

## The Theological Identity of Ludis Bērziņš as Reflected in His Manuscript ‘Magnificent Songs’ (*Greznas dziesmas*)

Ludis Bērziņš (full name Ludvigs Ernests Bērziņš, 1870–1965) was a man of many talents. Not only was he recognized as a competent folklore researcher, in particular for his studies of Latvian folk songs, but he was also a pedagogue, a literary historian, a poet, and a theologian. Bērziņš’ professional activities crossed the borders of several disciplines, and he was successful in most of them.

Bērziņš obtained his early schooling at a local parish school in the village of his birth Džūkste, located in the Tukums district in the western part of Latvia. His first teacher was an outstanding folklorist and man of letters Ansis Lerhis-Puškaitis (1859–1903) whose wide collection of Latvian folk tales and legends later was published in seven volumes (*Latviešu tautas pasakas*, 1891–1903). Bērziņš’ subsequent studies at the Irlava Teachers’ Seminar (1886–1889) laid the foundation for his pedagogic identity. By virtue of his educational activity, Bērziņš became known as one of the most outstanding pedagogic figures of pre-World War II Latvia. Later Bērziņš worked both as a school teacher and as a principal in the towns of Dubulti, Jēkabpils, and Limbaži. In 1909, together with his brother-in-law, Lutheran pastor Fricis Šmithens (1876–1918), Bērziņš established a private grammar school in Dubulti where he introduced the most current western European pedagogic methods. In 1922 Bērziņš became one of the founders of the Riga Teachers’ Institute, subsequently serving as its first director for 12 years (1922–1934). At the same time, in the 1920’s, Bērziņš also taught at the University of Latvia, Faculty of Philology and Philosophy – initially as an assistant, later as a professor. There he delivered lectures on the history of Latvian literature and taught folk song studies.

Bērziņš received his theological education at Tartu (official name in German – Dorpat) University from 1891 until 1895. When he came to Tartu, he was 21 years old. Bērziņš’ professors were Johann Christoph Wilhelm Volck (1835–1904) (Old Testament, Semitic languages), Heinrich Ferdinand Mühlau (1839–1914) (New Testament), Johann Hermann Kersten (1842–1905) (dogmatics), Ferdinand

Hörschelmann (1833–1902) (applied theology), and others. In his memoirs Bērziņš noted with respect that professor *emeritus* Alexander Konstantin von Oettingen (1827–1905) still played a significant role at Faculty of Theology. (Zariņš 1967, p. 246) Bērziņš' unique achievement in theology was his new translation of the Epistle of James into Latvian. This version was included in the amended Latvian edition of the New Testament. (Ibid.)

Two years after completing his theology studies at Tartu University, Bērziņš served his internship period in the Smiltene pastorate, where he assisted Professor Kārlis Kundziņš Sr. (1850–1937) in his ministry. No clear record exists of Bērziņš' ordination date. When Bērziņš was questioned at a ripe old age by Pastor Rihards Zariņš, he could not remember the date but guessed his ordination to have occurred in 1900. (Ibid., p. 249) After his internship period the young Tartu University graduate spent six years in Kiev (1898–1904) doing pastoral and teaching work for Latvian colonials.

When Bērziņš left Kiev and returned home, his ministerial practice assumed lesser importance vis a vis his pedagogic work and research into Latvian literature and folk songs. In 1915, given the pressures and disruption of World War I, Bērziņš and his family went into exile to Tartu. That summer a number of the young Latvian exiles were confirmed in the Lutheran church, with Bērziņš officiating at the confirmation ceremony. When Bērziņš' family came back to Latvia, he returned to pastoral work for a few years. He combined his ministry attached to Limbaži and the neighbouring parishes with pedagogic work. In 1922 Bērziņš' family moved to Riga. There Bērziņš participated in all the important conventions of the Latvian Lutheran Church synod. He edited several hymnal editions and collaborated in the creation of the amended New Testament edition. At this time Bērziņš also wrote religious poems, many of which were to become popular Lutheran church hymns, with some still sung to this day. In Riga, as well as the seaside town of Dubulti Bērziņš continued to occasionally perform his pastoral duties. In 1944 Bērziņš' family emigrated to Germany, and in 1950, they moved as refugees to the United States of America. Both in Germany and the United States Bērziņš took pastoral care of the Latvian community. It is worth noting that Bērziņš baptized, confirmed, and wed his own children as well as their offspring.

