

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITING OF THE HISTORY OF THE FINNISH EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

(Suomi Synod), USA., 1890-1962



### Is Church history history?

This work is a piece of Church history. But, someone might ask: Is Church history really history? It is not something total different from other history, an "ethereal", spiritual entity, that cannot fit into usual historical categories and be subject to critical examination? Does it fall outside scholarly attention?

The answer to these kinds of questions is a simple one: Church history, rigidly investigated and honestly written, is no different from any other kind of history. The same standards prevail there as they do in any area of human historical activity, - provided we proceed on the assumption that the writing of history is a communication of human experience, a recreation of "the past in the present".

For this enterprise the following requisites are of first importance: a) to give a basic and a full a picture as possible of real people, b) to point out the process of change in the events (avoiding getting stuck on separate,

static events), c) to employ instruments of "logical adequacy" and coherence, learning from the fields of linguistic analysis and literary structuralism to represent human reality in its communal character,

There are, obviously, distinctive elements in all areas of the historical knowledge of man. There is history of music, there is history of science, for example. To investigate the various fields of musical history presupposes that the research possesses to some degree a musical ear, for instance in distinguishing Sibelius' orchestral sonorities from those of Haydn. To gain a perception into the field of the history scientific thought does require from the investigator a capacity for logical distinctions. Likewise, the composing of Church history comes realistically for a person who has some affinity with the phenomenon of the "varieties of religious experience" (to borrow a phrase from the American philosopher, William James), than it would appear to someone who claims a total insensitivity to the Church's purpose and dynamic (although he at same time might claim an extraordinary objectivity for

being distant and far away the Church - an objectivity that becomes highly suspect as another form of insulated subjectivity).

### The urgency for immediate action

There is an urgency to labor during these very years with the issues of Finnish American Church history. The reasons are several. The only effort toward presenting a comprehensive account is now 70 years old, namely Viljami Rautanen's "Amerikan Suomalainen Kirkko". Only partial works have appeared in recent times, a formative history of the Suomi Synod, the yearbooks of the several churches, annual "kalenterit", some historical approaches for explaining the "Laestadian" and the "Kansalliskirkko" experiences. The urgency to spur the investigations also arises from the need for competency in the employment of sources, - allow me to state that there has occurred some distortion in the usage of Church related historical materials. The use of sources requires a command of the Finnish language; capability in this respect is rapidly diminishing among Finnish Americans despite a growing interest in searching out their roots. A penetration of the available texts demands not only a working ability with the Finnish language, but also an ear for American Finnish as well as for "Finglish". "Finglish" ! How did this term originate? A digression may be pardoned at this point, because the answer to this question belongs to the Suomi Synod tradition. You find the term "Finglish" in H. L. Mencken's masterwork on the dictionary of the American language. When Mencken was working on his project he wrote to the editor of the "Amerikan Suometar" requesting information on the language of the Finns in America John Rantamäki was the editor. He discussed this problem with Martti Nisonen, teacher of music and composer at Suomi College, Hancock, Michigan. Nisonen spun the term, "Finglish". From my student days at Suomi I recall the fun we had over this new word!

### "Teamwork" the solution for complex problems

The study of Finnish American "church histories" is a wide, complex field, shot through with paradoxes. Once the usual generalizations are dismissed, and the ground broken through source studies, there emerges a challenging landscape. The foundation for this research only can be laid by teamwork that addresses itself to the investigation of the distinctive elements in the life of the Finnish American churches in the context of their social-political-religious rootage in Finland. In other words, the joint enterprise requires the efforts of both Finnish and American scholars laboring over an extended period of time in form of cooperative seminars. Such a plan, fortunately, is already receiving attention. The Section of Contemporary Church History of the University of Helsinki has already produced several significant papers engaging the American experience of Finnish Christianity.

