

## **CHRISTIANITY AS A PROBLEM IN FOLK CULTURAL STUDIES**

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**S u b j e c t:** The interrelationship between archiving, research and teaching as a problem in shaping the study of folk religion.

**P u r p o s e o f s t u d y:** To analyze the intellectual background of studies of folk religion, using Finno-Ugrian religions as a case study, and to suggest some ways of making our analyses more sensitive to the materials.

**K e y w o r d s:** Folk religion, archiving, research models, teaching, Finno-Ugrian religions.

Although archives and teaching are usually thought of separately, they are linked in significant ways. What is archived determines to a large extent what is researched and published, and what is published shapes what can and is taught. What is taught then determines research and fieldwork, and thus what will be archived. Typologies, too, channel the ways that archiving, research, and teaching are done: how an item is classified in a tale type or motif index, for example, strongly determines the archiving and thus the directions of research on that item. This was brought to my attention recently when I began planning a course on supernatural belief in which I wanted to emphasize the relationship between official and unofficial Christian supernatural beliefs. The published collections of folk legends rarely included Christian materials, and the anthologies and studies of Christian legends tended to focus on literary versions of saints' lives, and to only occasionally include discussions of other types of Christian supernatural belief such as witchcraft. Even though the study of Christianization, conversion, and folk religion has made considerable advances in recent years, there nonetheless remain areas in which the study of the interaction of Christianity and folk culture is a problem of considerable importance. Though almost any European tradition of research could be chosen to illustrate the connections between archiving, research, and teaching, I will limit my comments here to research on Finno-Ugrian religions.

The primary reason for the collection and study of Finno-Ugrian religious texts has been, and continues to be, the reconstruction of the old ethnic religions and

mythologies<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Ivar Paulson writes that the supernatural legends collected from the Finno-Ugrian peasantries constitute the best source for the reconstruction of the old ethnic religions – even though these narratives and beliefs were often collected from peoples, like the Estonians and Finns, who had been Christian for hundreds of years<sup>2</sup>. This paradigm for the study of the religions has its origins both in quite ancient sources, and in the nineteenth century. As Dale Martin has recently suggested, the differentiation of religion and superstition has even more ancient roots than Christian theology, growing initially from ancient Greek efforts at distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate forms of worship<sup>3</sup>. But, while the roots of the paradigm are old, the most important work for shaping the current study of folk religions was Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*, an encyclopedic study of Germanic mythology, especially the lower mythology. In his effort to reconstruct ancient Germanic religion and mythology Grimm turned to a variety of sources: chronicles, local newspaper and journal accounts of superstitions, field collections of folktales, legends, and beliefs, and medieval and classical accounts of the ancient Germans. That much of this material came from Christian sources was of no concern, for, according to Grimm,

Christianity was not popular. It came from abroad, it aimed at supplanting the time honoured indigenous gods whom the country revered and loved. These gods and their worship were part and parcel of the people’s traditions, customs, constitution. Their names had their roots in the people’s language, and were hallowed by antiquity; kings and princes traced their lineage back to individual gods; forests, mountains, lakes had received a living consecration from their presence<sup>4</sup>.

Not only was Christianity unpopular, Grimm declares, the missionaries had not entirely destroyed the older ethnic religions: sites of cult worship and beliefs, for example, had been appropriated into the new Christianity<sup>5</sup>. But more often, as he writes, the older beliefs in the ethnic gods were “perverted into hostile malignant powers, into demons, sorcerers, and giants, who had to be put down, but were nevertheless credited with a certain mischievous activity and influence”<sup>6</sup>. Because so much survived in this new form, or in documents illustrating the old pagan religion, Grimm believed it possible to reconstruct the religion: The shared terms in the Germanic languages concerning religious beliefs and practices, the “identity of mythic notions and nomenclature”, “[t]he precisely similar way in which <...> the religious mythus tacks itself on to the heroic legend [in the various languages]”, “the gradual transformation of gods into devils, of the wise women into witches, of the worship into superstitious customs” and of “[h]eathen festivals and customs into christian”, “[t]he evident deposit from god myths, which is to be found to this day in various folk-tales, nursery-tales games, saws, curses, ill-understood names of days and months, and idiomatic phrases”, and “undeniable intermixture of the old religious doctrine with [the new system] of law”, all pointed to the antiquity and unity of ancient Germanic mythology according to Grimm, and his task was

