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Anti-Semitism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland between 1917–1933

(Summary)

This study examines the attitudes toward the Jews among the leaders and the most important clerics of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The study concentrates on the period between 1917 and 1933, and it focuses especially on anti-Semitic views. Until now, anti-Semitism in the Church of Finland has mainly been studied in other fields of historical research, but the ecclesiastical anti-Semitic atmosphere, in the early 1920s in particular, has not been properly analyzed. This study shows that anti-Semitism within the Finnish Church was considerably more common and more varied than has been known so far.

Finnish ecclesiastical anti-Semitism had a religious background, which was based on the traditional Christian thought that the position of the Jews as God's chosen people changed when they deserted Christ after falsely interpreting the biblical promises about the Messiah. The people of promise became the cursed people, and Jewish characteristics considered to be negative were seen as reflections of this religious reality. According to the most radical religious accusations, the Jews were guilty of murdering Jesus, and the most anti-Jewish eschatological interpretations insisted that Jews were preparing the world order of the Antichrist. Furthermore, some churchmen believed that the Antichrist would rise from among the Jewish people. A particularly strong and widely accepted perception was that Jews had a profound hatred for Jesus. This hatred could also be found in the ideologies and activities of certain political movements. All these elements were present in Finnish discourse, in either a hidden or more open manner, during the period of focus.

First, the timing was right in the political atmosphere for the most common ideas of modern anti-Semitism to be flexibly linked to the Christian idea of history. Secondly, in

addition to the religious background, another central feature of Finnish ecclesiastical anti-Semitism was to connect the Jews to the political phenomena of the day, especially Communism and Bolshevism. In this respect, the discourse within the Church followed a general negative attitude toward Jews in society on the whole. Thirdly, many Finnish clerics saw negative Jewish effects in cultural liberalism and the general anti-religious atmosphere as well.

Many ecclesiastical key figures believed the Jews to be in control of the European press, and they referred to the significant economic resources of Jews as well as their dominant position at the core of capitalism. Behind these prejudices can be seen German moderate anti-Semitism in particular, which welled up from a general experience of the increasing influence of Jews.

In this study I have focused on what the leadership of the Church of Finland thought of Jews. Only one of the Finnish-speaking bishops—the bishop of Tampere, Jaakko Gummerus—did not present any views that could be considered anti-Semitic. His moderate attitude reflected on the policy of the Church, when a strong anti-Semitic campaign broke out in his diocese at the turn of the 1930s.

By contrast, the archbishop Gustaf Johansson and the bishop of Savonlinna O. I. Colliander represented the most severe degree of religious anti-Semitism among the bishops. They found their reasons for anti-Semitism in an interpretation of Christianity, but they also connected their views to a secular context. On the other hand, both had defended Jews at the Diet of Finland at the end of the 19th century. Both Johansson and Colliander presented their anti-Semitic beliefs when acting as bishops.

Archbishop Lauri Ingman’s anti-Semitic views were connected to his previous political activity: in the name of national interests, he sought to slow down the process of granting civil rights to Jews, because he believed that they could pose a considerable threat to Finland and Finns. As a practical politician, however, Ingman did not return to the subject after the new rights were granted. Though his suspicions remained, he did not discuss the Jewish question after his political career.

The bishop of Vyborg Erkki Kaila also presented his most notable speculations on the Jews before assuming that office. The content that I found in his personal archives was the most diverse of my source material, and he had even created a card index of more than 170 nationally and internationally significant Jews. The main concern for Kaila was the increasing influence of the Jews in post-war Europe. He also presented the most extensive Finnish version of the German-type of moderate anti-Semitism in his book *Aikojen murroksessa* (1921, "In the Age of Transition"), which received a great deal of public praise, both within and outside the church. Over time, however, Kaila's perspective changed and in the 1930s he ceased to emphasize the negative effects of Jews.

The most radical anti-Semite was J. R. Koskimies, the bishop of Oulu. He adopted his negative attitude toward the Jews from the 19th-century Finnish nationalistic Fennoman movement, and he was the only bishop who made references that can be interpreted as racial thinking. As far as Koskimies and most of the other bishops are concerned, one must underline that the anti-Semitism represented by them was by no means cautious or veiled in the ecclesiastical context. The leaders of the Finnish church represented a variety of different manifestations of anti-Semitism, and in the case of J. R. Koskimies, it appeared even in a pronounced way.