The strange, utterly untrue notion still seems to hover over minds of many that the Church of Finland "planted" the Suomi Synod, that it established an autocratic base in America, extending its rule. The historical evidence precisely indicates the contrary. "Official Finland" toward the end of the 19th. century looked with cool eyes across the ocean toward its own children and kinsmen. The thorough study, carried through almost a decade 1889-1898 known as the "Emigration Question"<sup>1</sup> for the cause and cure of emigration primarily to America, contains but two recommendations for providing teachers-pastors to work among the emigres. These came from the governor of Waasa and the diocese of Porvoo (Swedish). An incredible non-understanding of the motives that led some emigres to form their congregations and to build church structures without any certainty regarding the availability of pastoral leaders the following statement: "The motive for establishing congregations, for building churches and hiring ministers

from "kunnian himo", vaingloriousness - for they do not wish to be inferior to others" (this text from the report of the Kuopio diocese, undersigned by the bishop-chairman Gustaf Johansson and four others). - Equally absurd, but more positive, is the frequently used explanation to the effect that the emigrants established congregations because they were "accustomed to going to church". The effort that it took to work toward forming a congregation, to sacrifice for it, to build a sanctuary and to maintain it, without any support from the outside is not accomplished by force of habit. An emigrant by force of habit and social desire found his way to a saloon, to drink, but not toward the thankless task of building a church. Some may have been neurotic conformists, but the phenomenon of sprouting independent churches across the wide USA requires a far more potent explanation.

### Sheep without a shepherd

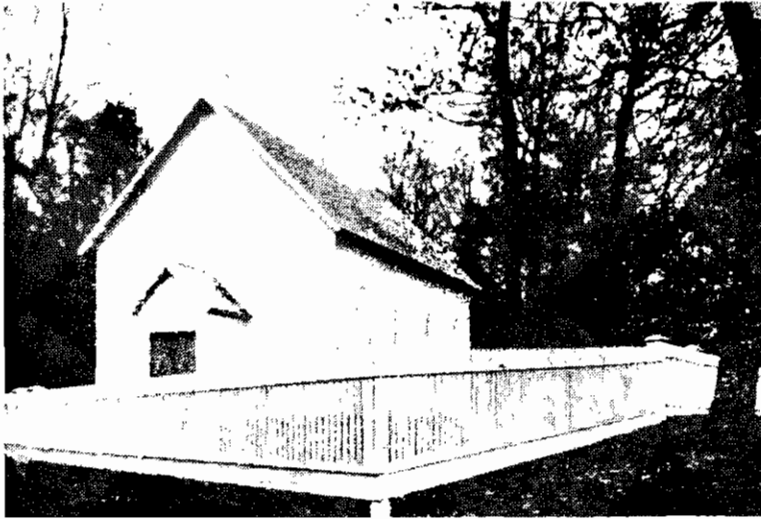
"As sheep without a shepherd" suggests a picture that held through for a long period of time in the life of Finnish emigres to America. Two documents, the first from 1867, and the second from 1873, say something of the unfolding of the church-life. In Quincy (Hancock) a Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran congregation came into being in summer of 1867, some three years after the arrival of the first contingent of Finns from northernmost Norway, Ruija, as recruited workers in copper mines. The minutes (preserved by the Finns in the archives of their Hancock congregation) indicate the cooperation of three nationality groups in its formation: Swedes, Norwegians, and Kvener, the latter referring to the Norwegian Finns. Beside the Norwegian preacher at the services stood a Finnish translator. - The second document that played a crucial role in initiating an interest in Finland regarding the desperate needs of the American Finns is a long, 12-page letter from a Norwegian pastor who had served the



Pastori A. E. Backman oli ensimmäinen Suomesta amerikansuomalaisten keskuuteen saapunut pappi. Hän saapui syyskuun 10. päivänä 1876 ja otti haltuunsa Quincyn ja Calumetin evankelisluterilaisten seurakuntain hoitamisen. Pastori Backman oli varsinainen tienraivaaja Amerikansuomalaisen evankelisluterilaisen kirkon historiassa.

