

THE LAST MINUTES OF OUR EARTH

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Abstract: The article seeks to compare popular omens of the end of the world with the auguries of prophets. Both traditions reflect societal and cultural changes, the fears for doomsday tend to integrate new interpretations and causes for destruction. Astronomic celestial phenomena retain their relevance whereas the recent discoveries in astronomy, physics, genetics and other sciences have remarkably complemented the list omens for the end of the world. Latter-day prophecies leashed by human behaviour and intellect, alien civilisations and other relevant motifs have come to the forefront during the last century. Prophetic predictions propose fixed dates, represent certain political or ideological trends, associated with social norms and evoked as a result of changes therein. Among the prophetic messages there are stereotypical expressions and omens which have been adapted and attributed to different persons. Karl Tõnisson's leaflet *Meie maakera viimased minutid* 'The Last Minutes of Our Earth', printed in 1907, is a political-apocalyptic contemplation based on scriptural passages substantiated by references to scholarly works, illustrated with five woodcuts. The omens of the end of the world, listed by the author, comprise an earthquake in Lisbon in 1795, a dark day in New England in 1780 and the 1833 meteor storm in America. The discussions presented in the leaflet differ from Tõnisson's later self-centred political fantasies on Pan-Baltonia, and the ideology and rhetoric of the booklets endeavouring to create a native religion merged with Buddhism.

Key words: end of the world, Karl Tõnisson, leaflet, prophecy, prophets, *The Last Minutes of our Earth*

INTRODUCTION

The leaflet, *Meie maakera viimased minutid* 'The Last Minutes of Our Earth' (Tõnisson 1907), compiled and illustrated by Karl August Tõnisson (20.08.1873 Umbusi – 05.05.1962 Rangoon) inspired me to observe the end of the world prophecies in the 20th century. In addition to the doomsday omens recorded from oral tradition, the collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives also comprise prophetic lore written down by the close ones of the prophets, and the prophecies preserved by the mediation of their memories, whereas the material written by the prophets themselves is more infrequent. Auguries, prophetic messages, revelations and brief life stories form a series of sources

concerning religious life, helping us to observe the changes in the rhetoric of the prophecies and their social meanings, within the framework of the non-alternated invariant basic message.

Proceeding from the standpoint that narratives are an archetype, a fundamental way to talk about the world (Georgakopoulou 2007: 27), the narratives and printed publications of an individual fall into the context of other similar printed matter and earlier tradition, allowing us to position this concrete leaflet in a more general discourse. The interpretations of the world, conveyed in the leaflet, constitute a part of a shared mental resource which, in turn, is associated with earlier narratives. Likewise, end of the world omens are, at least partially, a branch of daily conventional knowledge, whereas the conventional truth and everyday narratives, furcating therefrom, are also covered with social practice. End of the world omens, constituting the other part of this branch, are usually a part of a wider social critique or ideology, individualised lengthier narratives. These stories are characterised by the reminiscence of personal and collective history, enriched with the highlighting of mental and religious values.

The Last Minutes of our Earth is an example of religion related discussions. The small-size printed prophecy published in the format of a leaflet is, regarding its nature, similar to hand-written religious chain letters and to the tradition of heaven-letters or protective letters emanating from religious innovations. In the Estonian context, the author of the leaflet, Karl Tõnisson, is more commonly known as one of the first persons spreading the message of Buddhism. His path towards Buddhism is similar to that of others who discussed religious issues in the secularising society at the beginning of the 20th century: exploration of Christian values, inclination from thereof towards a syncretic faith and theosophy, quests in the field of ethnic native religion, and the amalgamation of all the relevant knowledge in writing. The choices of K. Tõnisson, who had started off as a religious innovator, differed from the other seekers of truth at the beginning of the 20th century, regarding their final solution. For instance, at the time when Anton Schultz, known as the collector of Estonian folklore, elaborated fantasy-rich native mythology and pre-history (Kikas 2006: 18ff), Karl Tõnisson advanced to become the advocate and promoter of Buddhism. In his vernacular writings Tõnisson combines Buddhism with a social state utopia, envisaging the unification of the three Baltic countries (referred to by the author as Eesti, Latvija, Lietuva) in a Pan-Baltic state, with a niche left also for ethnic deities. His unusual and scandalous attire, behaviour and presentations brought about town gossip and rumours. Recurrently, Tõnisson has presented his life story in a poetic format, describing the change of his faith and principles, by way of using great words (according to Brother Vahindra's use of language, the religion of Jews equals to Christianity):

[---] *kord oli aeg, kus hullustuses*
Ma juute lora uskusin
Ja nõtru vendi – ilma rahvaid –
Küll valet kuulma kutsusin.

Once there was time when I was crazy
An believed the nonsense of the Jews
I called upon my feeble brothers –
The men of Earth – to believe their truth.

Kord oli aeg, kus pööre tuli
Ja päästmine mu hingele,
Siis juudausu maha jätsin ja –
end andsin Buddha Dharmale.

Once time was ripe for an upheaval
And soul of mine was saved,
I left behind the Jewish faith and –
Gave myself to Buddha Dharma.

Siis algasivad hirmuajad
mul tagakiusajatega.
Küll söimasivad Eesti mehed
Mind oma ajalehtedega [---]

Then times of terror dawned for me
With persecutors all around.
In their newspapers Estonian men
Relentlessly reviled me (Vahindra 1928).

The connections of Barefoot Tõnisson with Estonia were ruptured as early as 1930, his later notoriety was enhanced by media publications, and also by the visits of Estonians to Buddhist centres in Asia and face-to-face contacts with him, forming a legendary part of his image (see, in detail, Talts 2003; Gerodnik 1973). The records of his after-death miracle in Rangoon and the fact that he was proclaimed an Arhat and Bodhisattva provided him with a special nimbus in his homeland.

The article introduces Karl Tõnisson's omens of the end of the world, in comparison with the auguries of other prophets, and provides an analysis, regarding the relationships of the popular corpus of end-day omens and prophetic lore, their common features and differences, and the position of this leaflet in the worldview axis of K. Tõnisson, bearing in mind his Buddhist and ethnic-pagan mindset in the later stage of his life.

