

LUTHERANISM IN FINLAND: PAST AND PRESENT

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The article focuses on the spatial and temporal differentiation of Lutheranism in Finland. The study aims to identify historical and geographical features of the development of Lutheran space in Finland, as well as modern trends in its transformation. This study is very relevant, since Lutheranism is currently the major confession in Finland and religion tends to strongly affect the system of values and worldview prevalent in society. The article describes the administrative structure transformation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. It is argued that Finnish Lutheranism emerged in 1923. The religious and national unity of Finland contributed to bringing together the Finnish society during the Winter War, the Continuation War, and the post-war reconstruction of Finland. In the following decades, the number of Lutheran parishes and parishioners decreased. These processes were most pronounced in the first years of the 21st century. Probably, they mark the beginning of Finland's transition to a 'new society' that is not based on Christian values. Similar processes are observed in other countries of United Europe.

The authors establish a connection between secularisation processes in the society and changes in the administrative structure of the Lutheran church of Finland. A decrease in the number of Lutherans is accompanied by the closure or merger of the church primary territorial units — parishes. Probably, this process will be followed by the transformation of the diocesan division.

Key words: geography of religions, geography of Lutheranism, administrative church division, diocese, administrative church unit

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Submitted on April 15, 2015.

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2015-4-9

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opment — believed religion to be a decisive factor in the development of civilisations. He identified civilisations on the basis of their religious affiliation. N. Ya. Danilevsky wrote when characterising cultural and historical types and identifying ‘categories of cultural activities’: ‘Religious activities, encompassing human relationship to God, are a human idea of his or her fate as a moral indivisible entity in relation to all human fates and the Universe, i. e., in more general terms, a popular worldview not as theoretical, more or less hypothetical, knowledge that is available to the few, but as strong faith and the living foundations on which all moral human actions are based’ [1, p. 472].

Whereas research into civilisations on account of their religious differences has gained wide currency, ‘local’ religious communities still remain little studied. This can be a result of the unavailability of source material. For instance, part of the data used in this study had to be obtained directly from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), since relevant information has never been published.

The authors of this article are obviously not pioneers in the geography of religion. Similar studies have been carried out in post-Soviet times by a number of researchers, namely, S.G Safronov [8], I. Yu. Filimonova [10], A. A. Sokolova [9], etc. However, their studies focused primarily on religion in Russia. The authors did not manage to find any works by Russian geographers dedicated to modern religious patterns either in the Nordic countries including Finland or in other parts of Europe. Russian researchers have examined isolated aspects of the history and development of the ELCF. The expansion of Lutheranism in Finland and the development of administrative church division were discussed in the monograph *Studies in the History of Reformation in Finland (1520—1620): Establishment of a national church life. Portraits of prominent figures of the Finnish Reformation* [3]. However, the monograph covers only a rather short period of time and focuses on the individuals.

Dozens of religious organisations function in modern Finland. The ELCF is the largest one by membership and infrastructure. It has a complex administrative structure and enjoys, alongside the Finnish Orthodox Church, a special national status. However, Russian researchers have not conducted any studies focusing on the historical and geographical aspects of the territorial organisation of the ELCF throughout its existence and examining current trends in its reorganisation.

The expansion of Lutheranism in Finland dates back almost to the moment of the emergence of this Christian denomination in the first half of the 16th century. Earlier, the Finns were christianised from two quarters — since the 12th century the Swedes had been inculcating Catholicism in the West of the country and Novgoroders had been spreading Orthodox Christianity in the East.

Some Finns were baptised Catholics and recognised the Swedish king as their overlord after a successful campaign undertaken by Eric IX of Sweden in 1157. The first Christian cross was installed on the conquered territory at the site where the Swedish troops had disembarked, not far from the city of Turku, which became a stronghold of Catholicism — and later Lutheranism — in Finland.

The Catholic Church has a strict administrative structure, with an important role being played by dioceses headed by bishops. In the 12th century, Finland and its newly converted Catholics were placed under the authority of the archbishop of Uppsala, alongside six dioceses in Sweden.

The first known bishop of Finland was Thomas (1220—1245). His See was first located in Nousiainen and later transferred to Koroinen in the environs of Turku [1]. Turku boasting a cathedral consecrated in 1300 became not only the administrative and trading centre but also the church centre of the Swedish-controlled territory of Finland.

The borders of the Diocese of Finland coincided with those of the country. The Diocese included the following territories: Finland Proper (Finnish: *Varsinais Suomi*), Satakunta, Nyland, Tavastland, West Karelia, and West Savolax. The Åland Islands were incorporated into the Diocese of Finland in 1303—1326 under Bishop Ragvald — a native of these parts. In the North, the territory of the Diocese extended to Ostrobothnia [5, p. 4].