As a scholar and a man of letters Bērziņš throughout his life wrote down his thoughts. There are hundreds of examples on record of Bērziņš' work as published in

the Latvian press, collected articles, editorials, brochures, and books. The bibliographical indexes of his works make for a long list indeed, indicating how prolific Bērziņš was in publishing. (See Grava 1992; Jēgers 1967.) Several works were signed with a pseudonym *Pabērzs* or *Pabērzis*. Thematically Bērziņš' published work focuses on his lasting interest in Latvian folk songs, early Latvian literature, religious poetry, the Latvian language, and educational issues. As already mentioned, Bērziņš was a poet himself and a translator – he rendered into Latvian the Roman poets Gaius Valerius Catullus and Quintus Horatius Flaccus, the Russian fabulist Ivan Krylov, and others.

'Magnificent Songs' (In German - '*Herrliche Lieder*' – the title translated by the author himself) is the work of a mature scholar. Bērziņš wrote it in his seventies. In this book he elaborates on a number of topics that he had studied over the years. It is a historical study of the collecting and publishing of Latvian folk songs from the 16th century until 1844, when Georg Friedrich Büttner's (1805–1883) collection of folk songs 'The Songs and Popular Ditties of the Latvian People' (*Latviešu ļaužu dziesmas un ziņģes*) was issued. Bērziņš' manuscript was written in 1942 in honour of the centenary of the publication of Büttner's collection. Unfortunately, Bērziņš' work had remained unpublished until now because when Bērziņš emigrated to Germany and the United States, the manuscript of the 'Magnificent Songs' was left in Latvia. Fortunately, the text found shelter in the Latvian Folklore Archives. Now this valuable work has been edited by the staff of the Latvian Folklore Archives and will be issued for the first time in 2007. Latvian folklorist Māra Vīksna has introduced the Bērziņš' study, describing in detail the manuscript and its relevance in her article '*Atgūtais Ludis Bērziņš*' (Ludis Bērziņš Retrieved) (1997, pp. 69–76). She has also written a preface to the forthcoming book.

'Magnificent Songs' consists of 328 pages of handwriting and some printed inserts. The text is divided into two parts. Part I is the lengthier one, devoted to the history of collection, publication, and evaluation of Latvian folk songs before Georg Friedrich Büttner. More significantly, Part II reviews Büttner's collection of folk songs. While Part II was newly-written in honour of the centenary of Büttner's collection, part I was in part an amalgam of earlier published studies – a summing up of ideas and several excerpts from previously written texts.

Reading the text of 'Magnificent Songs', one can discern the influence of the author's theological and ministerial identity upon his folkloristic work. The invitation

of the Tartu Conference ‘to reflect on knowledge production within folkloristics and ethnology’ has provided me with the opportunity to summarize observations I have made about Bērziņš’ work.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I would like to elaborate on aspects of the text, wherein one can perceive the „voice” of a theologian. My analysis is topically related to the Hungarian folklorist’s Vilmos Voigt’s concept of ‘ecclesiastical code’ – “the positions of folklorists in the church, as well as the possible religious connotations of the folklore they have studied” (Voigt 2004, p. 258). Within ‘Magnificent Songs’ Bērziņš’ personality represents a merger of the Lutheran pastor with an accomplished folklorist. It is the process of collecting Latvian folklore (not the folklore itself) that has provided a glimpse into the theologian. While the manuscript is not overburdened with theological utterances, there are several that are insightful.

Bērziņš has used both citations from the Bible and indirect references to biblical texts in his manuscript. The very first sentence in the book is emblematic of the balance of his composition. The introductory words contain two references – a folk song couplet and a quotation from the Bible of related content.