“faithfully and simply to collect what the distortions early introduced by the nations themselves, and afterwards the scorn and aversion of christians, have left remaining of heathendom...”<sup>7</sup> In this rationale for the recovery of the ancient ethnic religion of the Germanic peoples Finno-Ugrian and other scholars found the strongest intellectual and methodological support for their projects of reconstructing the pre-Christian ethnic religions. Just as Grimm could look to these seemingly Christian and late sources to discover Germanic antiquity, so Estonians, for instance, could turn to the meager early sources and voluminous current folk traditions to recover that which was essentially Estonian, and beyond that Finno-Ugrian, about themselves and their mythology. While Grimm’s influence is directly admitted by Estonians throughout the nineteenth-century, perhaps the best illustration of the influence of his method is Oskar Loo’s *Grundzüge des estnischen Volksglaubens*, a study of Estonian folk belief that rivals Grimm’s work on Germanic mythology in its scope and use of sources. And, just as Grimm believed he was studying the religion and mythology of the ancient Germans, even when he was looking at modern materials, so Loo, as Ülo Tedre comments, believed he was studying ancient Estonians<sup>8</sup>.

This is not to say that the Christian milieu has gone unnoticed. In his survey of Finno-Ugrian religion, Paulson also mentions the conversion of the Finno-Ugrian peoples, though there is little or no sense that the narrative texts he and others have so convincingly used to reconstruct Finno-Ugrian religions might also have had a role in the Christian folk religion of the people studied, or that the Christian role may have been the primary one for the people from whom the narratives were collected<sup>9</sup>. Lauri Honko too comments on the conversion of the Ingrians in his *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland*, but when he turns to discussing spirit beliefs in a phenomenological context he makes no mention of the possible Christian connections and meanings of the beliefs, yet the Ingrians from whom the beliefs were collected were Christians<sup>10</sup>. Honko, like most researchers in Finno-Ugrian religions, appears to regard the supernatural events recorded in the Ingrian belief legends and other genres as phenomenologically distinct from Christian supernatural beliefs. An example of this is Honko’s analysis of a belief concerning Ingrian barn spirits in his article “Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs”<sup>11</sup>. Honko is concerned to show how these beliefs and stories represent the dominating concerns of the Ingrians. He provides a sophisticated phenomenological study of the beliefs to demonstrate their function and meaning in Ingrian culture. Donald Ward has conveniently outlined Honko’s example:

After a festive occasion, some of the men in an Ingrian settlement retired to one of the farmhouses and began playing cards, drinking Schnapps, and in a general way acting boisterously <...>. While the men continued in their boisterous ways, one of the women went out into the dark to draw a bucket of water from the well. While returning to the house, she saw a figure standing next to the wall of the house and she immediately knew that it was the Cobold, and she rushed inside to tell of her experience <...>. The experience was then given the interpretation which it demanded: The cobold appeared because he was dissatisfied with the family, and if the men did not cease their boisterous behavior immediately, there would be dire consequences<sup>12</sup>.

As the Ingrians were Christians it would not be surprising to find that they interpreted this belief in the context of Christian demonology, but Honko focuses on Ingrian belief as Finno-Ugrian belief rather than as folk religion in a Christian context<sup>13</sup>. There are Christian legends from Europe that express similar concerns about the well-being of a community that has offended a supernatural guardian, as, for instance, this story from medieval Frisia:

Cesarius tells the tale <...> of a pious matron in twelfth-century Friesland to whom the Virgin appeared in order to explain that the flooding that was threatening the province was a chastisement from Christ, who was offended by the inhabitants' disregard for his Body in the form of the Communion host. Sometime before then, a man known for his drunkenness and wife beating had knocked the Pyx from out of the hands of the priest with a stein of beer, scattering the consecrated hosts across the floor. The Virgin reportedly made it clear to the matron that this action was only a particularly blatant example of a sin rampant in the community...<sup>14</sup>

The Marian apparition is phenomenologically, and in its social message, indistinguishable from the Ingrian cobold story. Would the Ingrians have kept the spirit beliefs, so easily assimilated to a Christian demonology, separated from their Christian beliefs, as works on Finno-Ugrian religion would lead us to believe? That such Christian apparitions were an available part of the worldview of the Ingrian peasantry is undeniable, but, regrettably, little specifically Christian material was collected or has been studied<sup>15</sup>.