END OF THE WORLD IN FOLK TRADITION

The diverse system of popular omens of the end of the world is based on the empirical observations of nature and society, yet in turn, it is being affected by scholarly standpoints. The significance of scholarly standpoints has increased in the course of centuries, facilitated by the media and school system. Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding are critical with regard to the 20th century media, stating that American media, which is always there on the spot, presents the global events as a continuous tautological crisis (Stewart & Harding 1999: 291) and intensifies contradictory standpoints.

Throughout the ages, most attention has been attributed to unusual celestial phenomena: eclipses or the emergence of a bright comet, halos, circles or crosses in the vicinity of the Sun; unusual colouring of the sky, asteroids, comets and their tails comprising toxic gases; enormous meteorites falling on the Earth causing the potential destruction of everything living; the Earth, shifted from its axis; disorder caused by the sequence of planets shifting the position of the Earth or the equator; and, during the last century, the possibility of occurring in the influence zone of a giant star, absorption into a black hole, collapse of the galaxy – these are just some examples of a long list of concern narratives and belief motifs, brought about by astronomic phenomena and associated with human living space, that have worried mankind. In many cases the scenes witnessed with one's own eyes have been explained by way of Biblical passages, amalgamating personal experience and the future forecasts into one integral whole.

This is a story from my aunt, Triin Vakkum in 1932.

For nation shall rise against nation, and brothers against brothers. There shall be earthquakes and floods. People wouldn't know what it means and from who to look for help [---].

Once, when going back home from our place Triin became the victim of an unprecedented revelation. The northern sky was severely red, covering half of the firmament. Red as blood. And some kind of light flashes illuminated this red sky. My aunt had fallen on her knees and prayed to God as he was afraid of the "Doomsday", i.e. when everything is destroyed, and only the angels and God alone would live. Whether they would look like people or rather like animal images, my aunt could not explain. She thought they would probably look like humans. The poor soul had been on her knees for several hours, and prayed reverently as she thought herself to be very sinful.

Drowsy after crying and many long prayers, she had stood up to go home. When she had turned her face towards the morning, the eastern direction, she had noticed a bloody red cross, formed of clouds, on the vault of the sky. Now, Triin had fallen on her knees, anticipating an immediate end of the world. She wouldn't dare to make a step. In the morning, she was found by a villager who had helped her go home.

Triin had ailed for several weeks. She did not complain about any pain or bother anywhere, but still could not get out of her bed. When I went to see her, she looked at me with a strange glance and whispered: "A war will break out, a big war, a lot of people will be dragged into this. Many will be killed and you will also go."

I did not believe her at first but in 1938, when I served as a conscript in the polygon unit of Valkla artillery I recalled this again. World war II commenced in 1938. The fascists attacked Poland. In 1939, Soviet troops marched into Estonia. Fascist occupation. Concentration camps and crematoriums, I also had to take part in this as a prisoner of Kaunas Stalag 336, currently P fost.

Is there a wise enough person in the world who could tell us to how many perished in World War II – there is no one to be found! The prediction of aunt Triin turned out to be true. After the Great War, when I came into contact with my aunt for the last time, she still remembered this, but refused to retell her revelation. Still, my aunt was convinced that all this had been the foretelling of God, as the young and old have withdrawn from faith, they don't go to church nor pray to God. There were many, many more awful "things" for us to anticipate in the future (RKM II 385, 524/7 < Pärnu l < Jämaja parish (1985)).

However, there are many more recordings of religious generalisations which have not been individualised:

When the northern lights are really widely displayed and when crosses and lines are seen on the sky, and when the sky is red – this means war or great changes (H, Kase, 100 a < Halliste parish).

The descriptions in the sample texts are associated with symbols and signs heralding the coming perdition and imminent changes. The conception of the cyclic nature of the world – destruction would occur after the passing of predestined years, after which the world would be born new – is a part of the end of the world belief. The length of the cycle is determined differently in different cultures. Estonian tradition narrates about the length of the world of several thousand years, whereas the references made in the 19th century recordings indicate that "this is written in the Bible" or "this is how it has been predicted". A century later, it is the association with the turn of the millennium that becomes salient as a sign of the end.

In the year two thousand, when it expires, the end of the world will come. It would not come right away and maybe it would take a year or two (RKM II 461, 321 (8) < Võnnu parish (1986)).

It seems that one of the functions of conventional beliefs is to check the morale of human society, uniting the end terms with the downfall of the world and creation. Pursuant to popular logic, the vital force of creation becomes exhausted in the course of time, and at the peak of its degradation, everything

that has decayed or spoilt will perish or be ended. The reason for this destruction can be the physical and moral degeneration of people and wildlife (popular explanations: hens are not able to lay eggs, people have big heads but small hands and legs; a hen's egg has to be carried between two men as mankind has weakened to an extent that one man could not be able to carry an egg). Another outbreak of a wave of fear, anticipating mankind with a large head and weak physical body occurred again concurrently with the spread of personal computers, and later, a relevant concern was launched by the Internet, associated with its entertaining opportunities and communication networks. Those worrying about the issues comprised ordinary citizens, teachers and literati.

Most of the beliefs, incl. the prophetic messages of Nostradamus (1503–1566) that had aroused the cultural space of Europe for centuries were associated with the year 2000. The exact timing of the end of the world enlivened discussions during the second half of the century and impelled people to look for signs of crisis in technology, nature and society. Global wars, economic crises, dissemination of information and the media were merely augmenting the meaning of the threatening signs. Relying on the appearing of comets (Kõiva 2007) and signs in nature, concrete dates had been set for the end of the world, decades prior to the coming of the new millennium. Hardly could one date pass when a new one was suggested. Armageddon, and the exchange of the eras concurrent with the millennium, i.e. the coming of the so-called era of light, together with the beginning of the world of the creatures of light, were frequent topics for conversations. Global warming was considered the cause of destruction – Tallinn would drown due to melting icebergs or flood waters released as a result of an unexpected catastrophe – or global pollution or the coming of an ice age. Likewise, rumours spread about a new untreatable disease starting off in Africa, similar to AIDS, killing everyone irrespective of the gender, age and nationality, thus eliminating people in the majority of the regions in the world. Large cities with a high concentration of inhabitants were supposed to experience particular destruction. People were also afraid of a global nuclear war as the only living creatures to survive would be spiders and rats, and hopefully also a few people somewhere on the islands of the Southern Sea. The regaining of independence in Estonia released warning narratives of a mass-scale famine and, simultaneously, of a locus deserving a special wrath of God, destined to undergo full destruction during a major catastrophe in the near future.

