

COMMUNICATION WITH SUPERNATURAL PROTECTORS AND HELPERS IN ESTONIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: Estonia has been repeatedly called the least religious country in Europe or even the whole world. The Estonian mainstream media and politics mainly resonate with the identification of Estonians as a rational high-tech and science-oriented nation. Although the number of people who believe in biblical God and/or feel affiliated to any canonical religion is indeed low according to representative polls, there are numerous other forms for communicating with the numinous (e.g., in the form of protective angels, spirit animals, nature spirits, spirits of dead relatives, or pets who give spiritual guidance) observable in the Estonian society. Based on personal experience narratives from the recent decade, this article will give an overview of supernatural helpers and protectors with whom people in Estonia communicate. Answers will be sought to the following questions: Who are these beings? From which traditions do they stem? Which ways of communicating with them are practiced? What are the differences compared to older layers of religion? This paper will demonstrate a recent heterogenous pluralism, presented in the co-existence and fluctuation of – partly situational – beliefs in various supernatural figures, and try to locate these findings in the current (post)secularization debates. The author concludes that such contemporary models of religious beliefs and practices are not necessarily replacing the traditional ones but rather recycle already existing religious ideas in somewhat modified configurations that are adjusted to the contemporary needs. Despite the rather polarized view of religion and science in the mainstream media and political discourse, the empirical material shows that such vernacular beliefs and practices may build symbioses with scientific conceptions of the world.

Keywords: supernatural protectors, communication with the numinous, contemporary spirituality, belief narratives.

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Introduction and methodology

The Estonian constitution states that there is no state church and individuals can belong to any religious group and practice any religion as long as this does not harm public order, health or morals (Estonian Constitution, 2020). But the actual religious-spiritual life in Estonia is highly multifaceted and only fragments of it can be covered with classical definitions of religion that presume stable belonging, commitment or hierarchies of authority (see similar observations by Rimmel & Uibu, 2015, p. 5). The 2021 census found that 58 percent of the population don't feel connected to any official religion and from the ones who do, the biggest groups are rather small – Russian Orthodox making up 16 percent and Lutheranism 8 percent of the whole population. However, there are plenty of people who agree or rather agree in public polls with the statement that angels protect and help people (54 percent in 2015 and 50 percent in 2020), that sensitive persons can cure illnesses (62 percent) or that magic rituals can have an influence on events or persons (38 percent) (data from the representative public polls “About religion, life and religious life”, organized by Estonian Council of Churches). Such beliefs build only seldom a stable coherent religious worldview and there is a number of liquid combinations that are difficult to measure with fixed statistical categories: for instance, belief in angels often exists without a belief in God or anything defined as “religion”; real-life animals and deceased grandparents can be perceived as supernatural protectors, and rituals or courses are attended to make contact with such otherworldly beings whereby sacrality, entertainment and consumerism can go hand-in-hand.

However, there are certain tensions between such pluralistic spiritual-religious outputs and the dominating ideology in Estonia which is science- and technology-oriented. In the mainstream discourse, spirituality and esoteric teachings, at times also religiosity as such are mostly met with skepticism and ridicule, being viewed as something subcultural or marginal (cf., a similar observation for Finland in Koski, 2016: 19–21). At the same time, the mainstream media (e.g., women's magazines, several newspapers, television and radio programs) nevertheless frequently produce interviews with local healers who communicate with protective spirits, or with shamans who teach people to contact with their spirit animal or ancestors. Thus, the messages in the public sphere are mixed, on the one hand admitting that the number of the ones interested in spiritual topics is high and on the other hand, presenting such phenomena as something weird and alternative. For example, TV3, one of the biggest Estonian television broadcasting companies offered in the series “Ten most burning questions” besides topics like cybercrime, environmental crises and violence against family members also an episode about astrology, framing it with the statement “Recently, Estonians have been hit by a real madness of mysticism and esotericism” (TV3, 2021). Similar attitudes resonate in the speeches of politicians. For example, in a 2019 interview, Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik titled alternative medicine practices as a whole as “*uhhuu*-medicine” (gibberish medicine) and this concept found also wide reflection in the media (e.g. in one of the biggest newspapers Eesti Ekspress, see Vedler Moora, 2019), whereby vernacular healing methods are often associated with religious behavior (especially in the form of “blind” believing and acting). There are also researchers of social sciences and humanities (e.g., Tiidenberg, 2022) who find that in most cases “*uhhuu*-science” indeed deserves being ridiculed in the news and internet memes. One of the authors of the recently published “Small *uhhuu*-book” (Jäger & Koik 2024), Märt Koik, said in a TV-interview that people believe *uhhuu*-theories because they like simple solutions. However, the public sphere similarly likes simple categorizations of people with spiritual interests or supernatural experiences, perceiving them as a homogenous – mostly uneducated, credulous and labile – whole. At the same time, empirical research has shown that events interpreted as supernatural experiences can be experienced also by persons who have scientific worldviews, and scientific and supernatural reasoning can exist simultaneously or fluctuate (cf., Hiimäe 2020, 2024; Haimila et al. 2024).