This trend in Finno-Ugrian religious studies is not a thing of the past. Honko's essay "Ritual and Belief: The Phenomenological Context" in the anthology *The Great Bear*, for instance, though a good introductory essay on Finno-Ugrian religion, does not consider the Christian context of Finno-Ugrian religion, nor the possible Christian and Islamic influences on the older ethnic religions<sup>16</sup>. Nor do the discussions of Hungarian weddings and Karelian funerals in the volume discuss the Christian beliefs of the peasantries, even though it is quite apparent from the materials presented that both groups were Christian<sup>17</sup>. The published anthologies and studies of Finno-Ugrian folk religions thus tell only half the story, minimizing the ethnographic fact that many of the Finno-Ugrian religions have their only observable form as Christian folk religions. These Christian folk religions do not appear to have been distinctively Finno-Ugrian ethnic religions to their believers; rather, even though the believers knew that some aspects of their faith were different from that of the official church, they appear to have considered themselves Christians. It is the power of the methodological assumptions of historians of religions and folklorists, through their classification of beliefs as, for instance, pre-Christian and Christian, that allows these religions to be understood as Finno-Ugrian, and for the structure of the supernatural world presented in them to thus be understood as a survival of the older Finno-Ugrian worldview. To understand these religions in the forms encountered ethnographically, and as experienced by the believers themselves, however, the Christian and Finno-Ugrian elements must be studied as a whole, without concern for the origin of specific beliefs. The

historical insights that the methods of folklore and the history of religions provide us should not be allowed to overwhelm the insights of phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to the study of these religions if our goal is to understand the religions as experienced by the believers<sup>18</sup>.

In more recent centuries, with the loss of much of the old supernatural worldview that used to inform theology, the retention of supernatural belief among the laity has become a particular problem for the official churches theologically, and because of the influence of the official churches on definitions of religion, ethnographically as well. Indeed, theology has more and more considered supernatural beliefs, especially demonic beliefs, as essentially superstitious and non-Christian, which has reinforced the ethnographers' beliefs that the religions they encounter aren't really Christian<sup>19</sup>. But, though theology has lost its belief in the power of the supernatural, folk religion has not. As John Kent remarks in his recent work on early Methodism, much of the appeal of supernatural beliefs arises from their connection to what he calls "primary religion". "The primary religious impulse", he writes, "is to seek some kind of extra-human power either for personal protection, including the cure of diseases, or for the sake of ecstatic experience, and possibly prophetic guidance. The individual's test of a religious system is how far it can supply this 'supernatural force'". He continues, noting that "by the eighteenth century there could be a wide gap between what ordinary people wanted from religion and what different religious bodies offered, or thought they were offering. There had never been a perfect fit between the intellectual structures of what claimed to be orthodox Christianity and the alternative interests of proliferating local cults..." Many people, he concludes, "were more concerned to obtain supernatural power for a variety of ends" than with religious orthodoxy<sup>20</sup>. Because of this, Kent is critical of definitions of popular religion, writing that "popular religion is a term sometimes used to describe a system of witches, wise-women and cunning-men, and the charms, curses, and fortune-telling they provided – in which case it seems to denote no more than a particular example of the focus which primary religion has often taken. The term is also sometimes used to indicate a set of religious institutions organized by poorer people..." "[These] definitions", he concludes, "can lead to drawing a thick boundary-line between popular religion and what is regarded as official religion"<sup>21</sup>. To avoid this problem he proposes instead that we distinguish

a primary level of religious behaviour, when human beings, caught between strong, limitless desires and fears on the one hand, and a conscious lack of power over their situation on the other – and this applies whether one is talking about material or moral needs and ambitions – assert that there may be supernatural powers which can be drawn advantageously into the material environment; they also suspect the existence of hostile supernatural powers, against which defenses must be devised. This fundamental level of religious behaviour should be distinguished from the secondary theologies which develop around it, and which, in the world's religious systems, produce fresh expectations of what being religious means and what effects being religious may have on the individual. Institutional theologies are imposed on the primary level of religion and breed sects, denominations, churches, what

you will – sources of power in themselves, social and political. But the primary level, with its basic belief in intrusive supernatural power survives at all times (and this is frequently forgotten) at all social levels<sup>22</sup>.

A large part of the appeal of the eighteenth-century Wesleyan revivals, then, according to Kent, was their ability to provide for this primary level of religion, a level of religion amply attested to in the supernatural legends that have been so widely collected in Europe. In fact, as Kent writes, “as long as the Biblical text dominated Protestant thinking, [the official churches] could not rule out the notion of active evil spirits altogether”<sup>23</sup>.