As Catholicism was spreading across the country, the church organisational structure developed. It was closely connected to the administrative division of the country. The church began to exercise decisive influence on the formation of the state as early as the Middle Ages. ‘In this period, the church was the most organised force in sparsely populated Finland. It is sufficient to say that the system of parishes, based on the territorial division dating back to the tribal era, developed earlier than the administrative bodies representing the Swedish Crown. Each parish (Finnish: *pitäjä*, Swedish: *socken*) was headed by a parish priest assisted by a parish council’ [5, p. 26].

The ideas of Lutheranism started to spread across Finland in the 1520s. This process was supported by the followers of Martin Luther — P. Särki-lahti and M. Agricola. In 1527, Lutheranism became the state religion in Sweden. Therefore, the congregation of Finland had to accept the changes, which soon affected not only the doctrine and rituals, but also its territorial administration. In 1554, the Diocese of Finland was divided into two dioceses with Sees in Turku and Vyborg, both under the authority of the archbishop of Uppsala and the king of Sweden. The population of the territory controlled by the Diocese of Vyborg was much smaller than that of the Diocese of Turku. The Dioceses were divided into 24 and 78 parishes respectively.

In the late 16th century, the counterreformation led to a short period, when both Sees were left vacant after the deaths of the ruling bishops. However, an attempt to restore Catholicism failed. The 17—18th centuries witnessed rapid development of Lutheranism. The number of Lutheran parishes reached 350 [2, p. 12].

In 1812, when the Grand Duchy of Finland had been part of the Russian Empire for three years, there were 503 Lutheran, 26 Orthodox, and 2 Roman Catholic parishes in Finland [2, p. 16].

In the times of the Grand Duchy of Finland, the fact that the majority of its population were Lutherans helped Sweden to retain Finland in its ‘zone of influence’ — the ‘Scandinavian civilisation’. Even today, there are grounds to speak of a ‘Scandinavian Protestant region’ [4].

Russian emperors did not attempt to inculcate Orthodox Christianity in its Finnish dominions. The Helsinki Cathedral (the major Lutheran cathedral of modern Finland) was built by order of Emperor Nicholas I in the 1830—50s, whereas the key orthodox cathedral of the Finnish capital — the Uspenski Cathedral — was erected in the 1860s. In the 19th century, Lutheranism was *de facto* and *de jure* the state religion of the Grand Duchy. Within the ‘sacred space’, Finland was not separated from Sweden. The country had so little experience of independence that even the words ‘state’ (Finnish: *valtio*) and ‘nation’ (Finnish: *kansakunta*) had not existed in the Finnish language until the late 19th century.

After gaining independence in 1917, Finland started to perceive itself as an autonomous nation, which also affected religious affairs. Firstly, the Finns started to close down Orthodox churches transforming them into Lutheran ones (for instance, this happened to the churches in Lappeenranta (Villmanstrand) and the fortress of Suomenlinna (Sveaborg); the latter was assigned an additional utilitarian function of a lighthouse). Secondly, the idea of separation from the Scandinavian ‘sacred space’ and the development of the Finnish national church was becoming increasingly influential.

Serious changes took place in 1923, when the country, which had gained independence five years earlier, adopted a law on freedom of conscience. The law legalised abandoning Lutheranism without joining another denomination. This law, which could have undermined the position of Lutheranism, on the contrary, strengthened it.

In 1923, significant changes were also introduced in the diocese division of the ELCF.

In the 19—20th centuries, there were three dioceses in the Grand Duchy of Finland — in Turku, Porvoo (the See was transferred there from Vyborg, which was ceded to Russia, in 1723), and Kuopio (1851). In 1923, the Diocese of Porvoo was divided into the new Diocese of Porvoo and the Diocese of Tampere. A specific feature of the newly established Diocese of Porvoo (Swedish: Borgå) was that it brought together all Swedish- and non-Finnish-speaking Lutheran parishes of Finland. As a result, the ‘dominions’ of these dioceses were scattered along the coast of the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia, and on the Åland Islands. All other dioceses ‘targeted’ at the Finnish population formed continuous territorial massifs.

The Diocese of Tampere and the earlier established Dioceses of Turku and Kuopio included only Finnish-speaking parishes. The northernmost Diocese of Oulu (the See was transferred from Kuopio) was also established in 1923, whereas the modern Diocese of Kuopio emerged in 1939. Both new dioceses established during the interbellum have always been Finnish-speaking. The Finnish-speaking Diocese of Vyborg was also restored at the time.

