

## THE CURRENT STATE OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN ESTONIA

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### Abstract

*Estonia is one of the most extreme nations in the Western world regarding a modest belonging to the churches and scepticism towards religious institutions. This article presents a short overview of the history of Estonian academic landscapes from the point of view of biblical studies and the University of Tartu as the historical nodal point of all Estonian academic life. The paper sketches six polarities that characterise the work of biblical scholars in Estonia. The first polarity marks national versus international, since biblical scholars struggle with the needs of the narrow national academic sphere and the broad international scholarship. The second polarity is the tension between scientific and popular spheres, of which both are needed to have a sustainable national academic environment, but academic publications are rare. The third problem is the polarity between the historical-critical and the religious, generally designated as a conflict between conservatives and liberals in Estonia. Particularly in the Lutheran church, several theologians and pastors publicly distinguish between “church theology” and “university theology,” and the label of liberalism keeps sticking. The fourth polarity concerns religious versus anticlerical and non-institutional religion. Biblical scholars are confronted with a very ambivalent attitude towards churches, demanding flexibility to understand the exact auditory. The fifth polarity marks the academic study versus new spirituality interpretations: how to approach people speaking the jargon of new spirituality, who might be religiously illiterate, individualistic, and sceptical towards institutionalised churches. Open theological discussion versus political-nationalist ideology is the sixth polarity. After gaining independence and becoming free from communist ideology, the lifetime of one generation has not been enough to cope with all the changes in the world view to emerge a free, tolerant and cohesive society. The situation welcomed the import of fundamentalist Christianity, far-right politics and the phenomenon of cultural war.*

**Keywords:** Estonia; Challenge for biblical scholarship; Tartu University; Historical-critical scholarship; Non-institutional religion; New spirituality; Political-nationalist ideology

Estonia is a small country situated in the Baltic Sea region with a population of 1,328,976 inhabitants in the year 2020 (SA 2020). Estonia is one of the most extreme nations in the Western world regarding a modest belonging to the churches and scepticism towards religious institutions. Estonia has been named a gigantic “Lab” for studying the future of religion (Heelas 2013), since many unique developmental features of history have coincided. In recent years, the development has become successively more complex because of a certain come-back of public religious sentiments and a rediscovery of fruitful contacts between religion and politics.<sup>1</sup>

In order to prepare the grounds for our thoughts about the current situation in biblical studies in Estonia, a short overview of the history of Estonian academic landscapes from the point of view of biblical studies, as well as of the University of Tartu as the historical nodal point of all Estonian academic life, is definitively welcome. After this historical introduction, we will sketch six polarities that in our understanding characterise our work as biblical scholars in Estonia.

### **History of studying theology and religion at the University of Tartu and beyond**

Estonia’s complicated history directly relates to the cultural and religious situation that forms the context of biblical studies in the country. It is best exemplified by the history of the most important academic institution: the University of Tartu. The university was founded in 1632 as *Academia Gustaviana* while Estonia was part of the kingdom of Sweden. The leading faculty was the Faculty of Theology (others being faculties of philosophy, law and medicine). The faculty, which was modelled after the University of Uppsala, had four professors called “theologians”. The first theologian taught Old Testament, and the second taught New Testament. The state religion was Lutheranism, and the academic language Latin (Kulmar, Petti, Laats 2001). However, due to the Northern War between Sweden and Russia and the defeat of the former by the latter in 1710, the university that had moved to Pärnu in West-Estonia was closed.

The University was reopened in 1802 as the *Kaiserliche Universität zu Dorpat* (Dorpat being the German designation of Tartu). At that time, it was the only Western-style university in the Russian Empire where courses were taught in German and that had efficient contacts with other German universities. The reason was that the country’s ruling elite were Baltic Germans who had received special privileges from the Russian authorities. Estonians were mostly rural peasants involved in agriculture. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became possible for Estonians to enter university. One of the leading figures of the national awakening that formed the new national identity of an emerging nation was Jakob Hurt, an alumnus of the Faculty of Theology in Tartu and a Lutheran pastor. He famously coined the slogan that has been ever important for Estonian national self-identity since then: “As a nation, we can never grow great in numbers of the population, but we can grow great in education and culture.” The backbone of the new identity became the Estonian language and culture, partly in opposition to German language and culture. In theology and biblical studies, the trends shifted from rationalism to pietism and Lutheran orthodoxy. In 1813, rationalist Johann Wilhelm Friedrich von

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<sup>1</sup> Generally on the situation in Estonia before 2015, see Rimmel, Uibu (2015), on the position of the Lutheran church Rimmel, Rohtmetts (2021), on the relation between church and state Ringvee (2017), on the position of new spirituality Uibu (2016); Uibu (2021); Altnurme (2021), and on atheism and related matters Rimmel, Friedenthal (2020).