Christianity thus was both an agent for the destruction of ethnic religious beliefs and also an agent for their preservation – at least insofar as the beliefs addressed the primary religious needs that Kent describes<sup>24</sup>. The syncretism we so often encounter thus arises, it would appear, not only from the failure of the official churches to educate the folk in the doctrines and beliefs of the Christian churches (which in any case were changing themselves), but also because of the failure of the theologies of the official churches to address the primary needs of the folk<sup>25</sup>. This is perhaps less surprising than it seems at first, for, as Dale Martin suggests, “Christianity [itself] may have been as successful as it was because, among other factors, it offered answers to a problem that most people considered a real one: the threat of harm from possibly malicious daimons <...>. [It] offered an antidote more powerful than the poison, a drug stronger than the disease: healing and exorcism in the name of Jesus <...>. In its demonology, Christianity tapped into an assumed reality and met a need in a way that classical philosophy had failed to do”<sup>26</sup>. The intellectualizing theologies of the official churches have consistently failed to eradicate supernatural beliefs because the laity’s commitment is to religious beliefs, practices, and narratives that can answer their primary religious needs.

Our task as folklorists is to understand just how these religious beliefs were, and continue to be, an important force in Christian folk culture. But to do so we need to both understand how traditions of archiving, research, and teaching have shaped our methods of archiving and research, and become more sensitive to the varying meanings, Christian and secular, of the folklore we collect and study.

<sup>1</sup> As can be seen in such nineteenth- and twentieth-century works as *J. W. Boecler*. *Der Ehsten abergläubische Gebrauche, Weisen, und Gewohnheiten*. Ed. F. R. Kreutzwald. St. Petersburg, 1854; *J. Hurt*. *Beiträge zur Kenntnis estnischer Sagen und Ueberlieferungen*. Dorpat, 1863; *M. J. Eisen*. *Eesti mutoloogia*. Tartu, 1919–1926, rpt. Tallinn, 1995; Ivar Paulson’s contributions to Åke Hultrantz, Karl Jettmar, and Ivar Paulson “Les religions arctiques et finnois” (trans. L. Jospin; Paris, 1965), and his “Grundzüge der Volga-finnischen Volksreligion” (*Ural-altäische Jahrbücher*, 1964, No 29, pp. 104–135), “Outline of Permian Folk Religion” (*Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1965, No 2, pp. 148–179), and “The Old Estonian Folk Religion” (Bloomington, 1970); *Uno Harva*. *Die Religion der Tscheremissen*. – FF Communications, 1926, No 61; *Finno-Ugric, Siberian Mythology*. Boston, 1927; *Die religiösen Vorstellung der Mordwinen*. – FF Communications, 1952, No 142; and *Oskar Loorits*. *Grundzüge der estnischen Volksglaubens*, 3 vols. Lund, 1949–1957, among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Les religions finnois. – Åke Hultkrantz, Karl Jettmar, and Ivar Paulson. Les religions arctiques et finnois. Trans. L. Jospin. Paris, 1965, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> See Dale Martin. *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians*. Oxford, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Grimm. *Teutonic Mythology*. Trans. James Stallybrass, vol. 1. London, 1882–1888, rpt. Gloucester, 1976, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> See Ülo Tedre. About the life and work of an eccentric. – Mare Kõiva and Kai Vassiljeva (ed.). *Folk Belief Today*. Tartu, 1995, pp. 457–468, for a useful survey of Loooris's work.

<sup>9</sup> Les religions finnois, passim.

<sup>10</sup> Lauri Honko. Geisterglaube in Ingermanland. – FF Communications, 1961, No 185, p. 15ff., but cf. “Der Begriff ‘Geisterglaube’”, pp. 65–70, and “Homo religiosus”, pp. 120–125.

<sup>11</sup> In Reimund Kvideland and Henning Sehmsdorf (ed.). *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*. Bloomington, 1989, pp. 100–109 (Originally: *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1964, No 1).

<sup>12</sup> Donald Ward. American and European Narratives as Socio-Psychological Indicators. – Juha Pentikäinen and Tuula Juurika (ed.). *Folk Narrative Research*. Helsinki, 1976, p. 349.