As quantitative statistical models have difficulty in offering a nuanced picture of Estonian spiritual-religious life, this article uses qualitative content, context and discourse analysis to give an overview of the ways of communicating with supernatural protectors and helpers that are experienced and narrated about in the 21st century Estonia² and position these findings in the current (post)secularization discussions. As source material, personal experience narratives from the recent decade have been used. The contemporary material from the young generation came from responses to the School-lore 2018 questionnaire (3717 respondents in total, abbreviation KP) where the rubric “Fears and beliefs” contained the question “What protective beings (e.g. guardian angels, spirit animals), protective objects, protective words do you know or use?” As contemporary material from adults, threads from esoteric as well as mainstream internet forums discussing encounters with supernatural beings from 2013–2024, and interviews (ca. with 350 persons, abbreviation VPK) about protective rituals from 2017–2023 that the author’s students conducted as homework in the frames of courses on vernacular religion were used. Additionally, fieldwork material (ca. 100 texts and ritual episodes) gathered during the process of writing a book (Hiimäe, 2019) on religious traditions and spiritual teachings practiced in Estonia over time served as basis. Topical content was detected by keyword search or by frontal reading.

1. Who are these supernatural protectors?

Personal experience narratives from Estonia (but also other contemporary western settings) indicate that experiencing a supernatural being for the first time is usually perceived as unexpected and creates an ontological shock, but on an intuitive level, almost everyone understands the meaning of *supernatural* (cf., a similar thought in Craffert, Winkelman, Baker, 2019, p. 7) and classifies certain experiences as belonging to the realm of supernatural protection, at least partly based on knowledge from older or contemporary folklore. It becomes clear from the analyzed narratives that the categories of supernatural helpers described are usually taken over or inspired from older tradition, but they can be modified to better meet contemporary needs (e.g., by adding cultural loans from other cultures). Differences to older layers of religion can be also observed in the fact that communicating with otherworldly entities doesn’t presume a persistent contact, or even belief. And yet, mechanical reciting of prayers can be used despite of clearly stating non-belief as in the following example text:

“I’m not religious and I don’t believe in God. But somehow, ever since I was a little kid, I have always turned to him when I had any concerns or requests. I always read the Lord’s prayer and turn to him. There are things that have really gone as I have wished with all my heart. This is a kind of little belief of mine.” (VPK, K11, woman, 34, 2024)³

Similarly, figures of Buddha or angels can be carried or kept at home with the aim of getting protection but without actively believing in respective teachings or following them. Several individuals mentioned wearing a T-shirt, a tattoo or an adornment (e.g., pendant, ring) with religious symbolics that they just liked (with only a very vague sense of belief), getting thereby nevertheless the feeling of protectedness on the level of perception or imagination.

² As the term ‘supernatural’ has been viewed as ontologically problematic (see a topical discussion in Haimila et al. 2024), it seems necessary to specify that in this article the term ‘supernatural being’ is understood as “an incorporeal being believed to have powers to affect the course of human events” (as defined in several dictionaries, e.g. vocabulary.com) with the reservation that in specific personal experience narratives, various formulations may be used.

