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Published in:
Creating Through Mind and Emotions

DOI:
10.1201/9780429299070

Published: 01/01/2022

Document Version
Final published version

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Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg: The reluctant author of an autobiographical conversion narrative

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ABSTRACT: On June 12, 1844, Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg – one of the most prominent religious revival leaders in nineteenth-century Finland – published the first version of many of his spiritual development. The 26 pages manuscript has ever since been regarded and read as a so-called conversion narrative. It is ironic, considering that the revival movement named after him later came to dissociate itself from such testimonies. Hedberg's account can, namely, be read as a dissuasion against writing conversion narratives. In it, he explicitly advises against seeking any particular conversion experiences. Instead, he advocates a faith founded on God's Word, not one dependent on whatever passing and uncertain "inner flashes of feelings" a conversion experience may or may not bring about. In this article, I argue that this contradiction – namely that his account resembles and is interpreted as a conversion narrative despite his warning against such testimonies – may be explained by his use of metaphors and tropes typical of conversion narratives that he cannot avoid if he is to reach out to his audience. The rhetorical power of such tropes and metaphors lies in the cognitive and affective resonance they conjure up in the audience – they are universal, conventional, and immediately recognizable for most people. Consequently, the result is that Hedberg's account inevitably resembles a conversion narrative.

Keywords: Finnish church history, Revival movement, Conversion narrative, Historical narrative, Pregeneric plot structure

1 FREDRIK GABRIEL HEDBERG – A FINNISH REVIVAL LEADER

A characteristic feature of the Finnish and Nordic revivalist movements of the nineteenth century is their strong leaders. It is the case of the founder and leader of the so-called evangelical movement, Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg (1811–1893). As Hedberg's influence – through his various offices within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and through the many books he published during his lifetime – extended to a considerable part of the country but also abroad, he is often considered one of Finland's most important revival leaders in the nineteenth century (Wennerström, 1893; Wennerström, 1896; Sipilä, 1896; Takala, 1947; Schmidt, 1948, Ruuth, 1912, p. 193–209; Newman, 1931; Tiililä, 1974; Nyman, 1949; Santakari, 1961; Suokunnas, 1911).

Early in his priestly career, Hedberg – like many other young and unpromoted priests at the time – joined what was called the Pietistic movement. Pietism was a movement within the Lutheran state church that, among other things, emphasized individual piety. It was considered a threat to and by the state church. (Schmidt, 1948, p. 16–72; Suokunnas, 2011, p. 15–32). As a consequence of his Pietistic sympathies, Hedberg was sent off to serve as a preacher at the prison in Oulu – a standard procedure to limit his possibilities of spreading the Pietistic teachings. (Schmidt, 1948, p. 72–85; Suokunnas, 2011, p. 33–38). Hedberg himself speaks of Oulu as his Wartburg, with an unmistakable reference to Martin Luther (Schmidt, 1948, p. 72–85).

Hedberg's reference to Martin Luther was not merely due to his sense of identification with Luther's situation but also due to his acquaintance with the works of him and other German theologians. During his stay in Oulu, especially Luther's Commentary on Galatians opened his eyes to the legalistic Christianity that the Pietistic movement represented in his mind. (Hedberg, 1985, p. 153; Akiander, 1863, p. 280; Santakari, 1961, p. 79; Takala, 1929, p. 434).

After having 'served his time' in Oulu, Hedberg was appointed as a preacher farther south in Raippaluoto on May 1, 1842. The revelations that had started to take shape in Oulu developed, and he began to express them more openly. In Raippaluoto,

DOI: 10.1201/9780429299070-54

he started writing a book called *The Doctrine of Faith unto Salvation*, which was essentially a reaction and critique against the Pietist movement, of which he had formerly been a follower. Ever since the book has been seen as the key document for the evangelical movement (Dahlbacka, 2017, p. 99–115; Dahlbacka, 2021, p. 73–86).

During his time in Raippaluoto, and in the wake of his spiritual battle, Hedberg experienced an intense spiritual experience on September 24, 1842. Later, he would compare the event with the sun's rising (Dahlbacka, 2017, p. 101–102). That event has often been perceived as the impetus for the evangelical movement (Schmidt, 1948, p. 92–93; Santakari, 1961, p. 79; Kakkuri, 2014, p. 229).

Although the evangelical movement was not formally founded until 1873, the events following Hedberg's time in Raippaluoto have often been regarded as crucial for the inception of the Evangelical movement. Especially Hedberg's own inauguration as a parish priest in Pöytyä, on July 30, 1843, is often brought to the fore and referred to as the birthday of the Evangelical movement in Finland. It is evident from this rendering that the events in the 1840s meant a lot to Hedberg, as would his account for them subsequently mean to the evangelical movement as a whole (Hedberg, 1985, p. 154–155; Schmidt, 1948, p. 101–108).