Hezel was disentitled from reading exegetical disciplines because he had issued a rationalist translation of the New Testament some years before. In 1884, Wilhelm Volck and Ferdinand Mühlau, apart from editing the 8th–11th editions of the Gesenius Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon in Tartu (cf. Gesenius 1878), initiated a debate about the verbal inspiration of the Bible; when they defended the use of the historical-critical method in analysing biblical texts, the faculty stood behind them (Kulmar, Petti, Laats 2001).

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the authorities started an official Russification program, Tartu was renamed Jur'ev in 1893, and the university was renamed *Imperatorskij Jur'evskij Universitet*. In 1895, Russian was introduced as the language of instruction (UT100 2019). During World War I, in 1916, the Faculty of Theology was also required to transfer to Russian as the language of teaching. The professors resigned in protest, and the faculty dissolved itself. Only during a short period of German occupation in 1918, the faculty functioned for a while (Kulmar, Petti, Laats 2001; UT100 2019).

On 1 December 1919, the university opened its doors as *Tartu University of the Republic of Estonia* with Estonian as teaching language. The period between the two world wars was a time for building up and establishing a new academic and scientific culture based on the Estonian language. The Faculty of Theology was no exception, even though one professor could continue teaching German: Professor of the Old Testament and Semitic Studies Alexander von Bulmerincq (1868–1938). A generation of highly professional scholars was trained during the twenty years of independence. The most important among them were Arthur Vööbus (1909–1988) and Uku Masing (1909–1985). Vööbus emigrated to the U.S. during World War II and later became the world's leading scholar in Syriac studies based in Chicago. For a while, he was also a member of the New Testament textual committee of the Nestle-Aland 26<sup>th</sup> edition.<sup>2</sup> Uku Masing, a multitalented scholar in the Hebrew Bible, religious studies, theology and folklore studies, stayed in Estonia and became an intellectual who had to live in self-isolation under the communist regime. He wrote extensively on numerous topics, starting with theology and ending in poetry. Most of his texts were never published during his lifetime, and their publication is still an ongoing process today. Despite being not published, he became a personal cultural model for several generations of intellectuals, starting again with theologians and ending with poets and everything that goes between.<sup>3</sup>

About the history of biblical studies at the Faculty of Theology between the two World Wars, two facts are worth mentioning, as they directly connect to the situation today. The first one is a conference of theologians held at the faculty at the end of the 1930s, where the possibility of women's ordination in the Lutheran Church in biblical light was intensively analysed. It involved both exegesis and theological reflection, and the result was positive: it was decided that according to the Bible, it is indeed possible to ordain women into the ministry. Nothing happened at once, but this decision formed the basis for the future, and in 1967, the first woman (Laine Villenthal) was ordained into ministry in the Estonian Lutheran Church (Villenthal 2017; Altnurme 2018:239). The second is again the recurring theme from the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the question about the verbal inspiration of the Bible in the 1920s and 1930s. This time, it was not the faculty

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<sup>2</sup> See more on Vööbus by Annus (2019).

<sup>3</sup> See more on Masing by Nõmmik (2012); Nõmmik (2015).

members but alumni of the faculty who held positions in the church. On the one side, there was Theodor Tallmeister, who was a proponent of German liberal theology as exemplified by Adolf von Harnack (who had studied theology in Tartu in his youth), and on the other side was Harald Põld, who held a very conservative view and believed in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. The battle lasted for several years, and for some time, one of the congregations (Iisaku) that supported the liberal view was even expelled from the church, although this decision was later revoked (Saard 2008).

In 1940, after the Soviet invasion, the faculty was closed by the new atheist regime. During World War II, when Estonia was occupied by the German Nazi regime, an autonomous Institute of Theology was opened in 1941. It was not part of the university, even though Vööbus defended his dissertation here. The situation changed again when the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia in 1944, and the institute was closed. In the late 1940s, the Lutheran Church got permission to start its own theological program for future clergy, and thus the institution today called the EELC Institute of Theology was born (Kulmar, Petti, Laats 2001). During the Soviet occupation, the university worked without a Faculty of Theology.