Folklore and mythic thinking connects the end of the world with more substantial mythical catastrophes: everything alive would perish in the course of the war of the worlds. The perishing would be unleashed as a punishment for the disgraceful deeds of divine creatures, as a consequence for violating legiti-

mate norms, as the tragic perishing of gods and people in the *Older Edda*, as a result of treacherous and mean acts. The opinion prevalent from the early Modern Times, i.e. that the persistence of the world is jeopardised by the sinning of people, violation of the laws of the Kingdom of God, and lack of faith, is still clearly perceivable in the written records from the end of the 19th century.

It is only in the 20th century when the main reason for the end of the world – violation of the rules set by God, followed by a punishment, i.e. the end of the world mutually effected by God and nature – is complemented by the relevant beliefs which highlight the latter times as a consequence of thoughtless and selfish behaviour of people. Such beliefs, in the form of narratives, express fears and warning motifs against excessive consumption, pollution of nature, and the attempts to clone wildlife and human beings, genetically modify crops and animals, regarded just as dangerous as the inevitably imminent third World War with power weapons of mass destruction, the final act of everything living.

Human activity, or more widely, the development of technology brought about a renewal of some old motifs: the destruction is released by the revolt of machines against their creators. The motifs of a human being as a dangerous creator, the one whose mind and creation would affect the destiny of the planet, or as a creature destroying the globe, emerged in the 20th century, next to the problematique concerning the responsibility of mankind and collectively generated negative sum total, proceeding from the moral behaviour of all people. Belief motifs narrate about the destruction unleashed by the stupidity and flippancy of *homo sapiens*, his lust for gaming, etc. The idea of the revolt of machines evolved into dreadful stories of how machines would unexpectedly develop and reach the same level as human beings, or how there would be an accidental deviation or a programming error in the machines. Only a decade ago, prior to the year 2000, the United States of America were overwhelmed with the panic of the Y2K problem. Official institutions and agencies recommended people to procure food, candles and cash and stay at home in order to avoid the chaos caused by the fact that home utensils, banking systems and industrial machines would cease to operate due to programming errors at the turn of the millennium. According to Brenda E. Brasher, an online-religion researcher, such prophetic forecasts moulded the public, whose initial attitude with regard to the new had been relatively neutral, into the audience participating in the panic. Predictions and cyber-panic met the expectations of fundamentalist Christians (Brasher 2004: 56ff), however, our own contemporary memories of the time allow us to see the effect of prophetic messages on human behaviour.

The “latter-day” prophets have again awakened from their hibernation during the last decade. In 1997, my parents moved away from the San Francisco Bay area in order to be saved from a great earthquake prophesied for South-California. This earthquake was supposed to destroy Hollywood due to its immoral pollution and the perverseness of San Francisco homosexuals. The same prophetic message declared that North-California is going to be a coastal area.

My father and mother moved from the Bay to Nevada, in the vicinity of Lake Tahoe, to find the prophesied “restricted aviation space”. At the time when my parents were settling in their new place, several prophets began to proclaim the forthcoming global famine, known all over the world as the “Y2K” fever. We had to be judged for the reason that we had celebrated our intellect as god. This was a perfect “God’s plan”, according to which the blind hope in one’s smartness was actually the stupidity of man. It seemed that the Lord had obscured the eyes of all computer freaks, in order for them not to discover that soon, due to the absence of one number, the entire world would starve. What an end! Mutinies were supposed to break out on streets and people were to face a temptation to cannibalise their neighbours and children. As a next step, businesses and governments were to fall. Some were even prophesying that this would initiate the so-called “Mother of All Wars”. People were massively buying generators and weapons to protect their dinner table “in the name of the Lord”. Not to mention that all these preparations turned out to be senseless, but my parents still have to spend hours to drive to the seashore (Valloton 2007).

Another old motif was modified – the birth of a (human) creature or a messiah ruining the world, primarily bearing in mind a person growing up in an unknown rural area to change the destiny of the world, yet who sometimes acquired the concrete name and face of a ruler of a large country. An unusual birthmark – symbol of the beast – on Mikhail Gorbachev’s face, together with the reforms shaking the policy of the Soviet Union and the standstill economy caused the foretellers and the common people to see in him the embodiment of the beast who would destroy the world. The fear of changes, connected with the collapse of the Soviet Union, was expressed in the prophecies of the newest era, predicting of a symbolic apple cart that Gorbachev was to turn over, causing destruction.

Interesting political fantasies entail fears that scientists would put a new body (computers) to Stalin’s or Lenin’s head, preserved somewhere in a laboratory, and thus regenerate an extreme evil to rule and destruct the world.

Such motifs, similarly to some of the above-mentioned technological phobias, are inspired by a fear regarding science as a destructive force.

The new super-creatures of belief narratives are aliens, UFOs, a higher and hostile civilisation whose mission, according to folklore narratives, is to experiment with people, and, as a more long-term plan, destroy our world (cf. the relevant American subject matter Stewart & Harding 1999: 296ff).

The common denominator for all the listed omens of doom is the setting of the given terms, either as a definite date and year, or as an ambiguous near future. The 20th century is particularly abundant in soothsaid concrete end-of-the-world dates and years (the relevant list related to comets, e.g., Kõiva 2007: 181). Retrospectively, these dates were later associated with the beginning of concrete wars and other subversive pivotal events:

I was still a schoolchild at the time, when one day the Sun was supposed to move low across the sky. I looked at the sun and it was really lower. This was at mid-winter. It was in the thirties and this was the day when people said that it was going to be the end of the world. That it wouldn't be just for nothing, the sun being like that (RKM II 371, 699/700 (11) < Viru-Jaagupi parish).