2 THE "CONVERSION NARRATIVE" OF FREDRIK GABRIEL HEDBERG

In forming the identity and self-image of the revivalist movements, their leaders' lives and spiritual development have often played a significant role (Jarlert, 2003, p. 107). The statement is true, especially when it comes to the leaders' conversion narratives and spiritual testimonies. According to Finnish church historian Teemu Kakkuri, such narratives have often, in time, turned into so-called etiological myths, which recur, above all, when describing the origins of the movements. They are not myths in the sense that one would have to question their authenticity. They did take place – and they were often told, retold, or verified by the leaders themselves – but their meaning and significance have, over time, been extended far beyond their initial intention (Kakkuri, 2014, p. 228–229).

When speaking of the evangelical movement, such a 'condensation' and 'canonization' can be said to have taken place with the events in 1842 and 1843, respectively. Consequently, the coming into being of the evangelical movement in Finland is often condensed merely to those few years. However, when Hedberg, on June 12, 1844, wrote the first account of his spiritual development – a handwritten manuscript à 26 pages, which was to be the first version of at least a dozen altogether (Erikson, 2002, p. 23) – he began his narrative nearly two decades earlier, namely in 1826. In other words, the 'rising of the sun moment in 1842 was preceded by a spiritual battle of more than fifteen years. In fact, in this manuscript, Hedberg does not even mention the event in Raippaluoto. He writes of no typical, sudden, and dramatic conversion experience that turns his world upside down. Instead, Hedberg's conversion is more of a process – filled with progress and backlashes – which eventually, after a long struggle, turns into clarity.

My hesitation for straight off categorizing Hedberg's account as a conversion narrative has multiple reasons. First and foremost, Hedberg himself does not speak of conversion when trying to put words on his spiritual battle. At least not in the title, even if he uses the expression "way/walk of conversion" later in the text (Hedberg, 1847, p. 13). However, the word he uses instead to describe his experience is interesting.

The first version of Hedberg's account was called *Uppriktig bekännelse*. It would translate to *Sincere confession*. An almost identical account was included in a book published three years later, in 1847. That book is often referred to as *The Confuting of Works Righteousness and the Vindication of the Gospel,* but it actually has an even longer name: *The confession of Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg and the defense of the Gospel against the attack by the Finnish Pietism.*[1] In other words, the word "confession" is highlighted in the very title (Suokunnas, 2011, p. 81–86).

The use of the word "confession" might be unintentional, but it is hardly a coincidence. Hedberg had read the Church Fathers, and he had read St Augustine. As it appears already in the more extended title, the explicit purpose of the book was to defend the Gospel against the Finnish Pietism, of which he had himself been a follower. More precisely, he wanted to demonstrate how the "pure doctrine of the gospel" had constantly been fought against and falsified by "laws of the self-righteous." He did this, for instance, by referring to St Augustine's words against the Pelagians in *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum.* With this analogy, he accused the Pietists of being Pelagians; meanwhile, he endorsed the Augustinian doctrine of justification by faith (Hedberg, 1848). In light of this, it is hardly far-fetched to assume that the word "confession" is also an allusion to St Augustine's famous work *Confessiones* (Augustinus, 1990) – be it intentional or unintentional.

Second, what adds to my hesitation of explicitly calling Hedberg's account a conversion narrative is

1. My translation. The original title, in Swedish, is: "Werklärans Wederläggning och Evangelii Försvar. Fredrik Gabriel Hedbergs Bekännelse och Evangelii Försvar emot den finska Pietismens angrepp".

that there never existed a tradition of writing conversion narratives within the evangelical movement. Generally speaking, conversions or similar kinds of "born-again-experiences" have never been regarded as central or desirable. Moreover, within the Lutheran tradition, more in general, it was never considered essential to recall vividly the very exact moment of one's conversion. The conversion was understood as a lifelong process, not a dramatic moment (Strom, 2018, p. 10).