Biblical studies and theology were a matter for enthusiasts who worked in the Church or at the Institute of Theology. Resources were limited in a situation of being cut off from the wider academic community. Nevertheless, they managed to create an extensive collection of hand-copied books and textbooks; some were translated, some written by Estonian scholars. Of that period, two names are essential: Toomas Paul (born 1939) and Kalle Kasemaa (born 1942). In the 1970s and 1980s, Toomas Paul translated the New Testament afresh with the help of Uku Masing. The last Estonian translation of the New Testament was done by Harald Põld at the end of the 1930s, later edited for the Estonian Bible that was published in 1968 in Sweden. The new translation by Toomas Paul became the basis for the most recent biblical edition published by the Estonian Bible Society in 1997. Kalle Kasemaa was and is a prolific translator and writer whose academic speciality has been Jewish Studies and the Hebrew Bible but whose interests lay beyond these. He has translated dozens of books, both scientific texts and fiction. In 1991, after Estonia regained independence and the Faculty of Theology was reopened at Tartu University, Kasemaa became the first dean of the faculty.

The freshly reopened faculty had to organise its work from different premises than before. The EELC Institute of Theology remained active, as the Lutheran Church felt that the structures built during the Soviet occupation were still valuable. There is some cooperation between the university and the institute, but they remain separate institutions. From the start, the reopened faculty became ecumenical and established cooperation with other Estonian churches.

Already two years before the end of the Soviet occupation, in 1989, a Baptist Theological Seminary had been reopened and moved to Tartu. The history of Baptist theological education is comparable to the Faculty of Theology. The Seminary (then called Estonian Baptist Preacher's Seminary) became active in 1922 and was closed down during the Soviet occupation in 1940. During the occupation, some attempts to offer a more formal education were partially successful, but the way teaching was organised appeared very similar to that of the Lutheran theologians. Education was seen as a means to maintain a distinct identity (think of Jakob Hurt once more). In 1979, three Estonian pastors got permission to study at the Buckow Theological seminary in the

German Democratic Republic. They strategically divided their specialities between the Old and New Testaments and systematic theology with the aim that if the situation changed in Estonia, they could establish the seminary afresh (Pilli 2006). The situation changed indeed, and the first director of the seminary was Peeter Roosimaa, who had studied the New Testament. Roosimaa was asked by Kalle Kasemaa to also teach at the university, and he actually taught at both institutions for many years until his retirement.

Besides the schools already mentioned, there is another one: Baltic Methodist Seminary in Tallinn opened in 1994 (Saluraud 2019). The school is supported by the United Methodist Church and serves as a mission centre for the Baltic states and the Western part of Russia.

At the university faculty, both the staff and the students have been ecumenical. The alumni of the Faculty of Theology, since 2016 designated as the School of Theology and Religious Studies, are working in almost all of the churches belonging to the Estonian Council of Churches, not to mention people with different religious adherence like Buddhists or Muslims or no adherence at all.

This brings us to a further important fact about the School of Theology and Religious Studies and teaching and research done in theology in general. A chair for comparative religious studies already existed in the German-speaking faculty one hundred years earlier. In the 1990s, the Faculty of Theology began very quickly to attract students (and scholars) dealing with many facets of religious studies and even cultural studies and history. Hence, close contacts to the sociology of religion, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Jewish Studies, and the study of Asian religions were built, to name a few. Currently, the School of Theology and Religious Studies cooperates with churches and church schools in Estonia and also with many academic disciplines at the University of Tartu as well as internationally. The school is the centre for religious studies in Estonia; more students are doing religious studies than theology, and the staff profile is and will be multifaceted. Tendencies of dealing with an extensive scope of religious studies were inherent in the 1990s but have become succeeding and honestly evident through the thirty years of the school's existence.

Coming to the current state of biblical scholarship in Estonia, we design it from the perspective of the University of Tartu, bearing in mind that there is cooperation between all theological schools in Estonia. We will sketch six larger polarities that, according to our understanding, coin the present situation of biblical studies in Estonia.