**Respect and the mission for today properly understood moves us to remember the men that have paved the way for us in the past, because ‘The fathers of our fathers built the footbridges/our children’s children shall cross’ or, in biblical words, „others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour”.**

*(Pietāte un pareizi saprasts tagadnes uzdevums mūs skubina iecerēties tos vīrus, kas mums gājuši kā ceļa taisītāji pa priekšu, jo „Tēvu tēvi laipas lika, Bērnu bērni laipotāji” vai, Bībeles vārdiem runājot, „citi priekš jums ir strādājuši, un jūs esat nākuši viņu darbā”.)<sup>2</sup>*

The cited Latvian folk song (LD 3085–3085, 1; 3086–3086, 1) expresses a parallel thought to the words spoken by Jesus to His disciples (Jn 4: 38) – posterity benefits from our ancestors invested work. Bērziņš has also used the Gospel passage to emphasize: it is to the credit of our ancestors (in particular – Georg Büttner’s credit) that Latvian folk songs are appreciated, that they have been collected and published. Büttner (and others) eased the work of the next generations of collectors and researchers of folk songs – in the same way as John the Baptist and Jesus Christ

prepared the Samaritans for evangelization (the disciples just had to complete the work) (cf. Rubulis 1994, p. 225). Bērziņš has discerned the crux of the Gospel verse – future generations gain from the accomplishments of their predecessors (Gæbelein 1981, p. 58) – one can see the analogy with the Latvian folklore collecting and publishing process.

Bērziņš found the combination of these two – the folk song stanza stated in conjunction with a passage from the Bible very helpful; he used a similar style of paired citations in two texts other than ‘Magnificent Songs’. Both texts were also written in 1942 – the year when Bērziņš worked on ‘Magnificent Songs’. One is a dissertation, which appeared in the journal *Latvju Mēnešraksts* in remembrance of Büttner (Bērziņš 1942b, pp. 1092–5). The second one is the published abstract of his speech at the opening of Lutheran Deans’ Conference. Here Bērziņš applies the same citations he used in ‘Magnificent Songs’ to apply the cultural, educational, and economic heritage of the Latvian people (1942a, pp. 1–2). Bērziņš elaborates on what the Gospel verse “others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour” signifies for him: “John in Chapter 4 talks about the joy that links several generations in their common work, it makes both the sower and reaper happy. . This passage from the Holy Word has always touched me; I have felt its verity throughout my long school work.” (Ibid.)

An example of an indirect reference to the Bible in ‘Magnificent Songs’ is used by Bērziņš to express his admiration for Büttner’s work. At the beginning of the chapter about Büttner’s collection ‘The Songs and Popular Ditties of the Latvian People’ Bērziņš has written:

**In approaching this question, we tread ground where one must take off one’s shoes, for the Latvian people have no greater treasure than the wisdom and beauty of their folk songs (...).**

*(Šim jautājumam pieiedami, mēs speram soļus zemē, kur kājas jānoauj, jo latviešu tautai nav lielākas bagātības kā tautasdziesmu gudrība un daiļums (...).)*

Taking off one’s shoes before treading on holy ground is a reference to the Exodus. God speaks to Moses from a burning bush: “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Ex 3: 5; Acts 7: 33) Here Bērziņš draws an analogy between the sacred ground mentioned in the Scriptures and the quality of a sanctuary he ascribes to Latvian folk songs. Bērziņš

calls Büttner the holy man, the mediator who more than any other, except for Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923), has entered the sanctuary of Latvian folk songs ((...) *bet Bitners ir tas svētnieks, kas dziļāk nekā jebkurš cits, K. Baronu atskaitot, ir iegājis šinī tautas svētnīcā.*). Such an allusion shows the extraordinary reverence Bērziņš has for folk poetry and its carekeeper Georg Büttner. God prevented Moses from rashly intruding into His presence, when he issued the injunction for Moses to remove his sandals. (Gæbelein 1990, p. 315). Likewise, the author of ‘Magnificent Songs’ counsels the reader to pause before getting acquainted with Büttner’s relevant work. The indirect reference to God’s dialogue with Moses in the Old Testament serves a definite purpose – a request to venerate Büttner’s collection.

