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Introduction

Hegemonic Confessions at the Baltic Periphery

Religious Contact in the Early Modern Baltic Region

SEBASTIAN RIMESTAD
Universität Leipzig

KNUT MARTIN STÜNKEL
Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany

ABSTRACT The Baltic region has always been situated on the crossroads of the three main branches of Christianity: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. As such, it has provided ample material for studying religious contact. This special issue brings together four contributions analysing such cases in this region during the early modern period. It shows the value of the Baltic region as a multi-ethnic melting pot of different Christian denominations, held together primarily by the change-resistant land-owning class of Baltic Germans.

KEYWORDS Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Baltic, Orthodox Church, Catholicism, Protestantism

The Baltic region, i.e., the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, represents a fascinating case study for religious contact throughout history. Up to now, however, it has only rarely been examined as such a zone of contact. While studies on particular religious traditions and their development in the region are not lacking, the situations of contact between traditions and their specific synchronic and diachronic effects have not been in the focus of scholarly interest. The present special issue intends to take a first step in this direction. [1]

The key issue of the contact-based approach to the examination of the history of religions has been characterised by Volkhard Krech as follows: [2]

> Within the religious field, religious diversity as well as religious contacts and transfer processes enabled as a result thereof are key conditions for triggering dynamics in the history of religions. A plural situation can arise or actively be promoted either through the import and export of religious traditions, for instance as part of [3]

> trade relations, during imperial expansion, or through religious innovation and reformation from the inside outwards. Religious contacts challenge religious traditions to differentiate themselves, position themselves, […] and thus promote the controversy of the religious field inwardly and outwardly as well as the demarcation of boundaries. But equally, religious contacts can also lead to an explicit or creeping amalgamation of elements from various traditions. (Krech 2015, 64)

Trade, imperial expansion, and reformation are indeed important aspects of the history of the Baltic region in early modern times. In many regards, in its particular way of exemplifying Krech's general assertions on the dynamics in the history of religions, the Baltic region presents a special case in the religious history of Europe. It was the last part of the continent to be Christianised (except for the northernmost Arctic fringes), with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania officially becoming a Christian society only in 1387. IN this year, King Jogaila of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania accepted Christian baptism, a prerequisite to be able to marry the Polish regent Hedwig (Jadwiga). At the same time, Christianisation in this region was rather superficial, with pre-Christian traditions and rituals remaining common until the early nineteenth century, providing ample opportunity for religious contact. Because of this, earlier scholarship of religion considered the Baltic region a place of conservation of archaic religion, maintaining a chthonic quality (see Eliade 1983, 3:39). Additionally, the region was situated on the boundary between Eastern and Western Christianity, meaning that Christianisation was attempted both from the Eastern Orthodox and the Latin Catholic side. This competition allowed for Lithuanian paganism to endure by taking advantage of the contest of the missionary traditions, playing them off against each other. However, in the end, the Catholics were successful, partly because their brand of Christian mission involved the sword to a greater extent than the Orthodox approach, which relied more on monasticism. [4]

However, the idea that the Baltic region can historically be characterised as a clear-cut region is anachronistic. In fact, the contemporary region of the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, is a rather young construct, dating from the early twentieth century, when these three states first achieved political independence as modern nation states. Before then, one must always distinguish between the southern part of this region, encompassing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Niendorf 2018), and the northern part, dominated by the Baltic Germans who had arrived on these shores in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Selart 2018). Whereas the former was a political entity in its own right that aligned itself more or less with its Polish neighbour, the latter never had a unified political structure. Instead, the medieval patchwork of independent cities, episcopal domains, and territories of the Teutonic Order eventually gave way to first Swedish and later (from 1721) Russian rule. [5]

One of the main reasons for the collapse of this patchwork order was the Protestant Reformation, which from an early stage encompassed the northern Baltic region and created a power vacuum in those areas previously controlled by religious actors. The resulting power grab exercise again created favourable conditions for various religious contacts, especially between the two branches of Latin Christendom—Catholicism and Protestantism and among the diverse denominations of the latter, such as pietism in various manifestations (Hallensian, Moravian/Herrnhut, or radical pietism). [6]

Last but not least, in the later phases of the early modern period, the Baltic region served as an important relay point for the enlightenment movement from Germany to Russia. The enlightenment considerably impacted the internal development of the region's religious traditions. The cities in the region, in particular Riga and its ruling class, proved to be of salient im- [7]

portance for the spread of enlightenment ideas. In many cases, the threat that enlightenment posed to revealed religion may even be considered as constituting a silent but influential third participant in situations of contact between the Christian denominations and non-Christian religious traditions.