The first pastor from Finland Alfred E. Backman arrived in September 10, 1876 and took care of the Lutheran congregations in Quincy and Calumet. Pastor Backman was a pioneer in the Finnish American church history.

Copper Country Finns, H. Roernees. In writing it he was actually a spokesman for Finns. No one knew to whom to send it in Finland. They intended the letter for the Mission (Foreign) Society, but did not know its location nor its presiding officer. Roernees sent it to a person of whom he knew only by hear-say, J. P. Tiberg, in Kjaafjord, Norway, requesting that he send it on to Finland, pleading for a pastoral leader who could work with the Finns in their own language. Tiberg forwarded the letter to Turku, to a certain acquaintance, who again sent it on to its destination, the headquarters of the Mission Society of Finland in Helsinki. This letter is preserved in the archives of the Mission Society. The letter sent in June 1873 was discussed by the Board of the Society in late November. No help was available, but the letter would be kept in "good memory". Further requests<sup>2</sup> came for copies of the Bible, for spiritual literature, and for a pastor. Almost three years later, in September of 1876, the first pastor from



Quincyn kirkko (Hancock)

Jo aikaisessa vaiheessa kaipasivat amerikansuomalaiset jumalanpalveluksia ja säännöllistä seurakunnallista elämää kirkkoineen, pyhäkouluineen ja opettajineen. Quincyn kaivoksille Hancockiin perustettiin v. 1867 norjalaisten, ruotsalaisten ja suomalaisten yhteinen seurakunta, jota on pidettävä suomalaisten seurakuntain alkuna Amerikassa.

Church at Quincy, Hancock.

At a very early stage the Finnish immigrants in America needed a religious services. In 1867 at the Quincy Mines, Hancock, Mich., there was founded a common congregation of the Norwegians, Swedes and Finns. This was a starting point of the Finnish church in America.

**Finland, A. Backman arrived in Copper Contry, his travel having been paid for the Finns who called him, and who pledged their support.**

Outside of Finland, there has been, and is, only one Finnish born institution of higher learning, the Suomi College. It was supported neither by state taxes nor by Big Business, but through the voluntary contributions of the "proletariat" membership of the Suomi Synod. The total given for an educational cause rises into the millions dollars from the purses of so called ordinary people for their college during the life time of the Suomi Synod (1890-1962).

#### **The "twin birth" of Suomi Synod and Suomi College**

How was Suomi College born? Was it founded as an afterthought following the establishment of the Suomi Synod? No.

The story can be told in this way. At the

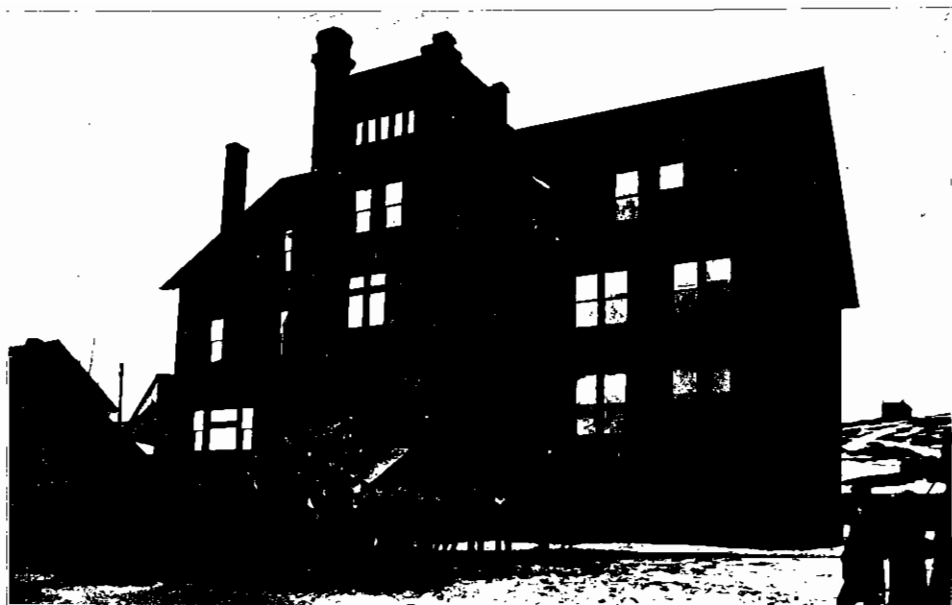
time of the creation of the Suomi Synod (March 25, 1890) - in the envisaged functioning of a unifying ecclesial body - appeared a unique projection of a commitment to found a school, "Opisto", a place of learning.<sup>3</sup> This idea was in a state of pure being, free of any association with a place, without a name. It was clear to all that pastoral leaders had to be trained by the Synod itself, and that education belonged to the essence of their Finnish culture. There took place a twin-birth of the Suomi Synod and its school. The prime root of the school becomes visible in realizing that the exception of certain persons, the attitude of the clergy of Finland was hardly sympathetic to the emigre movement to America. Pastor J. K. Nikander, while preparing to go to America met sharp criticism for his decision. Recalling that climate of opinion, as President of Suomi College he wrote in 1906:

"I still remember how sometimes prior to my leaving for America at the end of 1884, a certain respected colleague in Finland in-



Ensimmäisen v. 1890 kokoontuneen suomalaisen kirkolliskokouksen osanottajat, Calumet, Mich.  
 Participants in the first Finnish Synod of the church, Calumet, Mich., 1890.

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|----------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Jooseppi Salmu | A. A. Pajari | J. J. Hoikka   | K. L. Tolonen   | Heikki Heinonen |
| E. V. Wennberg | Isaac Niva   | Alex Leinonen  | Carl A. Silfven | Kalle Sillberg  |
| Niilo Majhannu | H. Sarvela   | J. V. Eloheimo | J. K. Nikander  |                 |
|                | E. V. Lund   | J. F. Erikson  | N. A. Lempeä    |                 |
|                | Tuomas Suni  | Olli Rousu     | J. H. Jasberg   | Antti Johnson   |



Suomi-Opisto aloitti toimintansa Hancockissa (Mich.) syyskuun 8. päivänä 1896 Suomi Synodin eli Amerikan suomalaisen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkkokunnan alullepanemana. Vuonna 1900 opisto sai oman punaisesta hiekkakivistä rakennetun talonsa, jota on jälkeempään useaan otteeseen laajennettu.

The Suomi College started at Hancock, Mich., September 8, 1896 initiated by the Suomi Synod or the Finnish Evangelic-Lutheran Church in America. Since 1900 the College has a house of its own built of red sandstone; later the buildings of the College have been extended several times.

directly made the matter of establishing a school among our emigres a significant matter. I had no idea at that time of becoming involved in activities leading to the creation of such a school. In his own way he opposed the emigration of pastors to America for the reason that there was a shortage of ministers in Finland. Having questioned him, how then could the emigres have pastors unless they were sent from Finland, he replied: Let them build their own school in America for training pastors. To his reply I had a ready answer: But, that kind of a school needs educated men for teachers, and for that reason it is necessary for a certain number of pastors to go to America. This kind of an idea I can now identify as a sprout (itu) that was in my mind before leaving for America, which under the force of necessity compelled me against my own will to share with others in its realization."<sup>4</sup>

This "negative impulse" from Finland received a positive charge through Nikander's experience in America.

The story of the Suomi Synod - as well of all Finnish American church bodies - is the answer to the question: What does happen to a religious Tradition in a land of total political and religious freedom?

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#### Footnotes

1. Emigrationsfrågan, föredragens betänkande 1898 n:o 10, 1898.
2. Letters from abroad received by the Director of the Mission Society, Helsinki. The Archives of the society. Box E ab 1.
3. Minutes of the constituting convention of the Suomi Synod, March 25, 1890. Suomi College Archives, Suomi Synod section. Hancock, Mich.
4. Suomi College Album, tenth anniversary celebration, 1906, p. 11.