An interesting opinion on the use of allusion in Latvian culture has been offered by the cultural historian Andrejs Johansons (1922–1983). He proposes that people from the Zemgale region of Latvia (Bērziņš place of birth) were particularly gifted in coining allusions. Johansons observed that Kārlis Straubergs (1890–1962) and Ludis Bērziņš, both men of science and both from Džūkste, were masters of allusion. (Johansons 2000, p. 186)

Bērziņš in his ‘Magnificent Songs’ has chosen also the familiar verse from the First Epistle of Corinthians to summarize Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744–1803) standpoint on folk poetry.

**If, as the apostle said, he would be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal without love, so too poetry created by a rationally calculating mind is just an inanimate play thing – only true delight can breathe life into poetic work.**

*(Ja apustulis sakās, ka viņš bez mīlestības būtu skanīgs varš un zvanīgs zvārgulis, tad arī dzeja, ko radījis vēss prāta aprēķins, ir nedzīva rotaļu lieta – tikvien patiesa sajūsma var dzejas darbam iepūst dzīvības dvasu.)*

The words by Paul “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13: 1) have been adapted by the author of the manuscript to stress Herder’s opinion. Virtuoso poetry, although perfect in form, but if it has no feeling in it, is the same as the life of a Christian with no love. Love is the essence of a Christian life and feeling – analogically – the essence of true poetry.

The above given examples demonstrate that Bērziņš finds biblical references very helpful in describing the process for collecting Latvian folk songs. Indubitably the effective interweaving of biblical passages and allusions in his text is indicative of a theologian who knows the Scripture well and shows a proficiency in commenting on issues with the help of the Holy Writ.

The history of collecting of Latvian folk songs in Bērziņš' book 'Magnificent Songs' is presented in an interesting way. Without doubt the author is familiar with the traditional approach of his time – he arranges historical facts and discusses them as a scholar (a philologist, a literary historian, and a folklorist). Yet Bērziņš also finds space in his explications to voice his attitude towards the persons mentioned after he has put them on his moral scale.

Bērziņš is very sensitive to the moral implications of the activities of the early folk songs collectors and interpreters. For instance, he criticizes the Baltic German historian and clergyman August Wilhelm Hupel (1737–1819) who, in Bērziņš opinion, did not possess either a true instinct for folk poetry or a sense of humour. Hupel also collected Estonian folk songs and, in his turn, denigrated the latter, considering many to be “intolerably childish” (in his *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Ehistland* (see Hupel 1777, p. 160)).

Commenting on Gotthard Friedrich Stender's (1714–1796) negative attitude towards the gibing of one another that the Latvians practiced at their weddings, Bērziņš tries to justify Stender.

**Let us not take offence at the old pastor Stender who, being a single minded man, did not delight in the poetry, wherein, as one would have feared, soon some naughtiness could be heard.**

*(Neņemsim ļaunā arī vecajam mācītājam Stenderam, ja viņš, viengabalains cilvēks būdams, nesajūsminājās par dzeju, no kuras, kā bija jābaidās, drīz vien varēja izskanēt kāda nerātība.)*

The author of 'Magnificent Songs' adduces that some of Stender's negative experiences as a pastor, have been the cause for his sharp reaction to naughtiness in folk songs. Bērziņš adds that most of the Latvians of his time themselves would also not feel comfortable listening to naughty folk songs in a family circle. To counter this observation, Bērziņš mentions a clearly scientific interest in the naughty gibing of one another as it relates to Latvian cultural history and ethnography.

The „needless humility” of Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1741–1796) that appears in a sentence of his three-volume novel *Lebensläufe* also does not escape Bērziņš’ notice.

**Of course, talk in the last parts of the novel that the honour of authorship is due more to the Latvian people than Hippel himself, demonstrates perhaps a needless humility or, more precisely, self-glorification, masquerading under cover of humility so as to be noticed more. But let that be as it may!**

*(Zināms, izrunāšanās, ka romāna pēdējās daļās autora gods vairāk pienāksoties latviešu tautai nekā Hipelim pašam, varētu būt lieka pazemība vai, labāk sakot, sevis cildināšana, kas klājas ar pazemības apsegu, lai tā jo vairāk tiktu ievērota. Lai nu kā!)*

Bērziņš reproaches August Bielenstein (1826–1907), the pastor of the Dobele parish and the leader of many years’ standing of the Baltic German organization *Lettische literarische Gesellschaft* (Latvian Literary Society), that the society and he personally did not support the laudable initiative of the Neo-Latvians (a movement in Latvia in the 1860–‘80s) in their collecting of folklore. Georg Friedrich Büttner, in contrast to Bielenstein, lent a helpful hand to the new Latvian intelligentsia.

