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The Study of Luther in Finland

Risto Saarinen

The Lutheran Reformation in Finland established the need for Finnish language in the teachings of the church. This need did not, however, lead to any extensive translations of Luther’s writings. Before the year 1800, only the Catechisms, some hymns and prefaces of Luther’s Bible translation had been translated into Finnish. Until the latter part of the 19th century, Latin and Swedish remained the languages of the Finnish university. The pastors received their education in Latin and Swedish; German books were also frequently read.

The Finnish University and National Awakening

The Finnish university was founded in Turku in 1640. Lutheran orthodoxy flourished especially during the professorship of Enevaldus Svenonius from 1664 to 1688. In the theological dissertations drafted by him, Luther is the most frequently mentioned person (252 times), followed by Beza (161), Augustine (142) and Calvin (114). Calvin and his companion Beza are, however, almost invariably criticized. Finnish Lutheranism has inherited its later critical attitude towards Calvinism from the period of orthodoxy.

Svenonius did not practise any real study of Luther, but he quoted the reformer mostly through using common Lutheran textbooks and, sometimes, Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*. Among the very few dissertations written about Luther in Turku one can mention the 24-page work *Lutherus heros* (1703) by Johannes Bernhardi Münster, professor of ethics, politics and history. This modest booklet continues the German genre of praising the heroism of the founding father of the Reformation. Even more modest is the 10-page dissertation by another professor of ethics, Johannes Bilmark, dealing with the political decisions of Luther (1775). In this text Bilmark criticizes the opinions of a French scholar, Naudaeus.

In 1809 Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy under the Russian empire. During the 19th century, the need for Finnish books grew gradually. The first biography of Luther in Finnish was written by K. H. J. Ignatius in 1845. This work continued to be reprinted until 1904. Due to the national awakening, several works of Luther were translated into Finnish from the 1840s (see the contributions of Simo Heininen and Tuija Laine in this volume). One of the leaders of the national awakening movement, Agathon Meurman, published a biography of Luther in 1901. The books of Ignatius and Meurman contain around 200 pages. Several shorter booklets about Luther and the Reformation were also published in Finnish between 1850 and 1900.

The Luther Renaissance comes to Finland

In the 400th anniversary year of the Reformation in 1917, Martti Ruuth published a new biography of 156 pages, *Martti Luther: hänen uskonpuhdistaja-persoonallisuutensa ja työnsä* (Martin Luther: his personality and work as reformer). Among the Finnish immigrants in Hancock, Michigan, J. K. Nikander published a 348-page biography, *Suuri uskonpuhdistaja Martin Luther* (The great reformer Martin Luther), in the same year. Even the founding father of Finnish Communism, Yrjö Sirola, wanted to invoke Luther’s name
through translating a small volume of Luther’s writings on usury collected by Karl Marx (1925).

During the first decades of the 20th century, the so-called Luther renaissance, a movement studying Luther’s early and original texts, permeated the theological climate of many countries. An important precondition of this movement was the publication of a critical edition of Luther’s works, the so-called Weimarer Ausgabe, from 1883. The very first volume of this edition contains a list of all people and institutions who had decided to order this work. According to this list, five copies were sent to Northern Europe: one to the university libraries of Copenhagen and Oslo, two to Professor H. Råbergh in Helsinki, and one to Pastor G. Dahlberg in Sääksmäki, Finland. As Finland continued to be a Grand Duchy under Russia in 1883, the rubric “Sweden and Norway”, under which the Finnish names are mentioned in this list, is misleading. It is nevertheless noteworthy that in 1883 no less than 60 % of all Scandinavian orders came to Finland.

Judging from the available evidence, the Finnish copies of Weimarer Ausgabe were well used. Herman Råbergh was professor of church history and dean of the Faculty of Theology in 1883. He is known as the first Finnish church historian who consistently employed modern source criticism. At the same time he opposed the cultural Protestantism of his times and co-operated with confessional theologians within a German Lutheran movement (Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Konferenz). An important focus of his research activities was the study of the earliest Reformation renewals in Finland.

Gustaf Dahlberg, dean of Sääksmäki parish and later of Turku Cathedral, belonged to the most active translators of Luther into Finnish. He was a founding member and active leader of The Lutheran Evangelical Association in Finland (LEAF, Suomen Luterilainen Evankeliumiyhdistys), an organisation devoted until this day to gathering together confessional Lutherans in Finland. In addition to the extensive translation of Luther’s writings, LEAF has published Lutheran theology closely affiliated with the American Missouri-Synod. For instance, LEAF has translated and published several confessional Lutheran works of Franz Pieper since the 1920s. The extensive Missouri-minded dogmatics of Pieper was translated into Finnish in 1961 and continues to be reprinted to this day. Confessional Lutheranism is currently also vividly discussed in Finland due to the impact of Luther Foundation Finland (Suomen Luther-Säätiö), another offshoot of conservative Pietism. Although both organizations have sponsored Luther translations and the reading of confessional Lutheran texts, they have not – unlike the American Missouri-Synod – been fertile in the field of academic Luther research.

Finnish Luther Research Emerges

As described above, the first wave of the Luther renaissance in Finland concentrated on translations and the study of the Reformation in Finland. It also produced some new biographies of Luther, for instance the works of Eino Sormunen, Uskon mies: Martti Lutherin elämä (Man of faith: Martin Luther’s life, 1937), and Olavi Kaires, Luther: henkilökuva ja kehitysaika (Luther: a portrayal of man and his times, 1944). Sormunen also published a study, Jumalan armo (The grace of God, 1934), dealing extensively with Luther’s thinking.
This first wave was soon followed by attempts to participate in the international scholarly discussion, thus giving a Finnish contribution to Luther research. Particularly important for this second wave of the Luther renaissance was the impact of Swedish studies, especially the Lundensian theology of Anders Nygren and Gustav Aulén. The earliest Finnish research contributions include Das Gewissen bei Luther by Yrjö Alanen (1934) and Der Zorn Gottes in der Theologie Luthers by Lennart Pinomaa (1938).