### ***National versus international***

The polarity is illustrated perhaps in the best way in the discussion on the function of the University of Tartu, the only classical and the oldest university in Estonia. Since regaining its independence in 1991, Estonian society has successfully opened itself to the world. So did the Estonian academic sphere, and internationalisation made progress. The intellectual exchange became intensive very quickly. Nowadays, when international cooperation is routine and part of the academic work is done in English, critical feedback from the political and media establishment questions the current relation between national and international. The University of Tartu is officially called *rahvusülikool*, 'the national university,' but in numerous documents, mainly created by the university authorities themselves, the identity to be communicated to the society is called *rahvusvaheline rahvusülikool*, 'the international national university.' The function of the

university is understood in terms of building bridges between Estonian academic thought and the rest of the academic world.

Hence, one of the key questions for Biblical scholars, among other academics, is the language question. Writing and teaching in Estonian automatically means exclusively national and hardly international, since there is barely any global auditory reading of Estonian. International in Estonian terms means writing in another, more internationally-recognised language, such as English, German, French or Russian. How to decide on the language is a simple question for Estonian scholars in the humanities.

A relevant example is a regulation of the university itself that at least one opponent of the PhD thesis has to come from abroad. It mainly affects the humanities because of a relatively higher percentage of Estonian dissertations than the natural or social sciences. Estonians working at universities abroad and Finnish colleagues capable of at least some Estonian are in high demand. On the one hand, the scholarly quality of PhD theses written in English can be better proved, making writing in Estonian unnecessary. On the other hand, the quality assessment of PhD theses written in Estonian suffers from lacking know-how among the Estonian-speaking population. Estonian PhD theses, however, do a favour to the Estonian scholarly language that also needs to be developed. Often, the dilemma ends up in a solution of a thesis in English and some articles in Estonian.

### *Scientific versus popular*

The previous polarity is complemented by the further problem of a narrow national academic sphere. Only one million Estonian speakers make the struggle of finding a suitable solution for writing and talking about biblical studies in Estonian remarkably breathtaking. The audience for reading complex academic texts is tiny; the number of students in real need of such studies is even less.

The result is that Estonian academic publications in biblical studies appear with low regularity, mainly in the journal of the Estonian Theological Society *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*<sup>4</sup> or in volumes of a relatively broad spectrum of theology and religious studies, e.g. in Festschrifts. Four Festschrifts have been dedicated to scholars of older generations who can be designated as biblical scholars: Kalle Kasemaa (Lepajõe, Gross 2003), Peeter Roosimaa (Saumets, Riistan 2009), Toomas Paul (Lahe, Pädam 2009), Randar Tasmuth (Lahe, Naab 2020). The number of popular publications regarding biblical studies is higher, particularly in online forums and journals.<sup>5</sup> Several scholars justify their Estonian publications to enforce Estonian scholarship and therefore Estonian culture in general. One of the authors of this article, Ain Riistan, is among them (although he has published in English too).

On the other hand, some prefer publishing articles and books discussing complex matters in English or German. German has been the language of evangelical theology for a long time at the University of Tartu; contacts with German scholarship were particularly vivid in the 1990s, when the Theological Faculty was re-established. Several Estonian theologians have received their Doctoral degrees from German universities,

<sup>4</sup> All volumes of the journal are accessible also in pdf format at [www.usuteadus.ee](http://www.usuteadus.ee); the editorial board plans to change the journal into an e-journal format.

<sup>5</sup> The leading online forum is the weekly online journal *Kirik & Teoloogia* [Church & Theology] [www.kjt.ee](http://www.kjt.ee), edited by a group of theologians, primarily alumni of the school in Tartu.

including one of the authors of this article: promotion in Old Testament at the University of Marburg and habilitation at the University of Munich, both monographs written in German (Nõmmik 2010; Nõmmik 2022).

Scholars who have defended their dissertations in the field of biblical studies or similar fields have done it mainly at the University of Tartu: Toomas Paul (1994, Estonian), Kalle Kasemaa (1997, Estonian), Peeter Roosimaa (2004, Estonian), Ain Riistan (2011, Estonian, English), Jaan Lahe (2009, German), Elo Süld (2014, German). Others have submitted dissertations at universities in Helsinki (Randar Tasmuth, 2004, English) in Marburg (Urmas Nõmmik 2008, published 2010, German), in Tallinn (Ergo Naab, 2017, Estonian, English), and in London (Küllli Tõniste, published 2016, English). In addition, Dace Balode from Latvia, currently the dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia, defended her dissertation (2006) in New Testament studies in Tartu in German.