Reflection of social and cultural changes is another common feature of the omens of the end of the world. For instance, technological and social alterations of the last centuries are clearly apparent in folklore records, similarly to the fact that the doomsday fears tend to constantly integrate new interpretations and causes for destruction. The presented non-exhaustive list characterises the great changes of the previous century and altered cultural-economic circumstances, and highlights the impact of the scientists' newer explanations on popular beliefs. The more up-to-date discoveries in astronomy, physics, genetics and other sciences have also substantially complemented the list of the omens of the end of the world. Symbols, signs and explanations point out the typical, stereotypical, repeated messages and novel original ideas from the context of the era. Likewise, the production of a certain ideology and fixation of social norms seems to be the task of the omens of the end of the world. The omens reflect and are closely connected with the events that intimidate social groups – be it unexpected changes in the law or surmised reforms. Every major social change, particularly in the economy or in the behavioural strategies of male and female genders would also unleash doomsday omens. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, when women began to have short hair and mini-skirts, Estonians were predicted to be witnessing the end of the world.

PREDICTIONS BY PROPHETS

The advice and doomsday predictions by prophets have a special place in the landscape of the end-of-the-world omens. By way of transmitting an invariant message and publicly proclaiming the divine truth, prophets indeed affected the popular belief system. Biblical prophets (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Isaiah and others) acted in crisis situations. Likewise, Estonian folk prophets who interpreted the word of god in an idiosyncratic and personal manner, and mediated this with personal visions, revelations and messages, emerged at the times of crisis or religious reforms. Personal charisma, combined with spontaneous behaviour, was the common feature of the autodidactic explicators of the Scriptures, with different backgrounds and aspirations.

Prophetic lore has been in the focus of scholarly interest during a couple of periods, providing a rare opportunity to obtain data of the specific features regarding the religious feelings of people, and the personalities of prophets. Järve Jaan, an 18th century prophet represented in the Folklore Archives with a number of texts, has been categorised by Johann Matthias Eisen as the one belonging within the discourse of earlier non-Estonian prophets (Eisen 1921). The next researchers (Rudolf Põldmäe, Olav Sild, Uku Masing, Kristi Salve) have dealt with the origin, destiny and revelations of individual prophets, and their impact on the proximal religious grouping (Põldmäe 1935, 1937; Sild 1929, 1935; Masing 1935; Salve 1998, 2000). Primarily, the relevant observation has encompassed the religious leaders and prophets of the awakening movement of the 18th – 19th century Brethren congregations.

The more extensive prophetic movement – the so-called heaven-goers – was practised at the beginning of the 19th century; among the prophets of the time there were also women and teenage girls (Põldmäe 1935; Sild 1935; Kalkun 2006). The major figures of the 19th century also comprised prophet Maltsvet (Masing 1993 [1934–1935]), Habakkuk II, Kordo, from the area of Vastseliina (Salve 2000), Järva Jaan (Eisen 1921) and others. According to Rudolf Põldmäe's estimation, the movement of heaven-goers entails abundant general human characteristics, apparent among every nation upon the emergence of appropriate circumstances. In conclusion, Põldmäe highly appreciates this prophetic movement:

Conditioned by the specific dispositions of our bondservant peasants, this movement, purely religious in the beginning, evolved also into an economic-social endeavour striving towards a goal, thus, to a certain extent, it was a preparation for the later political and cultural awakening period, maturing both men and women in joint actions protecting their rights

and teaching them to stick together during the most difficult turning points (Pöldmäe 1935: 176–177).

When observing the predictions by prophets, and the religious and lifestyle related requirements set for the members of the congregation, prophecies are a part of a wider social critique or ideology. The criticised stratifications of society have attempted to mitigate the prophecies by way of punishments, supervision, admonitions and healthy expertise.

For instance, Tallima Paap, an 18th century prophet strived for social equality (the manor-owners were regarded to be devils who should be deprived of their manors, their assets and property divided between people in a brotherly manner), whereas at the same time, he also called upon people to renounce mundane conceited things and decorations, and follow an ascetic lifestyle.

Similar requirements are repeated in the standpoints of the prophets of the 19th century. When comparing the predictions by Järva Jaan and prophet Kordo from Orava, Vastseliina, it is possible to note great similarities. Predictions concerning daily life are outlined by way of the mediation of lengthy individualised narratives. Some of these stories, due to the general human message therein, have become adapted and been spread from mouth to mouth during a longer period of time.

Järva Jaan

* **Technical innovations:** train (instead of horses, fire and water would be once used for dragging heavy loads), telegraph; a musical instrument would sound in the church and the congregation would be quiet.

* **Changes in daily and social life:** attire (boots – the foot-soles of men would be pasted), draining of marshlands, scarcity of fish, loads of juniper berries travelling in the seas.

* **The destiny of individuals:** concerns the fate of people or building in Pärnumaa and old Läänemaa.

* **Political changes:** Russia would shrink and would once be of a horse-shoe shape. Predicted the victory of the Swedish sword. One thousand years of peace cannot come before the Russian Tsar would see the borders of the Tsarist Russia from his Kremlin windows. According to the forecast, the manor-owners would come back for some time in order to soon leave forever. The Turks would once reach as far as the Kirbla church.

* **Religious issues and the end of the world:** the completion of the bridge on the Rumba River would be followed by the end of the world or a great war. (The bridge of the Rumba River was finished in 1939, a week later the Germans attacked Poland, starting the World War.)

Kordo

* **Technical innovations:** railway, airplanes, cars, telegraph (there will be time when as if a human spirit would move around the world, and at such a speed, and it would do and take care of everything; and the iron horse would move around, drinking water and eating fire).

* **Changes in daily and social life:** money would be measured in bushels, and there would be such a demand for bread; a lot of officials, destruction of manors, manor-lands would be redistributed; Estonians would have their own land but the plots would be very small, with boundary marks noted down for everyone.

* **Religious issues and the end of the world:** the faith would disappear, so that people would not go to church any longer and the devil would walk on the land; “A time of great wars will come and the people will perish so that there will be no rooster singing or dog barking from Riga to Pskov. The people who would survive would look for the traces of others but not find any. Such a time will come, when a human being, finding the traces of another man, would burst out crying; mankind would weaken so much that a man would not be able to turn an egg over the sharp edge.