³ Estonian sample texts are translated by the author.

As for the particular targets of communication, only very seldom contact with God was mentioned – mainly by the Estonians who identified themselves as Lutherans or individuals with Russian-speaking and Russian Orthodox background. Likewise, saints were referred to just in rare cases, mainly in the form of experiencers passively carrying an amulet or icon with a saint's picture. At the same time, quite symptomatically to postsecular religiosity, some persons obtained the information about protective saints not from Christian sources but from esoteric or astrology books, for example one student who interviewed a 75-years old woman described her experience as follows: "According to the astrology book, her patron saint is Peter, in whom the old lady has plenty of faith, although she is even not a Christian woman." (VPK K12, 2024).

The pluralism of ideas of spiritual-religious protection available in a globalized society is reflected in hybrid forms of communication. In many cases the same person claimed to have several supernatural protectors and could additionally own protective amulets from various traditions, for example a girl said that she used to have a protective angel but later it was smoothly replaced by her spirit animal who is wolf (KP623, girl, 18, 2018) and a boy said that he turns to both, protective angels and spirit animals for help (KP39, boy, 13, 2018).

One feature that had remained rather stable was protective contact with deceased grandparents (to a lesser extent, with ancestors in general). The following narrative is framed with expressions that hint to gauging such a contact as peculiar – which hints to taking at least partly over the public attitude – but it also becomes clear that the woman nonetheless has used the same ritual repeatedly:

"I don't think I have any guardian spirits or guardian angels. In my short life, I've been through a lot of things that I wouldn't wish for anyone. In those moments when I have needed support and have not been able to ask for it, I have always turned my head to heaven. It seems a bit awkward at the moment, but I have spilled all the worry on my deceased grandparents. Sometimes it has helped, and I have felt able to move on." (VPK M14 woman 20, 2024)

Spiritual practices (e.g., with Native American roots and animistic cosmologies) that regard nature as alive and sacred have become known in Estonia in the wind of the globalized information flow and have possibly received a more active reception in the recent years due to the general milieu of the climate crisis and green transition ideology. Such trends are likely to have contributed to the focus on certain spiritual ecocultural bonds, for example with spirit or power animals (see more in Hiimäe 2019, pp. 33–34). In the next sample text, an animal guardian spirit appears rather as imagination but there are also narratives about conscious contact-making and about real-life wild animals encountered in nature or pets who are described in the function of spirit-animals mediating important messages, thus obtaining a new cultural meaning through such imagined, lived, and narrated interaction:

"I believe my guardian spirit is a white deer. It appeared to me in a dream when I was feeling lost and searching for answers. In the dream, the deer was calm and dignified, and it led me through the dark forest to a safe place. Since then, I consider it a symbol of wisdom and protection. When I need to make an important decision, I sometimes imagine a deer walking in front of me and clearing the path of negative energy. For me, this is not just a fantasy, but a symbolic side with my own inner strength and intuition." (VPK A9, woman, 25, 2024)

2. Ways of communicating

The ways of communicating with the supernatural protectors and helpers reflect the general tendency to cover one's spiritual needs with outputs tailored to individualized interests. Forms of commu-

nication are flexible – adaptable to consumerist needs-based formats as well as to devoted spiritual use.

As mentioned, in Estonian personal experience narratives angels are one of the most frequently described supernatural helpers in correlation with the display of an “angel wave” or “return of angels” that some researchers (e.g., Draper, Baker, 2011) have documented in the context of Europe and the United States in general. Simultaneously, for more than two decades, Estonian bookshops offer numerous self-help manuals and sets of angel cards that contain detailed instructions for communicating with angels (e.g. translations from respective books authored by Doreen Virtue or Lorna Byrne, or a book from Estonian healers, clairvoyants and sensitive persons describing their contact with angels, see Antsov 2010). According to the analyzed narratives, communication with angels could take place through a variety of approaches engaging various senses, active visualization rituals or a monologue of gratitude as in the following sample text:

“I personally think that I have a guardian angel, and it is my father who died young when I was only 13 years old. When I feel bad for a longer time or there is a period when everything fails, then I always go to the graveyard. I bring my father a candle and thank him for watching over us and not letting anything bad happen. Strange but it always works. After such an act I soon discover that I’m kind of calmer, things start to go smoother again and everything will be good.” (VPK, N12, woman, 77, 2022)

The next sample text mediates also ways of help-seeking from a guardian angel in the context of specific situations characteristic to the modern technologized lifestyle that necessitate quick solutions:

“I would say I have a guardian angel who protects me in traffic. I myself think that it is some ancestor, but I cannot say for sure. I got in touch with this angel when I got my own driving license and started driving more. I am in contact with my guardian angel only when I am in the car, I communicate with him in my mind – I give him messages about my wishes, questions. I usually get the answers as some kind of gut feeling or a physical result. For example, a year ago I was on a trip to Austria and had to continue to Budapest by train. I ran out of time and had to take a taxi to the central train station. The taxi driver’s GPS showed that I would be 5-10 minutes late, and the taxi driver himself did not rush extra and was very law-abiding [in his driving manners]. In my head, I asked my guardian angel to turn all the traffic lights green and clear the way for us. And it worked, because I even got to the train 3 minutes early, so this situation confirmed the presence of my guardian angel.” (VPK E10, woman 31, 2024).

In some accounts, there is no clear contact-seeking, but the communication is described as just “knowing” or “feeling the angel’s presence” that can be manifested through noticing certain signs. A 75-years old woman (whose belief in saints was mentioned above) said that she waits for signs after praying to the protective angel and these can come either as a message from other people or as changes in the weather – if the sun comes out or there is a full moon visible in the sky, she interprets it as a positive indicator (VPK K12, woman, 75, 2024).

The manners of communication with elves described in the following sample text have got inspiration from certain new spirituality teachings and courses:

“The interviewed person has the feeling that she has elves in her belly. When she becomes aware of them with the help of breathing techniques they hold and protect her. She has a feeling from quite a young age that someone protects and holds her because there have never been accidents although there have been very real possibilities for these. Contact with the belly elves takes place through conscious breathing exercises, she came to these exercises in the course of a yoga session.” (VPK K8, woman 31, 2022)

Often the contact with supernatural protectors starts during a person’s difficult life period or in relation to a trauma when the need for spiritual-psychological support is perceived as more pressing as in the following interview that describes two different types of protectors:

“The contact with the House Spirit started when she bought this house about two years ago. The interviewed person says that the House Spirit gives a hint of himself when she is in a bad mood. She puts to the House Spirit milk and communicates with it sometimes, asks to keep an eye on home when the owner

herself leaves home. She has also two protective angels. This contact started when she had a near-death experience in relation to giving birth to her child.” (VPK M7, woman 47, 2022)

3. Discussion: from religious to the postsupernatural and postsecular

Considering the multi-faceted forms and vague borders of religion or spirituality, several researchers have found it useless to try to find one single definition for a whole field with such an enormous diversity – it seems rather appropriate to use specific descriptions or a continuum of terms for specific contexts or eras (Sutcliffe, 2014; Hiiemäe 2024, p. 44). As for the current context of communication with supernatural protectors, it seems fitting to revisit the classical and much-cited definition of religion by Edward Burnett Tylor, who defined religion as “the belief in spiritual beings” (Tylor, 1871). Indeed, the described modes of communication can be viewed as a form of contemporary unofficial lived religion.