### ***Historical-critical versus religious***

Many churches worldwide have felt the tension between academic theology as it is pursued in academic institutions and daily church life as it is commonly lived out in the churches where there is little or no reflection on the issues that interest theologians. In the case of biblical studies, this tension often translates into the question of what to do with historical-critical studies in the context of church life. Estonia is no exception here. As mentioned above, these issues were already debated in Estonia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seems to be a perennially recurring theme. During the last decade, a pastor of the Estonian Lutheran church, Arne Hiob, who defended his thesis in systematic theology in Tartu in 2000, has written several books, mainly polemical towards the method (Hiob 2015; Hiob 2017). He has not been alone.

For example, when the Baptist seminary was reopened, its curriculum was initially modelled according to German academic theological education traditions. When the seminary moved to Tartu and cooperation with the Faculty of Theology became tighter, the similarities grew even more prominent. This made some influential church leaders uneasy, as there was a suspicion that the university-style theological education would somehow harm the students' faith, the future church workers, and therefore the church in general (Pilli 2006). This situation eventually led the seminary to discuss reforming the curricula and rethinking the purpose of theological education in general (see Pilli, Riistan 2008). As a result, the curricula were reshaped several times. It was a long process, and now we can say that what is taught in seminary today is very practical and church-oriented. It is also ecumenical today as several Seventh-day Adventists are also studying there in cooperation with the Adventist Church. Is it "less" academic? The answer to that question is a matter of perspective. The seminary does not train future academics as the university does, but at the same time, we can say that there is no aversion to the historical-critical method either. It is embraced and seen as a tool for furthering the spiritual development of students.

The same goes for the Baltic Methodist seminary. Its curriculum has been, from the beginning, very practical, and not a lot of academic biblical studies is done there. However, at the same time, what is taught is always informed by the broader academic situation, the historical-critical method included. The Rector of the seminary, Külli Tõniste, has her Master's degree in biblical studies from Asbury Theological Seminary

and her PhD from London School of Theology / Brunel University (Tõniste 2016). Seminary has close contact with Asbury Theological Seminary and enjoyed visiting lectures from several world-class biblical scholars, mainly from the United States.

The situation in the Lutheran church is somewhat different, however. There are theologians and pastors (alumni of the university, by the way) who distinguish between “church theology” and “university theology,” the latter deemed to be “liberal.” Notwithstanding the reality that different people work at the university, some more religiously conservative and some more liberal, the label of liberalism keeps sticking. This has partly also to do with the current discussion over the rights of same-sex couples in Estonia, where church authorities have taken the conservative position and some biblical scholars at the university are saying that if one does a meticulous exegesis of the Bible, things are more complicated than what seems at first glance.<sup>6</sup> Precisely this has been the topic of one of the few scholarly articles in biblical studies (Lahe, Nõmmik 2011) that reacted with a set of academic arguments to a statement by the Estonian Council of Churches on homosexuality, and it has caused a furore in the Estonian media. The issue of the respective scholarly journal *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* was not allowed for sale at one church bookshop in Tartu, and the fact became public. Since then, many essayistic or popular publications have appeared in many forums. Arguments from both sides have been gathered into a paper on the Estonian debate, which can be read in English (Nõmmik 2017).

The general conclusion about the current state is that several Estonian Lutherans considering themselves conservatives coin the public image of biblical studies at the university while representing universities as liberal. Together with this, an assessment will be done regarding the historical-critical method in particular and university theology in general. This confrontation is based on different principles involved in the hermeneutic process of interpreting the Bible as an authoritative text. The conservatives—if we stick to popular designations—employ what can be called the dogmatist-legalist approach to the Bible. For them, the Bible is the Word of God; they see it as a legal text that sets forth the rules for Christians to obey in a way comparable to a constitution of a nation-state. Similar to the secular legislation where the additional set of laws specifies the meaning of the constitution, the meaning of the “Word of God” in the Church is specified according to the creeds of the Church or by Church legislative authority. It is hierarchical thinking, stressing tradition and the need to obey the rules. The people employing the historical-critical approach see the authority of the Bible in a different light. They see the Bible as a set of texts of religious communities conversing with their audience (and each other) about the things that matter the most. Its authority lies in the perceived continuity of the current generation of Christians with the generations before, the biblical authors and the people who shaped the Christian tradition (the creeds). Both the results of the past discussions and the discussions themselves are to be taken seriously. This approach does not dispense with the hierarchy in the Church. Still, it stresses the conversational character of theological thinking with the openness to possible new understandings embedded in it. The debate about homosexuality in Estonia exemplifies these different mentalities quite well: whereas the biblical scholars stress the