Several doomsday motifs can be found in the prophecies of heaven-goers, described by Rudolf Põldmäe and collected in the folklore corpus, thus allowing us to make conclusions with regard to the existing reciprocal effects of both parts of the tradition:

God would send white rats as a menace to attack people, to eat flesh off their bones. There would also be other castigations, if people did not repent and turn to God. His speeches confused people to such an extent that the manor owners considered it necessary to build a house of prayer on the spot to calm the souls (Põldmäe 1935: 168).

According to another prediction, the heaven-goers from Viljandi prophesied that iron would start talking against iron prior to the doomsday – this would be the telegraph. When women start walking with uncovered heads – earlier, this would have been an unthinkable violation of the valid custom – and when hair is tied in the back of the head (a fashion of the time!), this would again mean that the latter days are coming nearer. But before all this, there would be a great awakening and many will be blessed in the course of this (Põldmäe 1935: 172).

Uku Masing is of the opinion that in the beginning, the Juhan Leinberg or prophet Maltsvet movement “was much more eccentric eschatologically than in the later stage. At first, Maltsvet predicted the end of the world, and as it

was imminent, he demanded that people should repent” (Masing 1935). Likewise, in addition to religious reforms, concrete guidelines for conduct and daily norms, Maltsvet’s prophecies also comprise political and social demands, criticism and scepticism with regard to the Russian state. Disposition with the official church (the Brethren congregations, in the case of Maltsvet) is similar to the one of the earlier prophets; his predictions also amalgamate personal and collective history, enriched with rendering value to a proper religious conduct.

Juhan Leinberg has repeatedly determined the time for the end of the world. Accidentally, he made an error when predicting the date for doomsday in 1858. However, Leinberg himself and his assistant prophets have given twelve dates for the coming of the White Ship and the doomsday, from February 3, 1860 to May 24, 1861. This fact indicates that the disciples and followers had an unwavering faith in their prophet – although nothing happened and new dates for doom were set over and over again, the prophet’s message was still being believed in. Matthias Johann Eisen, relying on different folk tales, refers to failed miracles and prophecies within a longer period of time, yet this did not deprive the followers of their faith:

He found a lot of followers when delivering his sermons and demanding repentance. He promised to take them to Samaria, through the sea yet still dry. In addition to preaching, he was eagerly prophesising: “Everyone who is not following me will perish in 1862. There will be such a bloodshed in Estonia, with blood reaching up to the anklebone.” In another time, he predicted again: “Next spring the Holy Spirit will take all the chosen ones away on a cloud.” And in yet another instance he shouted to the river: “Stop! So that we could cross with dry feet!” When his prophecies were not fulfilled, he accused the people of being incredulous. Later, he promised to take his followers from Lasnamäe to Canaan on board a white ship. Instead of the ship that never came, Maltsvet took his disciples to the Crimea, on the land (Eisen 1921).

Uku Masing is of the opinion that for Maltsvet, who had extensive knowledge of the Bible, the end of the world was actually a passing catastrophe and rather an omen of tougher times. Masing refers to an instance when the exiles had given orders to their children to follow them to the Crimea, as “within three years, Estonia would become empty, and then the fire and sword would follow, bringing an end to the country”. According to other data, a war was supposed to break out, killing all those who were not the followers of Maltsvet (Masing 1993: 153). The latter prophecies are similar to these of the great famine and destruction, predicted more than a hundred years later, in the 1990s, referred

to above, and also to the soothsaying of the Elu Sõna church (Word of Life congregation). Järva Jaan's omens of the end of the world are related to changes in the proximate vicinity, whereas the time-wise distance with the forecasted events is more ambiguous: the burning of villages for the second time (e.g. Lavassaare village), sinking of the ground in front of the Vee inn, Ott would become the owner of the Alttõnise farm in Kuresoo, the land under the dam of Kõima water mill would be turned into a field, Naartsi sacred grove would dry and the village of Naartsi would be lost, a bridge would be built on the Rumba river, etc.

Some of his omens of doom are associated with the forthcoming social and economic changes: when Pereküla becomes a town, i.e. when chimneys are built on houses and curtains put in front of the windows, when fatted oxen are used as draught animals, when people start going to shops, the end-day would come soon.

Several deadlines suggested by the prophet are extremely stereotypical and generalised, allowing to adjust them to different historical circumstances: when an ox goes berserk in Mihkli church or when Turkish stallions neigh in Kirbla church, doomsday would not be far away. Such messages were fitted with the anti-clerical policy of the Soviet power in the 20th century, providing reasoning for empty churches and secularising society. Explications associated with the Turks have obtained a new meaning after joining the European Union, which now out-shadows the earlier interpretations related to the Crimean War and the migration of people after World War II. Many of Järva Jaan's prophecies provide a wide freedom for interpretation even today, with regard to technological achievements and changes in the environment (*the latter day would come soon when iron rails are placed all over the country*). Likewise, the salient activities in the case of the important prophets of the 20th century, Saaremaa Seiu and Karl Reits, comprise social (harsh maltreatment of the lower populace, the wrong lifestyle of the manors and the church) and general political criticism and calls for repentance prior to the coming of the one thousand years of peace, besides religious issues and the critique of the official church.

THE LAST MINUTES OF OUR EARTH AND KARL TÕNISSON'S RELIGIOUS-PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Where should we position the Bible-research-based leaflet by Karl Tõnisson, nicknamed as Brother Vahindra and Barefoot Tõnisson, foretelling the end of the world? As of the middle of the 15th century, leaflets were spread, as a medium of political views, and later as business advertisements, in churches,

at fairs and in other crowded events, charging for them a small fee. The content of leaflets was broadened during the 18th century, yet format-wise, the illustrated visual side retained its relevance, comprising nearly a third of the entire printed matter. Such designed leaflets were used as decorative elements on the walls, even in homes of illiterate people. The ones with strange wild animals and landscapes, unknown creatures and monsters were particularly appreciated. One of the oldest illustrated leaflets, *Ensisheim thunderstone* (1492), designed by Sebastian Brant, depicts falling meteorites as an omen of a disaster. According to Rudolf Pöldmäe (1935: 153), inserts of coloured pictures of judgement and doomsday, in popular books at the end of the 19th century, were abundantly used as decorative elements in farmsteads, one of such depictions is presented as an illustration to this article.