In addition to the bishops' views, all of the significant ecclesiastical newspapers contained anti-Semitic texts. In the beginning of the independence of Finland, there existed two major groups of churchmen in the Finnish Church, which were represented by two prominent ecclesiastical newspapers. The so-called Helsinki group aimed at renovation of the Church, and several significant university theologians belonged to its ranks. The newspaper *Kotimaa* was their unofficial organ. *Kotimaa* featured anti-Semitic writings, especially at the turn of the 1920s, but after the middle of the decade the degree of anti-Semitic material decreased. The anti-Semitism of *Kotimaa* arose in many respects from nationalistic views, and the most active writer on the subject was the subeditor Verneri Luohivuori. The newspaper *Herättäjä* of the so-called Turku group, close to Archbishop Johansson, was theologically conservative and had a reserved attitude toward the Church having a more active role in society. *Herättäjä*'s views represented religious anti-

Semitism, which increased in the beginning of the 1930s with the assistance of a clergyman from Lapua, K. R. Kares, a strong anti-Semite and the most important cleric in the radical nationalist Lapua Movement. In addition to these two ecclesiastical newspapers, which represented the two main directions within the Church, Professor Antti J. Pietilä, the editor of *Vartija*, also discussed Jews in his texts. Like Louhivuori, he was worried about the economic activity of the Finnish Jews and he theorized on possible relations between the Freemasons and the Jews.

The most original actor within the Church was the clergyman of Sauvo J. W. Wartiainen. Previous research has regarded him as an extremist and therefore a marginal thinker. In a way, he was indeed very extreme, but for a supposedly marginal figure, his thoughts received a lot of play in the most important ecclesiastical newspapers, especially the Turku-based *Herättäjä*, as well as *Kirkko ja kansa*, led by Bishop Erkki Kaila. Furthermore, the archival sources reveal that the dissemination of Wartiainen's crudest anti-Semitic work, *Juutalaisten maailmanhistoriallinen merkitys entisaikaan Jumalan kansana ja nykyään saatanan joukkona* (1922, "The Significance of the Jews in the Scope of World History, as the People of God in the Past and as Flock of Satan Today"), was promoted by dozens of priests in southwestern Finland. Wartiainen was not alone in his thoughts.

The criticism met by Wartiainen serves as a key to understanding the Finnish "platonic hatred of Jews." One was not allowed to hate Jews because hating was unchristian and hatred was a sin. None of the leading clerics considered themselves anti-Semites, because anti-Semitism as a concept was understood in a narrow way either as hatred of Jews or as a political movement aimed at limiting their rights (however, the missionary Aapeli Saarisalo defined himself as a religious anti-Semite and considered Christianity a real form of anti-Semitism, "opposing Judaism").

In the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, as in many churches around Europe, the most significant reason for anti-Jewish sentiment was the fear of Communism. The revolutions of Russia and Germany after WWI, as well as the Hungarian communist revolution, strengthened the Judeo-Bolshevist stereotype. The original perception created

by the propaganda of the Russian White movement also engraved itself in the minds of Finnish priests, and it persisted even after all of the most important Bolsheviks with a Jewish background had been replaced in the Soviet leadership. Eyewitness testimonies had a major role in creating the Judeo-Bolshevist threat scenario; for example, clerics of the Church of Ingria had had to flee to Finland from the areas around St. Petersburg. The traces of propaganda were not recognized in the anti-Communist atmosphere after the Finnish Civil War and the Russian Revolution. In the latter half of the 1920s, the key role of the Jews in the Bolshevik movement was no longer emphasized so often.

Even though research can prove that the anti-Semitic atmosphere disappeared in the latter half of the 1920s, Jews in Finland confronted doubts and accusations in the form of concrete and widespread anti-Semitism in the beginning of the independence. During this anti-Jewish phase, it was nearly impossible to know that it was a passing phenomenon related to the opposition of Communism. It requires time to create a sharper overall picture of the situation.

Anti-Semitism again became more common in the Finnish Church with the arrival of the 1930s. In the wake of the Lapua Movement, Jews were connected to the discussions concerning freemasonry and the international anti-religious movement. The German general Erich Ludendorff, a famous and popular figure in Finland especially during and after WWI, wrote about the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, and his opinions had a decisive influence on the emergence of the subject. In particular, clerics close to the radical right adopted his ideas about the conspiracy.

Economic uncertainty, searching for national identity, political quarrels and critical religious turning points fueled anti-Semitic thought in the Church of Finland as well. However, international propaganda material, clearly geared against the Jews, did not enjoy broad support in the Church, and nothing in the ecclesiastical material suggests that the situation would have been entirely different elsewhere in Finnish society. For example, a book that got relatively wide attention, General Ludendorff's *Vernichtung der Freimaurerei durch Enthüllung ihrer Geheimnisse* (1927), was primarily about Freemasons, not about Jews.