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<sup>6</sup> On the discussion on liberal secularist policy against the political, cultural and religious backdrop, see Kilp (2021).



need for an open and honest discussion about the issue, conservatives have taken the position that even opening the debate will lead to the erosion of the traditional God-given biblical truth confirmed by Church authorities that sees homosexuality as a sin.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Religious versus anticlerical and non-institutional religion***

Even though biblical scholars are often accused of taking the side of secularised and liberal society, they themselves believe to belong to the party of the religious. Otherwise, they would not be theologians and biblical scholars.

In the case of Estonia, anticlericalism is definitively a more significant phenomenon than atheism. Surveys and studies of religion and non-religion in Estonia from the last two decades have revealed that Estonia is not the most atheistic country in the world—as suggests a widespread belief among Estonians—but a nation with the lowest percentage of people belonging to some established religious community. Religiosity is multifaceted and often subtle. The attitude towards churches is ambivalent. Some examples can be brought. Relatively large segments among the people belong to the following groups: those not belonging to any congregation go to the Christmas service, this often being their only connection to the church; others can loudly declare their approval of moral principles formulated by church leaders without belonging to any congregation; again, others have been baptised or even confirmed but do not have any active or real connection to their congregation. The majority of the population cannot differentiate Christian denominations since religious literacy is remarkably low. Generally, the historical connection to the everyday Christian routine is lost, in some generations overwhelmingly.

This has historical roots. For centuries, pastors of the Estonian and German Lutheran congregations have been Germans. The decisive turn favouring pastors of Estonian origin took place first in the 1920s and 1930s. Strong anti-German opposition was one of the reasons why many understood the church as a German thing. On the other hand, the brethren movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries played a significant role in turning Estonians to Christianity. Furthermore, a considerable number of leading figures in the national awakening in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later were Estonians who studied theology at the university and became pastors in the Lutheran church. The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church was grounded as a “free people’s church” in 1917 (Rohtmets 2012); and also during the political and national awakening at the end of the 1980s, Lutheran pastors were active, and the turn to freedom manifested—among others—in a dramatic increase of adult baptisms in the same time. Once again, on the other hand, a well-known phenomenon is the anticlerical sentiment among the cultural elite in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having its resonances up to recent times. It does

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<sup>7</sup> In September 2019, the School of Theology and Religious Studies and the Estonian Sexual Health Association organised a conference called “Sexuality and religion—looking for a common ground.” One of the papers was about sexuality in the Bible, arguing that what is needed nowadays is an honest, open and polite debate on the issue (Riistan 2019). The mere fact that this conference was going to take place prompted some conservative Lutherans to publish beforehand a booklet with the title (in translation) “The Homosexuality Issue: Ecclesiastical Views and Speeches in the Debate on Theological Liberalism” (Homoküsimus 2019). It contains a set of previously published articles condemning homosexuality as a sin. The booklet’s message was clear: the Church already has clear teaching on homosexuality, and everything that the liberals do undermines the notion that the real problem is not homosexuality but theological liberalism itself.

not mean that most of the cultural elite is non-religious or atheist, but that the attitude towards churches is reserved or ambivalent.

Biblical scholars have to serve both the churches and society. It is true for those working at the secular state university and those working at private church seminaries. Mostly, it means that the register of language and argumentation has to be chosen according to the auditory. Every publication or public talk of biblical scholars presupposes a process of analysing the potential auditory. Therefore, e.g., the vocabulary can differ drastically depending on the context. However, all likely societal segments have to be taken care of. Biblical scholars have to build bridges, even though the task is often too complicated, and accusations from different sides can occur.