The division of the Lutheran Church of Finland into the ‘Finnish’ and ‘Swedish’ parts was the main result of the 1923 reform, which led to the formation of a national Lutheran church in Finland.

The efforts to form an ethno-religious unity in the county made in the 1920—30s were very successful. This became pronounced during the war



with the Soviet Union in 1939—1940 and the so-called Continuation War in 1941—1944. During these wars, the Finnish society acted as one, despite the fact that in 1918 it was divided by a civil war, when the ‘white’ Finns (Finnish peasants and Swedish barons) managed to prevail over the ‘red’ Finns (primarily, residents of the southern Finnish cities) only with the help of Germany. The significance of the church’s role in the military confrontation with the Soviet Union is emphasised by the fact that the parishes of both state churches of Finland (the Lutheran and Orthodox ones) were presented with awards, which, even today, are on display in each church of a parish.

It can be concluded that the national and church unity was one of the key factors ensuring the stability of Finland after the defeats of 1940 and 1944, which led to a loss of vast areas and the relocation of their residents to the territory of the modern state.

After World War II, the system of diocese administration changed. Since Vyborg — the second largest city of Finland — was ceded to the USSR, the Diocese was transferred to Mikkeli. Later, in the 1950s, the dioceses of Lapua (1956) and Helsinki (1959) were established. The youngest diocese of Espoo seceded from the Diocese of Helsinki in 2004. As of this article (spring 2015), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland comprises nine dioceses, with the main archdiocese in Turku.

It is worth stressing that Finland is one of the few countries, where the predominant church is actually a public institution. Section 76 of the Constitution in force, which was adopted in 1999 and amended in 2011, says that ‘Provisions on the organisation and administration of the Evangelic Lutheran Church are laid down in the Church Act. The legislative procedure for enactment of the Church Act and the right to submit legislative proposals relating to the Church Act are governed by the specific provisions in that Code’. At the same time, Section 11 of the Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and conscience: ‘Freedom of religion and conscience entails the right to profess and practice a religion, the right to express one's convictions and the right to be a member of or decline to be a member of a religious community. No one is under the obligation, against his or her conscience, to participate in the practice of a religion’ [2].

As to the administrative division, the ELCF has a rather complex structure. Its basic unit is a parish. Parishes are divided into two types — they can be either autonomous or affiliated with a parish union (Finnish: *seurakuntayhtymä*). For instance, the Diocese of Helsinki comprises 33 parishes, four of them are independent, and the others form six parish unions. Therefore, the Diocese of Helsinki is composed of ten parish administrations (Finnish: *seurakuntatalous*).

Parish unions emerge if 1) a commune has more than one parish (for instance, the municipality of Helsinki has 18 Finnish-speaking parishes); b) when a single territory has both Swedish- and Finnish-speaking parishes. The difference between independent and affiliated parishes is that a parish union takes on certain social obligations that are shared by several parishes.

In Finland, members of two churches enjoying a special national status — the Evangelic Lutheran Church of Finland and the Finnish Orthodox

Church — pay a church tax, whose rate ranges from 1.5 to 1.9% of a parishioner's income depending on the parish. Autonomous parishes and parish unions make independent decisions regarding the church tax rates; the latter also distribute the tax between their parishes.

The parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland are united into larger units — deaneries, whose number in a diocese ranges from five in Espoo to nine in Turku, Oulu, and Porvoo.

Recently, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has been losing its congregation, which entails changes in the administrative division, in particular, consolidation and elimination of parishes and deaneries.

In 2008—the beginning of 2015, the ELCF lost almost 100 parishes, which were either closed down or merged. The Diocese of Espoo lost a deanery in 2013. Espoo — the youngest Finnish diocese — has witnessed the most dramatic decrease in membership (20%) in the past years. On December 3, 2013, the parish of Karjaan was closed down. Four other parishes — Karjalohja, Pusula, Nummi, and Sammatti — were reorganized through incorporation into the large parish of Lohja. The recent changes in the territorial organization of the ELCF are caused by the changing borders of municipalities — a consequence of the reorganisation of administrative division (table 1).

Table 1

Number of parishes in the Lutheran Church of Finland

Year	Number of parishes
2008	515
2009	466
2010	465
2011	449
2012	449
2013	430
2014	428
2015	412

Drawn up based on [13].

These changes are brought about by a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a general trend towards secularisation observed in the Finnish society. To a certain extent, this trend was facilitated by the recent innovations introduced by the ELCF. Thus, the 'exodus' of parishioners increased when the first female bishop was elected and when the church reached a decision on the blessing of same-sex marriages (table 2).