The first Finnish study to have really influenced international discussion was Lennart Pinomaa’s Der existentielle Charakter der Theologie Luthers’ (1940). In this work the author traces similarities between the subjective worldviews of Luther and Sören Kierkegaard. The great attention devoted to this book in the German-speaking world was partly due to the popularity of existential philosophy in the late 1940s. Pinomaa does not, however, aim to practise existentialism, but he wants to show in which sense the subjective involvement of a Pietist style of faith can also be made theologically fruitful in the frameworks of Luther’s Reformation and Kierkegaardian modernity.

Pinomaa’s later textbook on Luther’s theology, Faith Victorious (1963), also became popular and was translated into many different languages. The popularity of this book may be based on Pinomaa’s way of describing the main issues of Luther’s thought in a fair and many-sided manner, without adopting the position of any particular theological “school”. Pinomaa acted as the convener of the Third International Congress for Luther Research in Helsinki, meeting from 11 to 16 August in 1966, an event which made him well known around the world.

Pinomaa received some influences from Swedish Lundensian theology, but the main representative of this school in Finland was Lauri Haikola. His study Usus legis (1958) has remained one of the most actively discussed books on Luther’s theology of the law. This work opposes such revivalist interpretations of morality and sanctification which were represented in Finland by Uuras Saarnivaara, a scholar whose English books have earned him a certain reputation among American evangelicals. In his Finnish study Syntisen tie vanhurskauteen ja pyhyyteen Lutherin mukaan (1947-48, American edition: Luther Discovers the Gospel, 1951) Saarnivaara sets out to prove that Luther follows a revivalist pattern of conversion and moral renewal. Haikola, on the other hand, claims that God’s law is not a means of sanctification and that Christian life should not proceed on moralist terms. In the 1950s and ’60s, the contrary views of Haikola and Saarnivaara were representative of several popular church debates regarding Christian life and the tasks of the church in the world.

Recent Approaches

During the last twenty-five years, a new style of Luther interpretation initiated by Tuomo Mannermaa in his book Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus (1989, English translation in two volumes: Christ Present in Faith, 2005, and Two Kinds of Love, 2010) has been spiritedly discussed in international scholarship. Mannermaa studies Luther’s connections with patristic and Catholic thought and emphasizes the ecumenical nature of Luther’s theology. Several students of Mannermaa in the field of systematic theology (Simo Peura, Eeva Martikainen, Eero Huovinen) have applied these insights to different themes in Luther, thus creating a particular “new Finnish interpretation of Luther”.
In Finnish church history, Luther’s significance has remained a prominent discussion topic since the times of Herman Råbergh. In the study of the Scandinavian Reformation, some scholars (Jaakko Gummerus already to some extent, later Toivo Harjunpää and Martti Parvio) have stressed the continuities between medieval Christendom and the Reformation. After the Second World War, many scholars have followed British and American church historians instead of the earlier German models. This trend has strengthened the discovery of continuities leading from Catholic traditions to the Reformation.

At the same time the intensive study of the Finnish Reformer Mikael Agricola, especially in Simo Heininen’s numerous publications, has unfolded the immediate impacts from Wittenberg to Finland. This line of research shows how considerably the cultural and intellectual influence of the German Reformation shaped the church life in Northern Europe, offering theological models for the emerging Scandinavian Lutheranism. Kaarlo Arffman’s studies on poor relief in the Reformation and Antti Raunio’s research into Luther’s social ethics have underlined the connections between Lutheran views of shared responsibility on the one hand and the later emergence of the Nordic welfare state on the other.

Contemporary Popular Views

After 46 years, the International Congress for Luther Research (the Twelfth in a series) again meets in Finland, this time at the University of Helsinki from 5 to 10 August, 2012. The scholars arrive to one of the most Lutheran countries in the world and see the huge statues of Luther, Melanchthon and Agricola in the Cathedral of Helsinki. After discussing the academic books we may ask: what does an average Finn today think about Luther? In answering this question, one can distinguish between three simultaneous layers of knowledge and opinion.

First, the great majority of all Finns still attend religious instruction in primary school as well as the confirmation training of the Lutheran church as a teen. Religious instruction is not confessional, but, according to the school laws, young people are instructed “in their own religion”. In practise this means that the main events of the Reformation and the common practises of Lutheranism remain in the curriculum. In confirmation training, the teenagers become acquainted with the worship life and learn some basic content of the Catechism, at least the Ten Commandments, the Apostolic Creed and the Lord’s Prayer.

Second, the popular media deals with ecclesiastical issues fairly often. The media commonly speaks of the Lutheran work ethic, meaning an honest and industrious attitude which sticks to old habits. The church leaders and parish pastors are regarded as well educated, middle-class citizens who tend, however, to be boring, old-fashioned and bureaucratic. When Luther and Lutheranism appear in this context, they may represent the old virtues of the social democratic welfare state.

Third, the media also reports extensively about the controversies in the Lutheran church. The name of Luther appears very frequently in the context of LEAF and Luther Foundation Finland who oppose women’s ordination and homosexual couples, following some American models. Average Finns may therefore regard this wing of Lutheranism as a morally and
politically conservative, discriminating style of religion. In this layer the name of Luther may be connected with American republicanism.

**Bibliography** (for books and persons mentioned, see the National Bibliography at [www.fennica.linneanet.fi](http://www.fennica.linneanet.fi) and the National Biography, mostly in Finnish, with some information in Swedish and English, at [www.kansallisbiografia.fi](http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi))