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REACTIONS OF LUTHERAN CLERGY TO MORMON PROSELYTIZING IN FINLAND, 1875–1889

Kim B. Östman

Introduction

The religious landscape of nineteenth-century Finland was highly uniform, at least on the surface. The organized and legally public practice of religion was dominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, with the Orthodox Church also having an officially approved role. During that century, however, this uniform religious landscape experienced unprecedented pluralization. This happened for example through revival movements that eventually remained within the Finnish Lutheran tradition, and through the emergence of new movements such as Baptists and Methodists.¹

Just as in non-religious contexts, such pluralization gave rise to processes of boundary formation, negotiation and maintenance. Established organizations and Finnish individuals had to decide how they would react to the new actors in the religious landscape. Were these new forms of religiosity acceptable, or were they to be resisted? Were they familiar enough to be embraced within or next to the existing mainstream tradition, or were they sufficiently different to become regarded as a sociocultural “other,” with all the accompanying attitudes?

One new religious movement that nineteenth-century Finnish society encountered was Mormonism. Born in the eastern United States through the visions of the founder Joseph Smith in the 1820s and proclaiming itself first as the restoration of ancient Christianity, Mormonism combined elements of Old and New Testament teaching. Its mainstream, officially called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, eventually built its own theocratic kingdom in the territory of Utah in the American west. Church membership reached approxi-

¹ Simo Heininen and Markku Heikkilä, *Suomen kirkkohistoria* (Helsinki: Edita, 1996).

mately 300,000 by the year 1900, with headquarters in Utah and pean strongholds in Great Britain and Scandinavia.²

Nineteenth-century Finns first encountered Mormonism through the printed word. Newspapers and Swedish books reported on Mormon doctrine, history and activities in both the United States and in Europe, and even in the other Nordic countries. With time, reports also began to trickle in concerning illegal Mormon missionizing in Finland. This happened after 1875, as about twenty missionaries proselytized in the country during the following fourteen years, making about eighty converts.

Conceptually and numerically speaking, Mormonism was a minor phenomenon in the Finnish religious field that was grappling with other new foreign movements and domestic revival movements that emerged from the Lutheran tradition itself. Nevertheless, Mormon activity attracted the attention of the Lutheran clergy in many locations where it took place. Mormonism was resisted, among other reasons, because of its religious content and the illegal nature of its proselytizing activities.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how Lutheran clergymen reacted to the spread of Mormonism in nineteenth-century Finland. The time period is limited to the years when active proselytizing took place, beginning in 1875 and ending in 1889. Mormon activity was quite limited, but it has been possible to construct a larger view of a handful of encounters between Mormon missionaries and Lutheran clergy. Three of these will here be presented as case studies to shed light on the central theme of this article.

Lutheranism and Mormonism in Nineteenth-century Finland

Finland and the other Nordic nations shared a common dominant faith tradition, that of Lutheranism. During the time period discussed in this article, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

² Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

was divided into three dioceses, namely those of Åbo, Borgå and Kuopio. Mormon activity took place mostly among the Swedish-speaking minority population on the coastal areas from the greater Helsinki region on the south coast up to the Jakobstad and Gamlakarleby region on the west coast. The encounter of Finnish Lutheranism and Mormonism thus took place in the Åbo and Borgå dioceses that covered these coastal areas.

Mormon activity in the Russian-ruled Finland began comparatively late and was significantly smaller in scope than in the other Nordic nations: Missionaries arrived in 1875, compared to 1850 in Sweden and Denmark and 1851 in Norway and Iceland. Only about eighty converts were made, compared for example with the over 16,000 converts made in neighboring Sweden during the nineteenth century.³ Nevertheless, this introduction of Mormonism to Finnish society made its impact on the nation's religious canvas and attracted the attention of journalists and clergymen. It is also noteworthy to mention that most nineteenth-century Mormon activity in Finland took place before the Dissenter Act of 1889, after which non-conformist Christian denominations were allowed to organize.

Of the three cases that I present in this article, two are from the Åbo diocese and one from the Borgå diocese. The first case, from the Åbo diocese, deals with the reaction to the first missionaries arriving and working in the area of Vasa on the west coast in 1875 and 1876. The second case is from Sibbo in the Borgå diocese, dealing with reactions to a group conversion to Mormonism in the spring of 1878. Finally, the third case is from the area of Pojo in the Åbo diocese, where Mormon activity took place for many years; the present focus is on the early 1880s. Because of the Swedish-language nature of the nineteenth-century Mormon activity in Finland, I use the Swedish names of the towns and villages involved, when available.

³ A. Dean Wengreen, "A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Sweden, 1850–1905." Ph.D. Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1968.

Case 1: Vasa

Mormon activity in Finland began through the arrival of two young Swedish missionaries in late October 1875. The brothers Carl and Johan Sundström, 29 and 23 years old, respectively, left Sweden from Sundsvall and arrived by steamship in the Finnish west coast city of Nikolaistad, also known as Vasa. The city and its vicinity was at the time part of the Åbo diocese. The missionaries seem to have gone by their work comparatively quietly, and instead of preaching in public meetings they did so in private for example with relatives of Finnish emigrants to Sweden who had converted to Mormonism there.⁴

Their activity did not go unnoticed, however. During January and February 1876, the Sundströms encountered Lutheran clergy at least three times, and their landlord was forbidden from renting a room to the two missionaries. The clergy, backed by the local church council, forbade the missionaries from preaching Mormonism and accused them of having been deceived. Later in August, the missionaries were called to see the mayor of Vasa who forbade them from preaching and read a request written by the local Lutheran clergy, asking that the missionaries be deported out of the country because they had come to preach a false doctrine.⁵ The Sundströms travelled back to Sweden that autumn, apparently not forcibly deported however.

Carl Sundström, the older of the two brothers, arrived back in Vaasa in October 1876. Together with him he had Axel Tullgren, a 49-year-old native Swede who had emigrated to Utah and who had then been sent back as a missionary to Scandinavia earlier the same year. These missionaries continued proselytizing in Vasa and other coastal areas. This time their work spurred one of the local Lutheran clergy to public objections.

⁴ Journal of Carl August Sundström. Church Historical Library and Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Hereafter cited as LDSCA.

⁵ Johannes Bäck to Gustaf von Wrede, 1 August 1876. Archive of Vasa Municipal Court and Magistrate, Vasa Provincial Archives.

This clergyman was Johannes Bäck, a 25-year-old pastor who had been installed as the parish minister in March 1876 as his predecessor, minister Karl Wegelius, age 41, passed away.⁶ Both Bäck and Wegelius, before his passing, had been active in opposing the Sundström brothers' work, with Bäck most probably authoring the earlier mentioned document requesting a deportation of the Sundströms from Finland. When Carl Sundström and Axel Tullgren continued the proselytizing work, the young Bäck went public concerning the matter and requested the local newspaper *Wasabladet* both to print his own writings on the Mormon situation and to reprint articles that had originally appeared in two Swedish periodicals. These took up space in six consecutive issues of the newspaper in December 1876.⁷

Bäck's stated purpose was to act in his capacity as a clergyman of the parish to warn the public against the doctrines preached by the Mormon missionaries. A note of frustration is evident in his opening words: "Who would have thought that this injurious sect, of whom somebody has said that it is a distorted and horrid caricature of all that is holy, would find its way even to our sequestered country? We have heard it spoken of Baptists, Methodists, Hihhulites, and other such, but at least from the Mormons ... one has hoped to be spared."⁸

Bäck summarized his objections to Mormonism in four points. They were: 1. The Book of Mormon was seen as being on equal footing with the Bible; 2. The Mormons held that the ancient Christian church had fallen into apostasy through persecution and false doctrines; 3. The Mormons assigned a physical place to the kingdom of God and claimed it exclusively for their church; 4. Those who were baptized Mormons

⁶ Consistorii Ecclesiastici i Åbo af trycket utgifna Cirkulärbref. Sjuttonde flocken. Ifrån början af år 1876 till slutet af år 1884. N:o 645-733 (Åbo: Åbo Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1885), 33 and 37.

⁷ See the issues of 6, 9, 13, 16, 20 and 23 December 1876.

⁸ "Mormonism," *Wasabladet*, 6 December 1876, 1. "Hihhulites" was a name used for Laestadianism, a revival movement that eventually remained within Lutheranism. English translations of originally Swedish quotations in this paper are mine.

were to emigrate to Utah and were also said to receive the charismatic gifts characteristic of the early Christians.⁹

One of Bäck's main thrusts seems to have been to distinguish Mormonism as something incompatible with true Christianity, a false doctrine that required more of its adherents than the pure Christian truth. His juxtaposition of Christianity and Mormonism was crystallized in his closing words: "... just as there is a huge difference between Christ and Joseph Smith, the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the Kingdom of God and the Mormon sect, so it is something completely different to suffer for Christ and His truth than for Joseph Smith, Brigham Young etc. and their lies and lunacies."¹⁰

Bäck's writings surely had an effect on the local population, at least by bringing the matter of Mormonism's presence to the forefront, although they did not lead for example to governmental action to deport the missionaries. The missionaries themselves were aware of the publicity: Axel Tullgren commented in a letter to his ecclesiastical leader that "the priest in this city has filled all the newspapers with all kinds of lies ... so that all hell seems to rage against us; and the priest has written so many lies that people whom we have spoken with are embarrassed for him that he would trumpet such obvious falsehoods."¹¹ To what extent Tullgren's evaluation of the situation represents objective fact is difficult to assess.

During the earliest proselytizing in the Vasa region, then, it is clear that the missionaries were resisted quite actively by one of the central clergymen in that region. This clergyman sought both to warn his parishioners through making public his theological objections to Mormonism and to enlist the help of governmental authorities by having the Mormon missionaries removed from the country. Johannes Bäck's actions portray a clergyman who was committed to Lutheranism

⁹ "Mormonism," *Wasabladet*, 9 December 1876, 2.

¹⁰ "Ännu något om mormonismen," *Wasabladet*, 23 December 1876, 3.

¹¹ Axel Tullgren to Ola N. Liljenquist, 19 December 1876, reprinted in *Skandnaviens Stjerne*, vol. 26, no. 8 (15 January 1877), 122-123.

and deeply worried about the appearance of a competing religious movement on his home turf.

Case 2: Sibbo

The second case examined in the present article is that of the town of Sibbo, located in the Borgå diocese immediately north-east of the capital city Helsinki. It was the scene of Mormon activity especially in the spring of 1878. This was when Axel Tullgren, the missionary just discussed in the case of Vasa, arrived there in the beginning of March together with Olof Forssell, another Swedish Mormon emigrant to Utah who had been called back to the old countries as a missionary. They received lodging at the house of a reputable farmer named Lindström, and began introducing the Mormon message to this family and others in the village of Borgby.

Numerically speaking, Tullgren and Forssell were very successful in their work. Within a few days of their arrival, at least ten persons were baptized as Mormons in a creek that had been dammed in order to bring the water level high enough for immersion baptism. The missionaries and the new converts warmed themselves around a fire, spoke of their convictions regarding Mormonism's divinity, and had communion or sacrament, as it is called in Mormon parlance.¹² Tullgren reported that he was "very satisfied and blessed in my work ... I have good prospects for more persons wanting to come and be baptized. I have many good friends, notwithstanding the priests warn the people against us, that they may not house us or listen to us."¹³

One of the priests Tullgren refers to is most probably Fredrik Wilhelm Fredriksson, the 51-year-old parish minister in Sibbo. In fact, Fredriksson had prior experience with sectarian movements, as he had been the Lutheran Church's choice to deal with Baptist enthusiasm on the Åland Islands in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Later on he was an

¹² "Mormoner i Sibbo," *Helsingfors Dagblad*, 22 March 1878, 2.

¹³ Excerpt of letter by Axel Tullgren, 13 March 1878, reprinted in *Nordstjerman*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1 April 1878), 110.

active participant in official discussions concerning the Dissenter Act, speaking from personal experience.¹⁴

In the beginning of April 1878, a few weeks after the conversions of his parishioners had taken place, Fredriksson wrote to the Borgå diocesan chapter “with deep worry concerning the ignorance and unbelief that still prevails among the common people in our country.” Fredriksson reported on the particulars concerning how Mormonism, “this mixture of absurdity and perversion of all religious and moral ideas,” had made inroads among the parishioners, and how these “victims” had now denied “the truth of our church.” In Fredriksson’s opinion the unsettled situation in Borgby was further compounded by lay persons who had been holding Bible readings there ever since the previous autumn. He asked the diocesan chapter to take “strong measures and steps ... to close the flood of indiscretion and calm the worries of conscience among the peaceable in the country.”¹⁵

The two missionaries Tullgren and Forssell were compelled to leave Finland only a week or so later because they got into difficulty with their passports.¹⁶ Many of the new converts also forsook their new faith rather quickly, apparently because of intervention by the Lutheran clergy in the parish. Fredriksson reported that the converts had been dealt with through teaching and a friendly attitude by the priests, and thus they had come to an understanding of “their delusion and bitterly regretted it.”

Thus the chapter, when replying to Fredriksson and writing another parish that had been affected by the Mormon conversions, only exhorted the priests to give special attention to those that had been baptized as Mormons and to take care of bringing them back to the

¹⁴ R.A. Mäntylä, *Eriuskolaiskysymys Suomessa 1809-1889, osa 1: 1809-1871* (Turku: Turun yliopisto, 1954), 119.

¹⁵ Fredrik W. Fredriksson to Borgå Diocesan Chapter, 2 April 1878. Archive of Borgå Diocesan Chapter, Finnish National Archives. Hereafter cited as ABDC.

¹⁶ Journal of Axel Tullgren. LDSA.

Lutheran faith.¹⁷ The Bishop of the diocese commented on the Mormon missionaries and the Borgby case a couple of years later: “When these deceivers have left, most of the misled have regretted their action, so that only two or three belonging to Sibbo parish and one belonging to Borgå parish should remain that still cling to their heresy.”¹⁸

Case 3: Pojo

The third case to be examined in this article is that of the town of Pojo in southwest Finland, part of the Åbo diocese. This case differs from those of Vasa and Sibbo in that the person propagating the Mormon message was mostly not a missionary but rather a Swedish Mormon layman who had arrived in Finland with his family. This man, Johan Blom, came to Finland in the spring of 1880 to work at Brödtorp manor in the employ of Eduard Hisinger, president of the town council.

At his arrival, Blom, age 31, informed his employer that he was a Mormon by religion. Hisinger gave Blom permission to attend to his devotions together with his family, as long as he didn't begin spreading his faith among the numerous workers at Brödtorp and surroundings. Upon arrival Blom had also delivered his papers to the 67-year-old parish minister Herman Sohlberg, who forbade Blom from preaching his views on pains of being called in front of the church council.

Over time, however, word spread, for one reason or another, that Blom was a Mormon, that he had Mormon literature, and that he held Mormon devotions in his home together with his family. Interested listeners came to Blom's home to listen to these devotions and to the Mormon missionaries who sporadically visited the area and stayed with the Blom family. In the summer of 1882, Blom baptized two persons in lake Fårsjö near Brödtorp manor when the visiting missionary wasn't able to do so due to illness.

¹⁷ Borgå Diocesan Chapter to Fredrik W. Fredriksson and to the Pastorate in Borgå, both on 17 April 1878. ABDC.

¹⁸ Speech of Bishop Anders J. Hornborg in *Protokoll fördt vid Prestmötet i Borgå den 15–21 September 1880* (Borgå: G. L. Söderströms tryckeri, 1881), 11.

Shortly after the baptism, Blom was called to meet with 25-year-old Fredrik Nauklér, the priest in charge of Pojo parish after Sohlberg had passed away a year earlier. Nauklér forbade Blom from doing any further baptizing. Rather surprisingly, however, when compared to the cases of Vasa and Sibbo, Nauklér did not call Blom before the church council. Apparently this approach was taken by Nauklér because he felt that only members of the Finnish state church could be warned by the church council, of which he was then president. When further queried by Blom whether those coming to attend his devotions should be turned away, Nauklér answered that doing so would not be necessary. While Blom had thus been warned by both Sohlberg and Nauklér – and his employer Hisinger – not to spread his faith, it seems that the clergy was not willing to take strong action against him even when conversions to Mormonism took place.

Indeed, when Blom eventually had to go to court in October 1883, it was his employer Hisinger that had become infuriated enough. During the trial it was Hisinger, not the clergy, who requested that Blom be deported from the country because of his religious activities. Nauklér, who was a witness in the case, only reported on his dealings with Blom, but did not urge deportation or that any other particular sentence be given. In any case, Blom was convicted of baptizing on the Sabbath, preaching foreign doctrines and for inducing people to leave the Evangelical Lutheran church. The hearings were held in late October 1883 and the details of the case were reported on widely in newspapers particularly in southern Finland.¹⁹

During a regular visit to the Pojo parish by the Lutheran Dean in November 1883, just after the court hearings, the matter of Mormon influences in the parish were briefly touched upon. The visitor discussed “the bogus basis that Mormonism had taken from the Bible as support for its doctrine of polygamy and counselled everyone to be on

¹⁹ Minutes of the Johan Blom trial. SOO 380/1884, Archive of the Senate Justice Department, Finnish National Archives. For newspaper publicity, see for example “Mormonmålet i Pojo,” *Ekenäs Notisblad*, 31 October 1883, 1, and “Mormonmålet i Pojo,” *Ekenäs Notisblad*, 3 November 1883, 1–2.

guard against deceptions in doctrine.”²⁰ Before the visit it was suggested to the Dean that a hearing of the two 1882 convert women could be organized if he so desired, but it is not known if such a thing took place.²¹

Discussion

There are also other examples of clergy reactions to Mormon proselytizing in Finland. In Kvevlax, close to Vasa, the parish priest Karsten came to the site of a Mormon preaching meeting in November 1881 and warned the attendees against listening to the missionaries’ message, resulting in a significant reduction of the gathered crowd, but he didn’t cause any further action to be taken.²² In Pedersöre, further north, the minister Victor Helander wrote to the mayor in the same year requesting the removal of the Mormon missionary who was active in the area “spreading his doctrines detrimental to society.”²³ These cases will not be dealt with in further detail in this article, but are rather given as additional illustrations of the types of reactions that clergy could have.

Generally it can be noted that proselytizing and resulting conversions to Mormonism were not simply dismissed by the Lutheran clergy, even if the total impact of the Mormon proselytizing in terms of conversions was very small. The reactions of the clergy towards Mormon missionary activity were usually always negative in one way or another, but they varied in extent and severity. In the Vasa case discussed earlier, for example, parish priest Johannes Bäck publicized his critical views very widely. Fredrik Fredriksson in Borgå wrote his ecclesiastical superiors and sought to counsel those in his parish that had been converted by the Mormon message. In contrast, Fredrik Nauklér in the Pojo case seems to have been content with only warning the per-

²⁰ Visitation notes, 21 November 1883. Archive of Åbo Diocesan Chapter, Åbo Provincial Archives, Finland. Hereafter cited as AÅDC.

²¹ Ernst O. Reuter to E.F.T. Strandberg, 12 October 1883. AÅDC.

²² “Mormonpredikanter i Qweflax,” *Wasabladet*, 9 November 1881, 2–3.

²³ Victor L. Helander to J.L. Pentzin, 27 April 1881. Reproduced in Vera Nyman, “Historiska händelser i Larsmo och Jakobstad,” LDSA.

son spreading the message of Mormonism and not discussing the matter publicly. None of the examined clergymen let the matter of Mormon proselytizing pass unnoticed, however.