Although the data on certain years and parishes were not available, it is obvious that the number of parishes is rapidly decreasing. The same holds true for the number of parishioners.

Current condition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

Diocese	Number of deaneries (01.01.2015)	Number of parishes			Number of parishioners (2013)
		1980	2013	2015	
Turku	9	97	60	57	532,372
Tampere	8	72	55	48	630,989
Oulu	9	82	60	No data	528,791
Mikkeli	7	67	40	No data	387,236
Porvoo	9	82	62	56	250,193
Kuopio	6	70	54	53	410,787
Lapua	7	69	46	No data	430,872
Helsinki	6	59	33	33	508,899
Espoo	5	-	20	19	202,937

Drawn up based on [5; 13; data collected by the authors].

Since in Finland, unlike Russia, religious affiliation is legally binding, ‘abandoning’ the church requires at least submitting an on-line application (the practice was introduced in 2003). Thus, one can rather accurately calculate the rate of decrease in the number of parishioners. 83.6% of Finnish citizens were affiliated with the ELCF in 2005, 82.4% in 2006, and 81.7% in 2007 [7]. In February 2015, two communes had a proportion of members of the ELCF below 50% for the first time in the history of Finland. In six out of 18 communes of Helsinki, members of the Lutheran Church account for less than 60% of the population. In 2014, the ELCF lost 66,000 people, or 1.64%. At the end of 2014, its membership accounted for 4,034,235 people [15], or approximately 74% of the country’s population. It is worth stressing that, at the same time, it is still a significant proportion uncharacteristic of most countries of Western and Northern Europe.

A decrease in the size of religious population has also been observed in other countries of the united Europe, and many of them ‘outperform’ Finland in abandoning Christian values, which formed the modern European society. For instance, the Netherlands — a country that emerged in the struggle between Dutch Protestants and Catholic Spain — is faced with the problems of assigning new functions to deserted cathedrals [12]. It is also of interest to compare Finland with Sweden — the country that brought first knowledge of Christianity to Finland. In Sweden, the proportion of religious population was estimated at 19% in 2015 [11].

Probably, the dramatic difference between Finland with 75% of religious population (74% of Lutherans and 1% of Orthodox Christians) and Sweden can be explained by the history and geography of these countries. Sweden has been living in relative peace for two centuries (since 1815). In the turbulent 20th century, it took part in only one military campaign (the occupation of the Åland Islands in 1918). Therefore, in Sweden, religion is perceived as a phenomenon with little bearing on the actual life. Finland went through the

Civil War in 1918 and two wars with the USSR, paid reparations to the Soviet Union during the interbellum, relocated 400,000 people from the territories ceded to the Soviet Union, and created new infrastructure at its eastern borders. Religion helped the country not only to survive but also to achieve its today's prosperity.

Although the ELCF remains the largest and most influential religious structure in the country, it has to face up a number of negative trends. Its membership is decreasing. Its infrastructure is becoming superfluous, which results in transformation of the diocese and parish structure. Changes within the ELCF and its acceptance of modern European values incompatible with the Christian doctrine affect the country's religious composition. The Finnish society is primarily secular, i. e. those leaving the ELCF do not join any other denomination. They do not become atheists, probably, they remain believers, but they leave the ELCF. There is a slight increase in the membership of the Finnish Orthodox Church through conversions from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity. The parish of the Finnish Autonomous Orthodox Church in the city of Lappeenranta saw an almost twofold increase [6].

Apparently, the 'national religious' unity of Finland, which was very pronounced in the 1920—60s, is eroding. It marks a transition to a society built on principles that differ from those of Christianity. In the first half of the 20th century, Europe witnessed two attempts to construct a 'new society' based on anti-Christian principles. These were the 'international socialism' in the USSR and the 'national socialism' in Hitler's Germany. The outcomes of these attempts are well-known. It is difficult to predict the consequences of the formation of a 'new society' in the 21st century. Probably, at first, it will bring better socioeconomic conditions, better environmental quality, increased life expectancy, etc. This course of events was predicted a long time ago: 'For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them' (1 Thess 5:3).

Of course, Lutheranism in Finland is not doomed to extinction. It is not even worth being discussed in a perspective of foreseeable future. The Finnish society may well remember its roots and try to return to them; moreover, the ELCF is supported by a significant proportion of the population, despite all the negative trends. However, it shall be concluded that the analysis of the current situation in the ELCF does not give sufficient grounds for making a positive forecast for its further transformation.

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