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# The Introduction of Mormonism to Finnish Society, 1840–1900

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Kim Östman. *The Introduction of Mormonism to Finnish Society, 1840–1900.*

Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010.

*Reviewed by Melvin J. Luthy*

If one were to ask a returned missionary from Finland, or even a member of the Church in Finland, when missionary work began in that country, a likely response would be that it began in 1946, when Elder Ezra Taft Benson dedicated the land for missionary work. The date is well known, and a small monument commemorating the event has been erected in Larsmo, a small town on Finland's northwestern shore. Although many consider missionaries who served in the years immediately following the dedication to be the first missionaries in Finland, there is a general understanding that some members in Larsmo and nearby Pietarsaari are descendants of those who were baptized in the 1800s by missionaries from Sweden. Studies documenting this time are few and generally not available in English.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Kim Östman's book, a comparative religion doctoral dissertation published in English, is not only the first in-depth treatment of nineteenth-century Mormon activity in Finland, but the first with the potential of reaching a broad English-speaking audience.

Perhaps the neglect of this period has been for lack of scholarly interest, but it may also be for lack of linguistic expertise to do the research. We are fortunate that Östman has both the interest and the language skills for this work. His background has prepared him well for the task. He was born in Pietarsaari, Finland, raised in the Church, and served a two-year LDS mission in Great Britain. Though not presently involved in organized religion, he approaches his study as an objective scholar with no apparent agenda other than to write a well-researched dissertation, which he does with admirable rigor.

Using a discourse analysis methodology, he examines a large corpus of newspaper articles and books covering the period from 1840 (when articles and books about Mormons first appeared) until 1900 (when a proselytizing hiatus began, which lasted until 1946). He chronicles the early history of religious activity in Finland, with an emphasis on how the Mormon image was constructed over time. He discusses the early proselytizing efforts and

their limited results compared with the success experienced in other Nordic countries and suggests reasons for the lack of growth.<sup>2</sup> Of the few missionaries sent from Sweden during that early period, nineteen were Swedes, three were Americans, and two or three were native Finns. Östman writes that by the end of the period, the handful of Finnish converts had mostly become forgotten Saints. From 1900 until the end of World War II, no Mormon proselytizing took place in the country.

Reviewing the earlier proselytizing efforts and the ensuing conflicts with Finnish society, Östman focuses on one geographical area, Pohja, as a “Finnish Mormon microcosm” where eleven baptisms took place in the 1880s, giving hope for sustained growth but attracting the close attention and censure of local authorities.<sup>3</sup> Here as in other parts of Finland, the language of those baptized was Swedish. Because it was against the law to proselytize, local authorities monitored the early missionaries’ activities closely. The law stated that it was illegal to “rise to preach,” so missionaries and Church leaders would sit while giving their message.

Östman recounts one serious event when a local leader, Johan Blom, was convicted of breaking the proselytizing law and was sentenced to twenty-eight days in prison on bread and water rations. For the most part, as Östman shows, members were careful not to run afoul of the law by only discussing their beliefs informally with relatives and close associates. He notes that Mormons were not the only group that threatened the traditions of the state church. Others including the Baptists, Methodists, and Salvation Army also received opposition. The Dissenter Act of 1889 gave Protestant religions permission to organize as denominations, but Mormons had to wait until 1922, when the Religious Freedom Act made it possible for church activity to proceed legally.

Östman continues with a discussion of emigration to Utah, with documentation on each of the fourteen LDS emigrants who made the voyage. This number contrasts with the nearly twenty-three thousand members estimated to have left the four other Nordic countries during approximately the same time period. With explanatory charts he includes data on converts, missionaries, emigrants, and the social networks through which the group of emigrants expanded. Such information adds significantly to understanding this interesting time and the persons who lived through it.

He discusses press accounts that illustrate how the themes presented produced an extremely negative image of Mormons, contrasted with the positive view that Mormons had of themselves. Borrowed from foreign publications, the primary discourse themes were of fraud, deception, polygamy, and theocratic dominance. His work shows it is not surprising that Finns had a negative view of Mormons when the first missionaries arrived

on their shore in 1875. They had, after all, thirty-five years to digest negative messages of Mormons before meeting one of them.

As one reads of the hegemonic negative views of Mormons in the print media, contrasted with the positive self-image that the Saints had of themselves, one senses the tragedy that two views of reality can be so divergent and divisive. Early on, Mormons were depicted as frauds and schemers, and those from Europe who had gone to Salt Lake City were reported to be in slavery and in harems. Reports to the contrary were received from members who had emigrated to America, but their positive accounts were likely muted when disillusioned emigrants reported negative experiences. Still, Östman reports that missionaries tended to write positively about their work with the “honest, hospitable Finnish people.”

The study shows that by the end of the nineteenth century, the meager efforts directed from Sweden to establish a functioning Church organization in Finland were sporadic and ultimately unsuccessful. Not until after World War II did Finland receive effective efforts to reach the Finnish-speaking population. Today, Finland has two stakes, many branches, and a temple. Those who enjoy these benefits and anyone with an interest in Mormonism in this country will find much interest in Östman’s book. In addition to assembling valuable data, he has opened a window to a place and time and to an observation of human reactions to “the other” that should capture the interest of both laymen and professionals.

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1. Anna-Liisa Rinne’s book, *Kristuksen Kirkko Suomessa*, written in Finnish and published in Turku, Finland: Grafia Oy, 1986, is considered the best treatment to date of early LDS activity in Finland.

2. Although Östman does not mention it, in my opinion any explanation for the lack of proselytizing activity during this time should also consider the perception that the Finnish language was an impenetrable barrier to both Swedish and English speakers. Not until a Finnish-speaking mission president, Henry Matis, arrived on the scene after World War II was this perceived barrier breached.

3. Of coincidental interest is the recent publication of a historical novel, *The Silence of God* by Gale Sears (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), which gives a fictional account of part of the Lindlöf family from the Pohja area who were baptized in St. Petersburg. Sadly, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, six members of the family were sent to labor camps in Siberia, but their residence as Church members in St. Petersburg before the Revolution helped justify the official recognition of the Church in Russia in 1991.