds with party’s political agenda (Gill 2008). Most successful in their agenda have been the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the “traditional” church in Estonia since 16th century, and the Estonian Council of Churches, ecumenical organization for Christian Churches (including Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, Baptist and other churches) established in 1989. However, also indigenous (neo)pagan association, the House of Taara and Native Religions, has been quite successful in their approach to politicians. Especially so during the period from 2007 to 2011 when the Estonian Green Party was represented in the Parliament, and whose green ideology sounded with the House of Native Religions’ agenda on nature protection for cultural-religious reasons.

However, in relation to the general theme of this conference, the spatiality of religion or the geography of the Holy, then in Estonian context one particular question emerges in the context of public space and legislation. The question is directly linked to the indigenous Estonian traditions of nature veneration and to the religious association called the House of Native Religions (or officially Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions) who represents and considers itself as the representative of the Estonian indigenous religion.

**Attitudes**

Estonian indigenous pre-Christian religious tradition could be described as animistic. The sacred places of the indigenous traditions have situated in the nature. Some of these traditions related to nature have been preserved up today, like the cross-trees that are marked during funerals in certain south-eastern parts of Estonia, and there are also other holy or sacred places in nature that are still used (Jonuks 2012, 2009, Kõivupuu 2009, Valk 2009).

In 1995 a joint commission between the Estonian Government and the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church was established. The subcommittee of architectural values made an initiative for a state program for the protection of churches. The state program “Conservation and development of places of worship” was adopted in 2003, and it has been extended up to 2013 (National Heritage Board Website 2012). The aim of that program has been protection and renovation of culturally and historically important churches and other sacral buildings. Year later the first initiatives for a similar program for the protection of historical sacred places in nature were made by the House of Taara and Native Religions.

The House of Taara and Native Religions was founded in 1995. The House was formed by two indigenous religious traditions. One of them, taara-faith, dates back to the 1920s and the other, maa-faith/earth-faith, became formed during the national reawakening movement in the late 1980s (Vakker 2012, Kaasik 2003, Västrik 1995). Maausk is defined by the House of Native Religions as the indigenous ethnic Estonian religion. At the same time it should be mentioned that although it defines itself as indigenous ethnic Estonian religious tradition it could not be defined as nationalist one, but is closer to ethnic-revivalist movements (i.e. native American). Currently the House unites five local houses, or groves.
In 2008 Estonian government enforced the state development plan for the protection of historical sacred places in nature (Minister of Culture 2008). The development plan “Historical Natural Holy Places in Estonia" for 2008-2012 considers sacred places historical if they have tradition more than 100 years, and archival or other materials must prove their historicity. This plan on natural sacred places was largely modeled after a state program for the protection and renovation of sacral buildings from 2003. The interest of Estonian State has been the preservations of the buildings as cultural, architectural or some other monument. Similar is State's interest in the case of the historical sacred sites (i.e. groves, springs, trees etc.) in nature. That program was the outcome of the activities of the House of Native Religions that resonated with the general Estonian nature related identity and got political support from the Estonian Green Party that was represented in the Parliament from 2007 to 2011.

There has been criticism from the House of Native Religions toward the state that it has not done enough to protect the holy places in the nature that form an essential part of Estonian identity. House of the Groves (Hiite Maja), a foundation established by the House of Native Religions for the implementation of the development plan, has pointed to the need to draft a new legal act for the protection of the historical sacred places in nature (Hiite Maja Foundation Website 2012). The main question for the neoliberal state becomes how cost efficient new regulatory procedure would be. Should the current situation to be changed or would it be possible to manage the situation with amending already existing legal acts that regulate the protection issues? The process of implementing the development program has raised new questions before the lawmakers, before the state. And it should not be forgotten that besides of the religious or philosophical reasons there are also property rights of the owners on whose property these sacred sites (groves, springs, trees, stones etc.) situate. The protection of sacred sites or objects may set limitations on owners’ use of their property. It is an area where interests of different interests groups may collide.

Some of these sacred places became protected already in the 1920s, after Estonia had established its independence. This process was continued during the Soviet period. However, these places are under protection of two different legal acts: Heritage Conservation Act and Nature Conservation Act. Some of these sacred places/objects are protected as cultural values, some of them as archeologically important places; some are protected to preserve natural environments (or elements of) of cultural or esthetical value. Thus there are several categories under which the wide ranges of holy places/sites are protected. At the same time many of these places are not protected or the borders of these places, even if under protection, are debated. Here we also come face to face with the question what could be considered as evidence or proof that the places have been ancient holy places, and that the initiatives are not reflections of the local communities negative attitude to the changes in their environment. Often these debates are very emotionally charged. There has been four court cases (2012, 2008, 2007, 2006) where the House of Native Religions or the House of the Groves have protested against the economical activities in the sacred space in nature that violate the traditional principles of conduct at the sacred space (House of Native Religions Website 2012).

In this process the question for protection of sacred sites not only as physical objects but also as a spiritual space has been raised. The already difficult questions on fixed borders
of the sacred space in nature to be marked on the map for the protection certain geographical spaces in nature becomes even more complicated with the issue of protecting also the spiritual space. Although it is a deep philosophical question, it seems to be extremely difficult or even impossible to regulate the protection of sacred space in nature with the law. Where the sacredness starts and where it ends? The subjectivity of the experience of the sacred becomes unpleasantly mixed with legal regulations that require more physical borders than the ambiguous and subjective experience of the Holy.

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