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Pilli's "Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism" - Book Review

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introduction of the college, clearly claims that “Catholics no longer view, or should no longer view, the Russian Orthodox Church as a dangerous rival...therefore, the Russicum seems to have outlived its original purpose. No longer are Catholic Byzantine priests especially needed in today’s Russia...which leaves the second purpose of the Russicum conceived in the wake of Vatican II: that of ecumenism and dialogue with the college as a true meeting place for Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It remains to be seen if the college can truly assume this role in the future.”

Apart from some rare typing mistakes that one can find throughout, the major criticism that one can raise, comes paradoxically, from what is one of this work’s major strong points: the attention to detail. Simon expands on almost all the topics he deals with: biographies, events, cultural and ecclesiastical movements, historical trivia and so on. Some footnotes are so broad as to fill entire pages on their own. If this makes Pro Russia a real mine of information, on the other hand it inevitably penalizes the reading. Overwhelmed by information, even the most interested reader is led to lose the thread. But again, all this is an unavoidable consequence of the mass of information that the author has been able to gather, information which contributes to giving a complete report on the Russicum and on the early Catholic Russian movement.

To sum up, Pro Russia is an extremely interesting piece of work, a seminal read for those who are involved in the study of contemporary relations between Catholicism and Eastern Christianity.

Reviewed by: Francesco La Rocca, University of Bologna, Italy


In this book Baptist historian, Lecturer at Baptist Theological Seminary (Tartu, Estonia) Toivo Pilli provides us with a detailed and skillfully written account of Estonian Baptist history during years of Soviet regime. This is a significant contribution to the studies of Baltic Baptist histories. This book marks the next, more advanced stage of Baltic Baptist historiography. In the past historical works written on Baptists in the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) have been mainly of a popular type, aimed at creating among local Baptists a sense of their historical roots and providing members of the movement with enough material to keep up cultural memory, linking a new generation of believers with the past. Such a type of works is always selective and its approach is closer to the “telling how it really was” approach of historical positivism. In the inter-war period when universities in all three newly established independent republics were free to develop their own theological traditions, academic circles, often dominated by persons belonging to ruling churches, mostly were not interested in the history of religious minorities. During the Soviet period we can see the same pattern – scientists who in spite of obligatory ingredients of atheistic ideology from time to time published valuable works on religion in the Baltics concentrated on the main religious groups (in Lithuania – Catholics, in Latvia – Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox, in Estonia – Lutheran and Orthodox).

After the collapse of the Soviet system ways opened up for Baptists to start writing their own histories of an academic character. One work close to project undertaken by T. Pilli is the Latvian Baptist history written by now deceased Latvian Baptist bishop Janis Tervits (Latvijas baptistu vesture. Faktu mozaïka. Riga: Latvijas Baptistu draudzu savieniba, 1999). However there is at least one important difference between these two monographs – Tervits distrusted the official archives of the Soviet period and purposefully ignored them as ideologically charged. Toivo has
used a lot of archive material, critically analyzing it and balancing information gained from archival files with other sources like interviews, published and unpublished materials. Thus the reader has access to diverse voices coming from various sources.

At the beginning the author examined how the Free Church movement started in Estonia. It is important for understanding the composite character of Estonian Baptist identity that after the Second World War, it developed by the forceful unification of Baptists, Revivalist Free Churches, Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals. As in other Soviet republics, Estonian Baptist identity was refashioned by external forces. Thus book speaks not only of Baptist distinctives but also shows the Estonian Baptist movement as a place of interaction between various streams of Evangelicalism within the territory of the USSR and not only from there. Through various channels the movement had access to a wider world as well, as it continued to cherish traditions and theologies of Holiness, Pentecostal and other movements that influenced it before the war. We can also see how a small informal circle of Baptist intelligentsia in the 1970s and 80s were inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Küng and other contemporary theologians, thus not only challenging ruling Soviet ideology but also stepping outside a traditional Evangelical subculture.

The author moves chronologically through the periods of Soviet rule – the first years of the second Soviet occupation until the death of Stalin, from Khrushchev to Brezhnev, opening doors in the eighties. In each of these periods Soviet religious policy differed. Then the author takes the reader through the internal dynamics of Estonian Baptist identity by analyzing various aspects of Baptist theology and praxis - open communion versus closed communion, baptism of believers versus open membership, more structured worship versus spontaneous liturgical style, the influence of dominant Christian groups (Lutherans) – these are only some of the topics discussed. A reader acquainted with international Baptist history will recognize among questions raised by Toivo topics familiar to other Baptist groups around the world. Thus local becomes global and boundaries are blurred by placing local Baptist histories in the context of global dynamics.

This book is a valuable source for foreign researchers who otherwise would not be able to use materials written in Estonian. It extends the scope of research that often has concentrated on Slavonic Baptists to other ethnic groups of the former USSR. We can hope that in the next volumes of Studies in Baptist History and Thought we will be introduced also to other Baptist groups of that region.

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