**When Brīvzemnieks came to Latvia to collect folk traditions, Bielenstein received him frostily, whereas Büttner welcomed him with kindness and warmth (...).**

*(Tā, kad Brīvzemnieks ierodas Latvijā krāt tautas tradīcijas, Bīlenšteins to saņem vēsi, bet Bitners laipni un sirsnīgi (...)).*

Occasionally Bērziņš refers to the ethical aspects of individuals he describes in his work. Hence, we may conclude that Bērziņš has a Christian ethical standpoint vis a vis the persons involved in the folklore collecting process. Being a good pedagogue Bērziņš not only finds fault, but also compliments particular qualities of folklore collectors. For instance, he adds that Büttner had compassion for orphans. When speaking of songs about orphans, Büttner could not restrain tears. As a result of such moralizing, sermonizing, and not staying within the framework of scholarly impartiality, the style of Bērziņš’ ‘Magnificent Songs’ text can be called a preaching style. One can clearly hear the voice of a pastor expressing a sense of moral duty.

Bērziņš also does not avoid some autobiographical interjections in ‘Magnificent Songs’ and frequently these are used to bridge the text of his historical



study. One can, thereby, glean further insights into the life of the author. Bērziņš makes mention of his early days, the expeditions, professorship and research activities at Latvia University, as well as various friendships with the Lutheran clergy. Bērziņš' colleagues, the contemporaries from his pastoral circle, supported his study. Bērziņš felt much obliged to many of them, as well as their forerunners, for sharing memories, safeguarding excerpts of memoirs and valuable manuscripts. Thus Büttner's collection was made accessible to Bērziņš by the pastor of Katlakalns, Emil Ludwig Runtzler (1848–?), who had kept it and then passed it on to Krišjānis Barons. Subsequently Büttner's collection was handed over to the National Library of Latvia (LNB RX 57, 2, 1). The story of Büttner's compassion for orphans Bērziņš had gleaned in a private conversation with the pastor of Kuldīga parish Ernests Frīdrihs Freibergs (1867–1964). The pastor of Āraiši parish Paul Friedrich Baerent (1866–1935) in his turn had helped Bērziņš by providing information in his letters on Herder's acquaintanceship in Livland.

The theological identity of Ludis Bērziņš in his work 'Magnificent Songs' manifests itself in several ways. The scholar uses direct quotations from the Bible and indirect references to Biblical texts in his commentary on the history of folklore collecting. To a certain extent he evaluates the persons involved in the folklore collecting process by applying Christian ethical criteria to them. Bērziņš' contact with his pastoral contemporaries appears here and there in the text. Although the theological identity of the 'Magnificent Songs' author is not the central one – primarily it is a work by a student of folklore and folkloristics – it is of certain significance.

## Abbreviations

LD – Barons, K. & Visendorfs, H. (eds.) (1894) *Latvju dainas*, 1 (Jelgava, Zīslaka H. I. Draviņ-Dravnieka spiestava); Barons, K. & Visendorfs, H. (eds.) (1903–15) *Latvju dainas*, 2–6 (Peterburga, Ķeizarskās Zinību Akadēmijas spiestava)

LNB R – National Library of Latvia, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts

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<sup>1</sup> The article was primarily prepared as a presentation for the international conference *Reflecting on Knowledge Production: The Development of Folkloristics and Ethnology* in Tartu (Estonia) May 17–19, 2007. The conference was organized by the Estonian Literary (Literature) Museum and the University of Tartu.

<sup>2</sup> Displayed quotations here and hereinafter – from the unpublished manuscript of Ludis Bērziņš' *Greznas dziesmas*. The metaphrase is mine. – R. T.