However, with such a laconic definition it is little said about how exactly such communication forms manifest in individual cases or to what extent they contain active believing. Thus, some additional supporting concepts seem necessary. Wildman et al. (2020, p. 1) talk about supernaturalist and post-supernaturalist cultures, pointing out a worldwide resurgence of supernatural religion and deducing from a computational model that the conditions for producing widespread rejection of supernatural worldviews are highly specific and difficult to produce and sustain, and therefore supernatural explanations are apt to return time and again. I agree that a culture without experiences interpreted as supernatural is rare, yet the reasons for their (re)emergence seem to me more complex. As already shown, experiencers can construe certain encounters as supernaturally protective without actively believing in supernatural entities or having a clearly supernatural worldview. It can be just a vague non-exclusion or stand-by acceptance of the possibility of supernatural help that can be activated in certain moments (e.g., when feeling lost or insecure) (cf., Hiiemäe, 2020, p. 226). But there are also cases when such an activation happens to people who identify themselves as skeptics or as someone with a scientific worldview. Thus, there must be mechanisms that explain how fluctuations between such seemingly mutually exclusive worldviews become possible in the current pluralistic societal milieu. Here I agree with Terhi Utriainen who talks about “coexisting worldviews and ontologies” and postulates that “by learning to key the ritual frame in and out it may become possible to keep separate while sensitively juxtaposing ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ realities simultaneously, and to navigate between often heterogeneous and complex social contexts” (Utriainen, 2016, pp. 46, 48).

A connecting point between these two poles can be the process of sanctification or sacralization that could be observed, for example, in personal experience narratives where pets were viewed as protective supernatural beings. As Pargament and Mahoney (2005, p. 183-185) state, “Sanctification can also occur indirectly; perceptions of divine character and significance can develop by investing objects with qualities that are associated with the divine.” Even if the relationship with the described supernatural protectors can be situational or superficial, it can still instill trust, hope, courage, support for coping, spiritual feelings, meaning, etc. in a similar way to a more committed communication with the divine based on a traditional canonical religion.

A continuum of further terms used in religious studies can be applied to describe such a relationship with the non-human – postsecularism (see related discussion in Casanova, 2013), semi-secularism (Burén, 2015) or hop-on hop-off spirituality (Hiiemäe, 2024) that all cover some relevant aspects of it. Furthermore, for analyzing experiences that the experiencers interpret as communication with supernatural protectors a combination of theories from various disciplines seems appropriate, considering cognitive processes (see more about the cognitive and neurobiological approach in Pyysiäinen 2009; Winkelmann, 2019), cultural, political, ideological and societal trends and dynamics,

theories of sanctification and transcendence but also approaches that view them as forms of (experiencer) reality (see more about experience-centered approach in Hufford 1995 and reality-related approach in Strieber & Kripal, 2016). However, from the experiencers' point of view, the search for meaning and psychological wellbeing in order to cope better with life's challenges seemed to be one of the major triggers for such forms of communication (see theorization about such a function Watson-Jones, Legare, 2022).

4. Conclusions

The material investigated for this article indicated that despite of the widespread public self-identification of Estonians as non-religious, the people here have not necessarily lost their religiosity, but it is just expressed in modified and updated forms that are not so obvious from polls and statistics and don't fit well into fixed terms and definitions. Contemporary models of communication with supernatural helpers can be considered just one of such forms. They are not replacing traditional beliefs and practices but are still inspired by them and many old supernatural characters (e.g., angels, house spirits) exist also in contemporary personal experience narratives. Nevertheless, the processes of secularization and globalization have altered the social role of religion. The increasing diversity of religious-spiritual outputs has led to fragmentation of powers, resulting in the absence of a central church or religious authority. Power relationships on the human/non-human level have also changed – modern supernatural bonds are non-demanding and don't presume steady devotion or sacrifices, they can offer therapeutic benefits on a need's basis.

Concurrently, supernatural- and religiosity-related topics are well visible in the public sphere, prompting ideological negotiations and positionings on a polarized axis in relation to scientific worldviews. However, the public discourse that ridicules esoteric reasonings seems not to diminish them. Rather the contrary, it can lead to specific identity formations, sometimes also to configurations of conspiratoriality (see more about the term in Ward & Voas, 2011). However, tolerance and understanding in society would be likely to increase if such polarized approaches were reduced in the public sphere and an acknowledgment would be reached that scientific views can co-exist with the religious to various gradations and there are forms of communication with the supernatural that can support everyday coping.

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