The most famous book on the international Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, purportedly written by the Russian Sergei Nilus in the beginning of the 20th century. This study shows that emphasis of the role of the *Protocols* in Finnish anti-Semitism has been a mistake. In my source material, there can be found some opinions which are similar to those of the *Protocols*, and therefore a part of Finnish ecclesiastical anti-Semitism is indirectly connected to the *Protocols*. However, none of the notable clerics considered the *Protocols* to be authentic, not even during its initial round of publication. In Finland, the *Protocols* were regarded as pure propaganda. Even the clergyman of Viitasaari Matti Jaakkola, perhaps the most radical clerical anti-Semite, sought to present more reliable source material for his writings on Jews than *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. There has been a tendency in some Finnish research to see blatant anti-Semitic material deriving from the *Protocols* or referring to the text somehow, even though actual attempts to prove it are lacking. In the background is probably the "Nilus ex machina" hypothesis, of explaining it with Nilus if there is no better explanation. A good example of this is the discourse surrounding Wartiainen's book on Jews. Contrary to earlier perceptions, this study shows that the dominant views of his book cannot be traced back to the *Protocols*.

Several When churchmen traveled abroad, they they adopted new ideas. On a few occasions, a priest who had presented anti-Semitic thoughts in Finland happened to also meet actual Jews while traveling. An interesting contradiction arises from the fact that these encounters seemed to have almost no effect on their thoughts about Jews.

Many Finnish clerics followed both the international press and literature. Foreign ideas on Jews spread from there to domestic ecclesiastical newspapers. The anti-Semitism that appeared within the Church of Finland originated primarily from Germany and Russia, but also from Denmark, Hungary and England. However, the diversity of the language used in the anti-Semitic texts indicates that the Finnish writers did not repeat foreign thoughts verbatim but created their own anti-Semitic descriptions.

One of the main challenges in the analysis of this study was the implicitness of expression

in some anti-Semitic texts: authors made hints and allegations, seeking to create an impression of suspicion in the reader. This opens several possible interpretations. Secular anti-Semitism in particular employed implications and ambiguity. On the other hand, many ideas which appear in the source material were “generally known” and part of the common way of thinking. In the religious context, this common way of thinking meant, for example, that scribes and Pharisees, as well as the Jewish people, were seen as antagonistic to Christ. When the churchmen wrote or talked about these opponents of Jesus and the gospel, their views were informed with an anti-Jewish tradition dating back two millennia. When examining Christianity, it becomes clear that a negative attitude toward Jews was not an individual choice, but the norm.

The discourse on Jews in the Finnish Church lacked three internationally significant features. Even though Jews were considered a race, this was not a clear concept. The churchmen did not underline interracial hierarchy, and Jews were never presented as a lower race. Secondly, none of the ecclesiastical key figures planned or encouraged anyone to take anti-Semitic action. The plan of new civil rights for Jews met with calls for limitations during the process, and after the passing of the law some priests considered granting the civil rights to be a mistake. Nevertheless, none of the prominent clerics proposed canceling them or imposing other restrictions on the lives of Finnish Jews. Thirdly, hatred for Jews was not preached in the Church.

Anti-Semitic thoughts were presented, but they were seldom the essence of the message. This does not mean, of course, that anti-Semitic views were not expressed, but a special characteristic of Finnish ecclesiastical anti-Semitism was the fact that Jews were not written about directly. Anti-Jewish sentiment was presented alongside other topics, such as Bolsheviks, missionary work, the decay of Europe and freemasonry. Only the clergymen J. W. Wartiainen and Matti Jaakkola wrote comprehensive texts directly about Jews, and their views were generally abhorred in the Church. There was practically no other collective pressure or control that led to restrictions of writing about Jews. Accepted anti-Semitic thought had very few limitations in terms of its content.

If my study creates a seemingly one-sided and negative anti-Semitic picture, it is because

there were so few defenders of the Jews among the clerical leaders shaping public opinion, and even those few wanted to convert Jews to Christianity. Previous research has suggested that Finnish anti-Semitism was a marginal phenomenon and that at the beginning of the Finnish independence there was a quiet majority which reacted to Jews neutrally, positively or indifferently, and for whom the Jewish question was not a question at all. In light of my source material, one cannot say if the hypothesis of the quiet majority is accurate. The ones who participated in the discourse had a voice and they made it heard. The conclusions of this study are made easier by the fact that at least the leading clerics in the Finnish Church did not belong to an alleged quiet majority. Indeed, this study proves that during the beginning of the independence of Finland, anti-Semitism was a common phenomenon throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and it even extended to the leadership of the Church.