In addition, the leaflets described sensational news and talked about miracles, predictions, curing of souls, and conveyed political and military news. Since the Reformation, leaflets became an important medium for disseminating religious viewpoints. Thousands of flyers on specific subject matters, distributed free of charge, were a significant method in the 20th century, used, e.g., for spreading false information about Jews in Germany, intimidation, and primarily for political and military propaganda and campaigns, although the leaflets did not fully lose their purpose to inform people of health issues, etc.

The Last Minutes of Our Earth (Tõnisson 1907) falls in the period when the author was a questing Lutheran – descendant-wise he indeed was one – and is coherent with his status of mind, i.e. at the time he was still looking for a new means of expression and ideology to explicate the world. The author's self-presentation as a biblical and history researcher, and citations of the Books of Revelation, Daniel, Matthew, Jeremiah and Ezekiel indicate his good command of the scriptures, whereas the text refers to his skills to transfer his message by way of operating with reference books, fiction and historical facts. There are five illustrations in the leaflet: the image seen by King Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, with the meaning thereof explained to him by prophet Daniel; two pictures of a dark day in New England on May 19, 1780; a meteor shower on November 13, 1833, captured as "The destruction of our Earth that would soon happen", with a reference to Matt. 24, 27. Regarding the design of the first and second pages of the leaflet, there are two wood carvings adjacent to each other placed next to the picture of the symbol image in the header. The leaflet begins by explaining the decline of the world, using the scriptures of the Book of Daniel and the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Let us follow his way of thought, without altering the presented factology. Each part of the image is associated with a certain political-historical statehood. The head, made of gold, depicts the Babylonian Kingdom (677–538 BC), silver chest and arms the Per-

Figure 2. The image seen by King Nebuchadnezzar in his dream.

sian Empire (538–331 BC), copper stomach and hips the Greek state (331–161 BC) – he mentions that the founder is Alexander the Great who had conquered Asia and other known countries of the time, within 12 years –, iron shins depict the Roman Empire (161 BC – 483 AD): one shin is pagan Rome and the other papal Rome – after the collapse of one the other would rise from the ruins. Tõnisson writes: “The Pope of Rome was a mighty man of power (referred to in the Bible as the beast and false Christ) who made all the most powerful rulers shiver.” The ten toes of the figure are made of iron, and partially, of clay; these 10 states are, according to Tõnisson (and in his manner of writing) are: Huns, Eastern Goths, Western Goths, Franks, Vandals, Suevics, Heruls, Burgundians, Anglo-Saxons and Lombardians who gave birth to Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, France, England, Austria, etc.

K. Tõnisson continues with a biblical citation where Nebuchadnezzar sees a stone falling on the feet of the image (Daniel 2:34–35), whereafter the entire image is broken into pieces “and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them”. According to Tõnisson, the stone epitomises the eternal Kingdom of Christ which will end all current states in our days and remain forever. This is the time, according to his subsequent discussion, when people would live in the “toes” of the image, the time of small states, and he is of the opinion that there will be no more empires and large states, even individual countries cannot be united and remain alone until the end.

In retrospect, his 1907 conviction that the time of large united states was over, seems humoristic. Particularly in the background of his later personal political utopia, Pan-Baltonia (he began to plan this in the 1920s), or when recalling that the Soviet Union (one sixth of the whole planet – the self-desig-



nation of the gigantic state) was about to emerge in approximately ten years time, with Greater Germany and other new unions to follow.

K. Tõnisson's discussion categorises countries into rich and poor ones, concordantly to the material of the toes of the symbol image: powerful states comprise England and North-America, and weak ones Switzerland, Belgium and other states of the clay toes. As usual with economic prognoses, neither has this proved to be right in the course of time.

In his further discussion, Tõnisson commences with prophesising the last minutes of our Earth. "We are living quite close to the end, and it is possible to ascertain this with the help of the Bible that the current mankind is the last one. A couple of examples of this," he writes, referring that in Matt. 24, Jesus talked about the end of the world and mentioned three signs: 1) earthquake, 2) darkening of the sun, 3) stars falling from heaven. Tõnisson, referring to those who have beheld this: "The people of this generation shall not end until all this will take place." K. Tõnisson introduces the three omens of the end-times. The first was an earthquake in Lisbon in 1795 and the second, a dark day in North-America and elsewhere on May 19, 1780. In an interesting way, he hereby highlights the person whose works are used even today as an ancillary source – Tõnisson mediates the darkened day related information by way of Noah Webster's work: [---] in his globally noted dictionary (under the title of famous names), he writes the following: "The dark day, a day (May 19, 1780) when a remarkable and unexplained darkness extended over all New England. The darkness in some places was so intensive that for several hours, it was impossible to read simple printed letters outside." The third sign, according to Tõnisson, is the meteor storm on November 13, 1833, the largest of a kind during the last couple of centuries. Again, he finds confirmation from the writings of scientists: "Professor Almstead writes about this: "The shower of stars in 1833 was substantial enough to extend over a significant part of the country, spreading from the East-Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, far towards the west, and from the shores of the northern part of South-America to the undeterminable boundaries of British colonies in the north. It was visible everywhere, and almost everywhere the scene was the same. This event cannot be regarded a mundane phenomenon any longer and has to be considered as one of the celestial ones.""

K. Tõnisson's further elaboration relies on the Bible, on one hand, and also on the fact that 75 years had passed from the last sign – the storm of stars:

[---] we reach the firm and unwavering yet also formidable decision: people who are 80 years old will see the coming of Jesus from the clouds – yes, all of us living on the Earth at the moment, we will see through those terrible times which can be expected to happen soon. We will all face a

terrible fate. All people to the last will be liquidated from the Earth, slaughtered and their bodies will cover the Earth from one end of the land to another (see Jer. 25, 33), will be given as food to birds under the sky (see Ezek. 39:17-29 and Rev. 17-21). Only a small group of people will be saved, the ones whose names have been written in the Book of Life in the heaven, and who do not worship the beast or his image but who keep to the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12, 22:14). The only way of salvation is the one shown to us in the Bible. Let us all make the effort to carefully study the Bible and fill all the prescriptions and orders therein. The eternal knowledge and commandments of God are written in the Bible and all those who follow them will get to eternal life – to the new land, whereas those who disdain these shall be destroyed together with this planet.