<sup>13</sup> See Ülo Valk's “On the Connections between Estonian Folk Religion and Christian Demonology” (*Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*, 1994, No 8, pp. 191–210) and “On the Descent of Demonic Beings: Fallen Angels, Degraded Deities and Demonized Men” (*Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*, 1994, No 9), on syncretism in Estonian folk religion.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz. *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje*. Princeton, 1991, p. 8. Here, as in many other places, one can see that historians and religious studies scholars often have difficulty accepting that the materials they study are in fact folk narrative. The sources that are used for church history, in fact, often contain much in the way of folk narrative: a good example of this is Symeon of Durham's history of Durham church, which contains many stories that are obviously folk narratives, but which are not treated as such by historians. See David Rollason (ed. and trans.). *Symeon of Durham: Libbellus de Exordio atque Procurso istius hoc est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie / Tract on the Origin and Progress of this the Church of Durham*. Oxford, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> And even when Christianity is mentioned, as in Juha Pentikäinen's study of Marina Takalo, the emphasis is on the Finno-Ugrian elements of the beliefs. In the case of Marina Takalo this is especially surprising, because, as Pentikäinen makes clear, Takalo was an Orthodox Old Believer who was very devout. By contrast, Irma-Riitta Järvinen's work on Karelian sacred legends, which includes the anthology of religious legends “Legendat” (Helsinki, 1981); “Transmission of Norms and Values in Finnish-Karelian Sacred Legends” (*Arv*, 1981, No 37, pp. 27–33); “Nastja Rantsi: Narrator of Sacred Legends” (*Studia Fennica*, 1989, No 33, pp. 55–63); “World-View in Finnish-Karelian Sacred Legends” (in *M. Hoppál* and *J. Pentikäinen* (ed.). *Uralic Mythology and Folklore*. Budapest and Helsinki, 1989, pp. 89–96); and “Sacred Legends and the Supranormal Tradition in Greek Orthodox Karelia” (*Arv*, 1993, No 49, pp. 37–42), sketches out nicely the role of Christian legends in the religious life of the Karelian peasantry.

<sup>16</sup> K. Bosley, M. Branch, L. Honko, S. Timonen (ed. and trans.). *The Great Bear: A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages*. Helsinki, 1993. But see too the essays by M. Hoppál, A. Viires, and A. Aikensvald, E. Helmski and V. Petrukhin in *M. Hoppál* and *J. Pentikäinen* (ed.). *Uralic Mythology and Folklore*. Budapest and Helsinki, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> This is not a problem confined to Finno-Ugrian studies. With the exception of a few collections of Dutch and Flemish legends, such as F. van Es's “*Wasch sagenboek*” (Gent, 1944), legend collections do not typically combine secular and sacred legends.

<sup>18</sup> See Juha Pentikäinen. *Oral Repertoire and World View*. – FF Communications, 1978, No 219, and *Tekla Dömötör*. Hungarian Folk Beliefs. Bloomington, 1981. The recent collection of essays edited by Mare Kõiva and Kai Vassiljeva “*Folk Belief Today*” (Tartu, 1995), is a mixed collection of older style studies of Finno-Ugrian religion focusing on shamanism and the specifically Finno-Ugrian aspects of the folk religions and essays that consider the Christian context.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Bultmann was a key figure in this demythologizing of Christianity. See, for instance, his “*New Testament Theology and Mythology*” (trans. S. M. Ogden; Philadelphia, 1984), especially

“New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation”, pp. 1–43.

<sup>20</sup> *John Kent*. Wesley and the Wesleyans. Cambridge, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208, note 2.

<sup>24</sup> “Belief in evil spirits did not die out rapidly <...>. It was [for instance] held for some time that Protestant ministers might entreat <...> God to remove diabolic powers. The Nonconformists asserted both the possibility of demonic possession and of fasting and prayer as remedies until the end of the seventeenth-century” (*ibid.*, p. 208, note 2).

<sup>25</sup> On the efforts of the official churches and the state to control folk religion see, for instance, *James D. Tracy* and *Marguerite Ragnow* (ed.). *Religion and the Early Modern State: Views from China, Russia, and the West*. Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> *Dale Martin*. *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians*, p. 243.

## KRIKŠČIONYBĖ KAIP LIAUDIES KULTŪROS STUDIJŲ PROBLEMA

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### Santrauka

Nors paprastai apie archyvus ir studentų mokymą linkstama galvoti atskirai, vis dėlto šie dalykai yra glaudžiai susiję. Tai, kas kaupiama archyvuose, dideliu mastu lemia mokslo tyrimų ir publikacijų pobūdį, o šie savo ruožtu veikia galimas studijų temas ir dėstomus dalykus. Straipsnyje analizuojama, kuria linkme finougrų religinių tekstų tyrimai ir archyvavimas pastūmėjo finougrų religijų studijas, bei mėginama pateikti būdų, kaip mūsų archyvų darbui bei klasifikacijai taikomas kategorijas padaryti imlesnes religinėms bei pasaulietinėms sakmių ir liaudies tikėjimų prasmėms.

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