### *Academic study versus new spirituality interpretations*

Another phenomenon growing from religious (or hermeneutical) illiteracy and the lack of a natural connection to the church is the popularity of new spirituality among the population. With the notion, we mean a broad spectrum of modern interpretations of many traditional religions of westernised oriental religions, of self-aid techniques, and many more (Altnurme 2013; Altnurme 2021; Uibu 2016; Uibu 2021). Against the backdrop of this phenomenon, the Bible can still be read and reflected upon. The result of this kind of reading is a self-taught, syncretistic, individualistic and highly speculative interpretation. Few studies exist on the phenomenon, but an everyday experience of biblical scholars in Estonia is a dialogue with this kind of interpretation. It also affects the specific auditory of masters degree students in religious studies (at the University of Tartu) or History of Christian Culture (at the Theological Institute of the EELC in Tallinn). The typical student in the master programs is a middle-aged person with no or weak background in Christianity but is interested in religious matters. In some periods of their lives, they have actively read literature that, according to the general terms, can be designated as spiritual. Even biblical scholars themselves do not all have a Christian *Kinderstube*, therefore having their experience seeking religious truth from a variety of literature and religious groups.

One of the reasons for the phenomenon is the Soviet era, during which being religious was not tolerated in public. Christian literature could only be spread in self-published half-illegal formats. The ban of traditional Christian routine from everyday life resulted in the popularity of—also half-illegal—interest in esotericism, occultism, and UFOs. In the second half of the 1980s, when Soviet dominance began to ruin rapidly, an explosion of alternative truths against the backdrop of one and only image of the brave, non-religious, atheist working-class soviet citizen happened. Since then, spiritual and related literature has lost only some of its popularity. The tradition is vivid.

After the end of Soviet domination, not only the market economy, together with its culture of success, have broken in, but also pragmatism and individualism somehow already latent in Estonian culture became evident and robust. Estonia is known globally for its rapid development in IT, but it is not surprising to consider the habitual need for an ample personal space among ethnic Estonians that is aided now by IT communication and other high-tech solutions where Estonians feel comfortable. Paradoxically, technical and materialist positivism, well known from the Soviet period, has found a new postmodern channel. New spirituality, primarily supporting people's wishes to gain success and personal development, seeks backing from science and medicine. The result

is the same for the religious field: earlier or later, people feel left alone with their existential or profound spiritual questions. There are two extremes. The positivist chase for individual benefit and the existential quest for answers flourish simultaneously. Traditional teaching, authority and congregational support offered by institutional religion, such as Christian denominations, suffers because of distrust in institutional religion. If one tries to find a positive example, only Orthodox Christianity, with its elaborate liturgy and openness to mysticism, comes to mind.

Also, in this case, the burning question for biblical scholars is how to approach people speaking the jargon of new spirituality, being individualistic, and sceptical towards institutionalised churches. Is it yet another register of religious language that biblical scholars have to possess? One has to get used to questions about the role of Karma in the Bible or the relation of Yoga techniques to Christian or Jewish religious practices. However, how should one adjust individualism to the Christian idea of love for one's neighbour? How should one re-establish the positive experience of reading the Bible together for the benefit of the community and not alone for personal success or satisfaction? According to our knowledge, the tendency marked by the rise of new spirituality will continue to furnish a great deal of our future work with the public.

### ***Open theological discussion versus political-nationalist ideology***

The new phenomenon in societal development is the rise of political-nationalist ideology (cf. Kilp 2021). A ground for such ideology has been present since the awakening in the 1980s because the Estonian-speaking population wanted to regain its right to freely develop its language and culture. A struggle against Russian dominance and now against English supremacy is still an essential aspect of national identity. Therefore, one must bear in mind that ideological impulses coming from Western European or American countries are based on a long process of reflecting on the shock of two world wars and much destruction that emerged from the clash of nationalistic ideologies. Still, from 1945 till the 1990s, most of this time went missing for Eastern European countries. Additionally, churches in the West could actively take part in the process of reflection since 1945. Churches in the East struggled with great difficulties and sometimes even for survival.

After gaining independence and becoming free from communist ideology, the lifetime of one generation has not been enough to cope with all the change in the world view, for working through all the reflection and discussion needed to emerge a free, tolerant and cohesive society. The situation welcomed the import of fundamentalist Christianity, far-right politics and the phenomenon of cultural war. The result is that after decades of silence, now suddenly, the voice of the Christians and their arguments have become part of public life. Or to be more exact, the voice of the fundamentalist Christians having good relations to the far-right political movements have joined forces against the "dictatorship" of the "liberal democrats" and the "tolerant." Estonia, once considered as one of the most liberal, if not the most liberal country in Eastern Europe, has now experienced a conservative backlash in which the standard repertoire of fundamentalist religious ideology is taken up: abortion, human rights on sexuality and reproduction family politics, gender and same-sex relationships, and other issues. The Association for the Defence of Family and Tradition (*Sihtasutus Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks*); which is an Estonian version of the network of Tradition, Family, Property (TFP); plays

a crucial role (Datta 2020). The Catholic-inspired movement is not acknowledged by the Catholic church in Estonia. However, the association has an influential internet portal, *Objektiiv*, which openly supports all conservative political initiatives that coincide with the general agenda of TFP, criticises mainstream European politics, and constantly refers to clear-cut “traditional Christian values.”