And he finishes his brief discussion with an exclamation: “Let everyone now choose either eternal life or death!”

His prophesy has a clear and logical structure, relying on the knowledge of the Bible and the authority of learned men. Science and the printed texts of scholars are an equally trustworthy source as the Bible, an objective and authoritarian confirmation of what has happened. This is a new trait in prophetic lore, similarly to the use of different levels of citations to confirm and disseminate one’s message. These symbolic signs are the important events in history, there is no reason to doubt in them, and although two of the relevant events have been visible only in America, they are more widely known by way of art and printed matter. The calls for studying the Bible and living a proper life are presented only at the end of the leaflet. The entire prophesising is a well-contemplated discussion, not an imagery obtained by way of a concrete revelation or a retelling of a supernatural experience. The location of the revelation is symbolic, remains obscure and is not transmitted to a local landscape. The author aims at appealing for repentance and biblical studies prior to the doomsday, yet he endows this in the discussion affirmed with concrete years, dates and quotations. At the same time, the belief in the end of the world is nothing eternal or physical, the relevant torments are known from the texts of books.

This leaflet, with argumentations therein, is indeed in concord with the rationally minded norms of the 19th century. Historical facts are skilfully chosen and effective. At least the 1833 shower of stars was widely reflected in folklore and served as a basis for a number of quondam prejudices (e.g. Kronk 2010; Space Science 1999).

It is difficult to assess the impact of the printed leaflet on the quondam community; it was one of the interpretations of the beginning of the new millennium. In his religious pursuits, Karl Tõnisson moved further from Chris-

tian scriptures and proclaiming of faith, searching for the old native religion of Estonians, writing on this subject matter and creating the native faith relying on his knowledge. Undoubtedly, he had scarce and superficial knowledge of the Estonian native religion, sustained by the popular texts of literati, and the ones published in the media during the national awakening era, and by his own fantasy rather than relying on a more thorough knowledge of folklore. In his home area, Umbusi, located in the vicinity of a massive bog, there were no rich and old farms nor abundant folkloric knowledge. Indeed, this fact allowed Tõnisson, a person who had repeatedly ruptured, altered, synthesised his self-image and self-identity towards a direction filled with new symbols, to freely elaborate on fantasy-rich and home-made philosophic approaches. Mait Talts (2003), a researcher of Karl Tõnisson, indicates that K. Tõnisson fantasised on his life history and constantly falsified his biography. Anyway, the leaflet and the published books form an integral entirety with the life history. The leaflet mediates religious contemplations, soothsaying of the doomsday, reflecting the texture and content of the alternating identity in a specific phase of his life.

His subsequent writings form an integral entirety with his altered identity and life history. His contacts with theosophy, which had gained popularity in Europe, during his travels to Riga and Russia, and closer contacts with Buddhism experienced in the expanses of Russia, changed Tõnisson's mentality. In 1923, he returned from St. Petersburg, the Babel of people and centre of red ideology, to Estonia, having obtained Latvian citizenship. According to Mait Talts, the Estonian embassy refused to issue him a permission to return as Tõnisson intended to start preaching Buddhism.

In his printed texts, particularly in the small publications at the end of the 1920s, Tõnisson presents the cult of sun and lightning of ancient Baltic peoples, referring to relevant similarities in Vedas and, more specifically in the Buddhist worldview, recurrently intertwining his conflicts with the local society and his dreams of future. Indeed, he remained to be the bearer of the mentality of village poets, and spoke of his life and society in the form of poetry, a trend more prevalent at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. Inserting exaggerations and using sharp language, he conveys real life and fantasies, being original in some instances, yet more prevalently, the speaking trumpet of the trends of thought of his era and popular standpoints. Admiration of his body and the promotion of his spirit are the common features of his written works; he also opposes his standpoints to the "vertebral god" of the Christians.

I am the first Buddhist priest on the Baltic coast. My official or secular name is Karlis Tennisons, and Vahindra – as a monk or clerical. I am persecuted and ridiculed by the masses of Christian Estonian people, as a

robber, thief, killer, arsonist, etc.... and also smeared as a lunatic-barefoot pagan priest. I am an evolutionist but not a revolutionist. I am an idealist and a sportsman practising a special kind of sports. I am a member of "Sangha", the order of Tibetan friars. I am a philosopher and the apostle of the first promoter of Buddhist philosophy in the three current Baltic States: in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. I am a neo-nationalist and a neo-anti-Semite.

And then in future
The black or red hell can never intimidate us.
One day, far away in the east
Tshingiz Khan will appear.
Emperor of the Turanian people,
The famous Tammerlaan.

Tõnisson, when speaking of the native religion, highlights the ideal sides thereof, refers to the nation's difficult past, which, in his opinion, is still not yet in the past but instead, continues to exist in the present of the 1920s. Mait Talts has referred to another popular movement emerging in Europe at the time – in the 1920s, native religions were taken to the political and identity-related arena which brought about a more broad-based promotion and practising of paganism. For Tõnisson, this period, the post-latter-day-omen era was also the time of building and melting paganism with Buddhism in his idiosyncratic manner. Tõnisson's written work partially fits in with the contemporary treatises on the elaboration of the native religion. Under the name of Brother Vahindra, he writes in a small booklet *Tulevane Pan-Baltonia Ilmariik ja selles kuldses riigis asuvate Buddha-, Päärkonsi, Pikse- ehk taarausü preestrite seadus* ('The future Pan-Baltonia and the law of Buddhist, Perkunas or Taara priests in this golden state'):



Figure 3. Different symbols used in the cover design of K. Tõnisson's book.

[--] *if you are patriotic and truly love your fatherland, please purchase this book and believe in my prophecy, and be aware that the ancient pagan national heroes of the peoples on the Baltic coast are about to come, the bold and mighty former historical leaders of these peoples who had fearlessly fought against the knights, the faithful servants of the Jewish god, i.e. the disseminators of Christianity, and protected our national faith until the last drop of blood, as did the ancient national heroes of Estonians-Livonians and Latvians-Lithuanians: Imanta, the quondam commander of the joint armies of Latvia and Livonia, and Lembit, the Estonian hero, and Gediminas, the ancient hero and king of Lithuanians* (Vahindra 1928).