This special issue of *Entangled Religions* originates from a workshop organised by the editors at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum in September 2019. We have gathered four papers that illustrate the various religious contact situations that occurred in this region—especially its northern part—in the early modern period, i.e., from the Reformation to the beginning of the nineteenth century. For the early modern period in this region, all social analysis must take the Baltic Germans into account. This included the upper class and city burghers all over the northern half of the Baltic region—today's Estonia and Latvia—as well as the coastline further south, all the way to East Prussia with its capital Königsberg. The Baltic Germans controlled the local administration—regardless of whether the political rulers were Swedes or Russians or Poles—, the court system, and the local Lutheran Church. It is thus impossible to analyse this region without scrutinizing the role of the Baltic Germans, who were mostly stern promoters of the Lutheran faith. [8]

The first contribution, by Sebastian Rimestad (2023), takes a look at the border area between the two halves of the Baltic region—the Baltic German Protestant north and the Lithuanian Catholic south—from the end of the sixteenth century. He traces the various contacts described in the annual reports of the Jesuit Mission at Dünaburg (Latvian: Daugavpils), characterising the Jesuits as a stabilising factor for the area of Latgale in the east of current-day Latvia. [9]

Piret Lotman (2023) analyses another border area within the Baltic region over the seventeenth century, namely Ingria in the north. Today, this includes the area around the city of St. Petersburg, a city that was founded in 1703 to become the new capital of the Russian Empire. Before then, it belonged to the Baltic part of the Swedish Empire. Lotman shows how the contact between the Lutheran Swedes and local Baltic German nobility, on the one hand, and the Orthodox village dwellers, on the other, was a struggle for religious hegemony. While the Swedes wanted to make the whole area Lutheran, the local actors employed a variety of approaches to this task, which resulted in different success rates. Obviously, the success and external perception of this religious contact also varied due to the wider political context. [10]

The two remaining contributions cover religious contact that did not occur on the margins, but in officially Lutheran areas. In both cases, the focus lies on the link between pre-Christian religious and cultural traditions and Lutheranism, but in different ways. Knut Martin Stünkel (2023) provides an overview of the perspective of Johann Georg Hamann, an unorthodox Lutheran thinker from the city of Königsberg, who in his early years as a tutor travelled the country and interpreted the folk songs of the Latvian peasants as an authentic expression of religiosity unspoiled by philosophical sophistication. As an opponent to enlightenment thought, Hamann portrayed the Latvian peasants as 'religiously complete' individuals who would not gain anything by enlightenment generalisation. Thus, Hamann posits contact between the universal (crypto-)religion of enlightenment ideology and individually localised religious conscience, exemplified in the Latvian peasant. [11]

Gvido Straube is one of the foremost experts on the Pietist Moravian (Herrnhut) movement in the Baltic region from 1729 onwards. In his contribution (2023), he conceptualises this movement as a contact situation between the mainstream Lutheran Church dominated by the Baltic Germans and the new Pietist consciousness and missionary zeal coming from Germany. [12]

To a certain extent, this resulted in a clash of religious worlds, which led to the official ban of the Moravian Church from the Russian Empire in 1743. However, as Straube shows, the ban did not stop the movement, and it continued to involve the Latvian peasants in a religious contact situation that made them more aware of their own religious agency and self-worth.

While the four contributions approach the question of religious contact in the Baltic region from a variety of angles, they show at least one similarity across the region: the conservative nature of the Baltic Germans, who would have prefered things to stay the way they were, especially in the religious domain. In the contributions by Straube and Rimestad, this attitude is depicted as the 'enemy' to missionary efforts by outsiders. In Stünkel's contribution, it is the position of the protagonist's employers, whereas Lotman positions it as an example of inertia both Swedish and Orthodox actors had to deal with. The idea of the conservative Baltic German feudal master survived until into the twentieth century, which complicated the transition to democratic nation-states after World War I all the more, but that is a wholly different topic for another publication. [13]

In any case, as the articles show, the Baltic region provides ample opportunities to study situations of religious contact. The present special issue on the early modern period is nothing but a beginning that will hopefully trigger further studies to come. Contact-induced processes of demarcation and intensification contribute significantly to the religious and also to the political history of this region. Regarding the effects of situations of contact, the area is far from marginal, but rather presents itself as an important node or hub of religious traditions (Glei and Jaspert 2017, 2–3), which in many aspects dynamically mediates between East and West, Christian and non-Christian religion, as well as religion and enlightenment. [14]

One of the participants of the workshop was Stefan Donecker, an eminent scholar of early modern Northern Europe, especially with regards to the mythical origins of the indigenous peoples in this region. He also wanted to contribute to the special issue, but health problems hindered him from completing a text. While finishing the revisions of the texts, we learned of Stefan's untimely death on September 1, 2022, at only 45 years of age. To honour his contribution to the field of Baltic history and join the commemoration, this special issue is dedicated to the memory of Stefan Donecker (1977–2022). [15]

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