The academic perspective here is that research is always done in a specific historical and cultural milieu that influences the outcome—whether the result relates to that milieu purposefully or accidentally. In the case of biblical studies, the period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the two World Wars when an independent Estonian State was established was a period of nation-building for all academic theologians, including biblical scholars. The cultural demand was to establish Estonian as an academic language. In 1926, *Usuteadusline Ajakiri* (Theological Journal, reestablished in 2000 as *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*) was launched by the Faculty of Theology with the express intent to advance academic theology in Estonian. The first issue already had an article about biblical studies included in it. As explained above, the same attitude is still relevant today. With the coming of the Soviet occupation after World War II and the militant atheistic communist ideology accompanying that, the situation changed drastically. The mere fact that somebody was religious, involved in doing theology (biblical studies included), was already a matter of suspicion. Theologians expressed a worldview that dissented from the established doctrine. Estonians have never developed anything akin to the liberation theologies that have appeared in other parts of the world. There has been no need for that: being a theologian (never mind the particular theology one was involved with) was an offence in itself, at least to be controlled by the state if not prohibited entirely. In that context, both the more liberal and conservative approaches to the Bible had the same kind of effect, helping to maintain one’s religious identity in a hostile environment. After the change in the political system, when Estonia regained its independence, the situation diversified. Some had been fundamentalists already before, and they felt that as their faith had served them well under hostile Soviet pressure, there was no need to abandon it. Moreover, re-establishing ties with their western counterparts only confirmed that they had been right all along. The rise of political far-right nationalist and socially conservative ideology in pair with a mentality promoting cultural wars is a relatively late development that gained its momentum during the last decade. One of the main features of the development is that the world in general is seen as a hostile place to a national and Christian identity again, albeit in a new form. Rapid changes in the world, globalisation, Estonia being part of the European Union with its regulations and ideological values—all this is increasingly seen as a threat by a significant portion of the population. In this context, many traditionalists in the churches have opted for defensive measures to maintain the status quo they see as under threat. Nevertheless, the majority perceives the situation more positively. Changes in society are perceived to be an inevitable part of life. The way to deal with them is to approach the problems we face responsibly and positively, trying to do our best in the circumstances in which we live.

Several biblical scholars belong to the forefront of the discussion on the issues of tolerance or non-nationalist theological interpretations. Others are moderate or avoid declaring their opinion on critical matters. Due to the small society, every public undertaking of scholars that might potentially affect religious-political decisions or views is being surveyed. It will be unambiguously reflected in conservative media,

followed by sometimes extreme reactions in social media. On the one hand, this is the price one has to pay for coming out of the classroom or congregation into the wider public; on the other hand, it forces biblical scholars to more intensively communicate their work results.

## Conclusion

While in academic circles the work of a biblical scholar is usually measured by the quality (and quantity) of one's research output, the reader of this article has seen that the authors have taken a different perspective. We see the biblical studies done in Estonia in the broader context. That is how what is done in our academic institutions relates to society in general. The reason for taking this approach has to do with the situation where we, as scholars, find ourselves working. It might be that in more major countries with larger populations, securely grounded national cultures and well established and valued academic institutions, it would be possible for a scholar to do one's academic work from a proverbial "ebony tower" (though we doubt that). Still, in the context of a small and dynamic country and ever-changing cultural, social and political milieu, biblical studies are in constant need of relation to the broader society. This is actually true to the humanities in general in Estonia, but the small number of biblical scholars that Estonia has have felt that this is especially important for them. While Estonia is considered to be an extremely secular country and from a secular perspective, the role of the churches is only a marginal thing—some scholars from other fields still see the School of Theology and Religious Studies existing in a university as an oddity—, the churches in response have struggled to maintain and strengthen their identity. There are different opinions and expectations about biblical studies from different sides—the theme of our current article. Sometimes it is quite tiresome, but on the other hand, we can say that it is rather refreshing too. "There is nothing better than a good fight," as an old saying goes.

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