The fighting anti-Christian style in Karl Tõnisson's writings (what he had managed to change primarily into an anti-Jewish attitude, as, at the beginning of the century, he had ignored living as the subject of the gigantic state of Russia) merges with fantasies and tacit imitation and citation of cultural texts. E.g., in his publication *Mina ja minu jüngrid usume nõnda* ('Me and my disciples believe so') he writes:

Taara aka Perkunas is helping us, we look forward to the kingdom of justice. We don't need arms and lances for establishing the state of Pan-Baltonia. We look forward to the coming of Imanta, whereafter our enemies shall perish. The bunch of those who hesitate, disbelievers and Jews the crooks would then disappear.

Oh, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, how sad your past! I prophesise, there'll be a golden future once. We've walked the path of freedom for ten years by now, but religious-wise the Baltic peoples are still in slavery.---

*Oh, come a breeze of wind and wipe away the darkness,
So that the sounds of Baltic prayers*

Could still be heard in the sacred grove.... (Vahindra 1928).

In frequent occasions, Tõnisson utilises the prosody intrinsic of the newer folk song, simple rhyming patterns and stereotypic expressions for presenting his ideas:

*Hom mani Patme Hum
Suur Buddha kaitse Baltimaad,
Me isa-ema hällimaas,
Meid Balti ema sünnitand
Ning Balti pind meid kasvatand.*

Om Mani Padme Hum
Great Buddha, protect the Baltic lands,
The cradle of our mothers and fathers,
The Baltic mother has given birth to us
And Baltic soil has brought us up.

*Ma Buddha jünger naeratan,
Kui piinab, mure, rist,
Mul Eesti rahvas pununud
On pärja ohakaist
Om mani Padme Hum*

As the disciple of Buddha, I smile
When toil and hardship tortures me
The people of Estonia have
Made me a juniper wreath
Om mani Padme Hum (Vahindra 1927).

IN CONCLUSION

In addition to the time-wise distinct prophecies, there are also many, passed on by oral tradition throughout times, which have been associated with different prophets. Mostly, these involve statements regarded as political omens, constituting a part of the popular interpretation process and offering hope for another future. *Russia would shrink and would once be of a horse-shoe shape. The triumph of the Swedish sword. One thousand years of peace cannot come before the Russian Tsar would see the borders of the Tsarist Russia from his Kremlin window* – these prophecies have been attributed to the heaven-goers, to Järva Jaan and Kordo. As a more recent relevant example, Hermiine Jürgens (1892–1976), known as the witch of Äksi, was said to have predicted in the 1980s that the Russian border would be seen from the Kremlin windows. H. Jürgens was not a prophet but instead, a lady with clairvoyant abilities residing in the vicinity of Tartu, and she mainly helped in looking for missing people. Indeed, political utopias and expectations, recollected by the mediation of prophecies, offered alternative opportunities to deal with history.

Some recurrent prophecies, as the ones by Kordo “there will be no rooster singing or dog barking from Riga to Pskov [---] when a human being finds the traces of another man, he would burst out crying” belong to the category of stereotypic legend formula. Earlier, this used to be an inseparable part of plague legends, depicting the awful emptiness when commencing with the creation of new life after the destruction of the pestilence.

Besides folk tradition, the prophecies and visions of Estonian prophets either rely on the Bible or follow the biblical message (see Kalkun 2006: 813). The language, metaphors and symbols used by the religious formulators of different centuries, are strictly related to their era and confessions. For instance, in the earlier prophetic lore, it is customary for the prophet to present herself as the bride of Jesus, and the entire semantics of the prophecy is Christ-centred (Salve 2000). However, the rhetoric of the prophets at the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century is totally different, highlighting the argumentative part and the relevant essence.

A number of Estonian prophets of the previous century can be characterised as the prophets of letters: well-known prophets have written down their standpoints and experience, the recordings have been also done by others, and their prophecies have been disseminated in writing. In this regard, K. Tõnisson's leaflet serves as an authorised continuation of a longer tradition. Still, it is characteristic that at the beginning of the 20th century, prophecies focused on the sky and celestial phenomena, in addition to moral and religious issues.

Several prophets have come forward at difficult and economically unsuccessful times. The actions of prophets, however, or their emergence on the scene, are not solely related to external, socio-political, economic and identity-related issues. Instead, prophesying is associated with religious changes or with a need for such alterations. The behaviour and the message of the prophets can indeed give an impetus for changes or, instead, affect the alterations.

The leaflet about the last minutes of the Earth presents a logical part of folk-Christian views integrated with book culture, knowledge of history and the Bible. Due to the non-existence of an appropriate system of old Estonian native religion, K. Tõnisson had to formulate it himself, render value and attribute certain ethical categories to the system. Tõnisson's writing-related activity and his Buddhist-pagan propaganda took place in a secularised society, the members of which were searching for new ways of religious expressions and bonds. Nevertheless, the writings by Karl Tõnisson refer to feelings and values distinct from the surrounding hegemonic social discourse.

The quondam news columns of the press informed the readers of the events which sought to be syncretic, combining Buddhism and the ancient native religion of Estonians, of dances in the scared groves and lectures diversified with gymnastics. The news items were complemented with printed publications wherein K. Tõnisson self-centredly presents his immaculate naked body. He provides information about the establishment of a Buddhist sanctuary in Riga, and about Buddhism in general, in his weird idiosyncratic manner. Together with Friedrich V. Lustig (Buddhist name Ashin Ananda), his disciple and life-long companion, Tõnisson travels to Paris in 1930, whereafter his direct contacts with Estonia break off.

K. Tõnisson mediated several messages to society – the need for religious severity, Buddhism, theosophical amalgamations of different faiths, and the native religion, still in the formulation phase at the time.

As a token of respect and trust with regard to the message of the prophet, many of his disciples would not subject their symbol to an analysis. Maurice Bloch refers to respect as a general aspect of human life which always reveals itself when we do something or believe that something is true, relying on the authority of others, and we tend to constantly consider this (Bloch 2005: 135).

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H, Kase – Jakob Hurt's folklore collection, 1860–1906.

RKM – folklore collection of the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Fr. R. Kreutzwald (State) Museum of Literature of the Academy of Sciences (now Estonian Literary Museum), 1945–1996.

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