It is also instructive to see to what extent the Lutheran clergy sought to deal with the Mormon phenomenon through spiritual means, for example that of warning their parishioners of the perceived false doctrine and heresy that had entered the parish, and to what extent they sought to do so through enlisting the help of secular authorities in having the Mormon missionaries removed from the area of their parishes or from Finland altogether. In the three cases discussed in this article, two, those of Borgå and Pojo were confined to intra-church discussions, whereas one, that of Vasa, entailed also an appeal to secular authorities.

The negative reactions by the Lutheran clergy can be understood in the light of their own worldview. The Mormons, in likeness with many of the other sectarians, were seen as heretics and false teachers who jeopardized the spiritual well-being of the parishes and who challenged the authority of the dominant tradition. In addition to this religiously motivated worry, some clergy may also have seen in the Mormons one more example of sectarianism that challenged their personal authority and position in society.

Then again, some Finnish laypersons felt the clergy were still too disinterested in battling new religious movements such as Mormonism. In Vasa, for example, one writer criticized the clergy especially in Swedish-speaking parishes for focusing more on the advancement of the Finnish language than on spreading a better understanding of Christianity among the common people, an understanding the lack of which some clergy had argued caused common people to be swayed by the sects. This neglect of pastoral duties was seen by the critics as creating a situation in which "it is not strange if Methodists, Mormons and Baptists in precisely these parishes find a welcoming field for their activity."²⁴ Not all were of the same opinion, however. Only a few days later, the Finnish-language *Vaasan Sanomat* published a rebuttal opining

²⁴ "Metodismen å orten," *Wasa Tidning*, 11 November 1881, 2.

that the original text was influenced by attacks towards Finnishness and such accusations of neglect on part of the clergy would require compelling evidence to be taken seriously.²⁵

Active Mormon proselytizing in Finland also coincided chronologically with growing worry among the Lutheran clergy concerning layman activity and its effects on doctrinal purity and the unity of the church. Two years after the Mormon activity in the Sibbo parish, for instance, parish priest Fredrik Fredriksson commented that “the sporadic revivals that emerge through layman activity are in my opinion bought for a very high price as they pave way for religious subjectivism and separatism. At least in Sibbo parish the results of the speakers ... have been that a direction towards separatism and Baptism, I do not now want to mention anything worse, has been visible in the parish.”²⁶ The Mormons can thus be seen as one additional strand of the phenomena that the clergy feared could cause serious damage to the church if not checked.

It is also important to note that the actions and mindset of the Mormon missionaries contributed to the reactions towards them. For example, the missionaries encouraged their converts not to partake of Lutheran communion and taught that they were representatives of the only true church; thus their own activities could be seen as inviting “hostility” on the part of the clergy. Mormonism did not invite ecumenism; its tendency to bifurcate the world into saints and gentiles, into true Christians and so-called Christians, created a situation where each party in the encounter was inclined to view the other with suspicion and as a tool of the adversary.²⁷

²⁵ “Wasa Tidning,” *Vaasan Sanomat*, 14 November 1881, 3.

²⁶ *Protokoll förddt vid Prestmötet i Borgå den 15–21 September 1880* (Borgå: G.L. Söderströms tryckeri, 1881), 45.

²⁷ Kim Östman, “Kristillisen identiteetin ongelma varhaisen mormonismiin aatemaailmassa,” *Finnish Journal of Theology*, vol. 112, no. 2 (2007), 123–134.

Conclusion

The theme of clergy of a dominant tradition resisting the influx and emergence of new movements is hardly new nor is it by any means restricted to the pair of Lutheranism and Mormonism. Indeed, such dynamics exist in religious landscapes not related to Christianity at all. Nevertheless, the interaction between nineteenth-century Mormonism and its various host societies is a useful tool for learning more concerning the attitudes in those host societies in general and what it was about Mormonism in particular that individuals in these societies found attractive or repugnant. Comparative analysis including other new religious movements in these societies will provide further understanding.