Third and foremost, Hedberg explicitly dissociates himself from any form of systematic (and, in his view, legalistic) *ordo salutis* – order or salvation. He writes that he has tried to read and closely observe the writings of Pietist authors who:

> step by step instruct how conversion should proceed, what signs a person should be able to observe, and how a man can know whether he finds favor with God or not (Hedberg, 1847, p. 8).[2]

However, he concludes that reading such books has only given him more despair, more hopelessness, and more doubt and "plunged him further down into his misery" (Hedberg, 1847, p. 9). Having read Martin Luther's Church Postil, however, he began to get an inkling of a way to salvation that was different from anything other man-written that he had ever read before:

> Finally, I found an old, altogether forgotten book in the church archives, which was doctor Luther's lovely Church Postil, the one I had never seen before. [- -] it differed a great deal from all the writings of man I had seen and read thus far. Thus, in Luther, I did not find the so-called systematic way to salvation that all the other spiritual books displayed. [- -] Instead, I found there an exposition of the Gospel so clear and distinct that I have never before seen or heard anything like it (Hedberg, 1847, p. 14).[3]

Therefore, the purpose of the confession – by which Hedberg refers to his "inner sufferings and fruitless efforts" – is, quite contrary, to "serve as a warning and exhortation" against the "poison of the self-righteous" (Hedberg, 1847, p. 15–16):

> And I dare to hope that right-minded souls will not misjudge my open-hearted confession; like no wise man would find fault with someone who, misled by false instructions, has long wandered about in the woods and the deserts and who, after finally having found the right path again, also informs other wanderers about his futile hardships and sufferings, as a warning for them, not to let themselves be misled by similar kinds of false instructions, but to remain faithfully by the only right path (Hedberg, 1847, p. 16).[4]

Given this, it seems almost as if Hedberg's account is a kind of anti-conversion narrative.

Seeing that Hedberg calls his time in Oulu as "his Wartburg" – thus explicitly referring to Luther – and considering Hedberg's reliance upon Luther in general – a reliance acknowledged by latter-day researchers – it does not seem farfetched to assume that Hedberg's account of his conversion primarily aims at describing his theological breakthrough similarly as Luther did, rather than serving as a model for others to imitate (Hedberg, 1847, p. 6–17; Arkkila, 2011, p. 73–86). This way of looking at the account is how Jonathan Strom, in his book *German Pietism and the problem of conversion*, describes the "Turmerlebnis" of Martin Luther. He writes:

> At the end of his life, Martin Luther penned an autobiographical Rückblick, in which he describes his theological breakthrough. Some treat this account of his so-called Turmerlebnis as a kind of conversion narrative, but in fact, there was no tradition of spiritual autobiography in Protestant Germany for the first century after the Reformation. Luther's Rückblick was a description of his discovery of fundamental theological insights rather than an account of a conversion experience. The path to evangelical truth, consequently, did not require imitation or emulation of Luther's experience; rather the emphasis was on the apprehension of theological truths. The Lutheran understanding of conversion after the Reformation did not

2. My translation from Swedish. Original quotation: "steg för steg beskrifva: huru Omwändelse bör tillgå: hwad menniskan derunder har att iakttaga: af hwilka kännetecken man kunde weta, om man står i Nåd hos Gud, eller icke"

3. My translation from Swedish. Original quotation: "Änterligen fann jag i kyrkoarkivet en gammal, bortglömd bok, som var d:r Luthers herrliga Evangelii Postilla, den jag ännu aldrig förut hade sett. [- -] den skilde sig betydligt från alla de menniskoskrifter, dem jag härtills sett och läst. Jag fann således alldeles icke hos Luther denna systematiska s.k. salighetsordning, som i alla de andra andliga böckerna [- -] men deremot fann jag der en så tydlig och klar utläggning af Christi evangelium, hvars like jag aldrig någonsin sett eller hört."

4. My translation from Swedish. Original quotation: "Och jag vågar hoppas, att min i sådant afseende gjorda öppenhjertiga bekännelse ingalunda skall misskännas eller förtydas af rättsinniga själar; så som icke heller någon förståndig menniska ville klandra den man, som, missledd af falska anvisningar, länge irrat i skog och ödemark, samt hvilken, efter att äntligen hafva återfunnit rätta vägen, meddelar äfven andre vandringsmän sina fruktlösa mödor och lidanden, till en varning för dem, att icke låta sig vilseledas af dylika falska anvisningar, utan troget förblifva vid den enda rätta vägen."

> encourage any particular kind of conversion experience (Strom, 2018, p. 9–10).

Interpreting Hedberg's account as a description of theological insights rather than a schematic conversion narrative could also explain why Hedberg omits the seemingly important passage of Raippaluoto from the text. Doing so, he does not encourage any particular conversion experience – just as Luther had not done. Hedberg advocates a faith based on the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ and "founded on God's Word," not one dependent on whatever passing and uncertain "inner flashes of feelings" a conversion experience may or may not bring about (Hedberg, 1853, p. 187; Hedberg, 1998, p. 116). He appeals to his audience's cognitive rather than affective resonance – to their mind rather than their emotions.

3 METAPHORS AND GENERIC TROPES AS INEVITABLE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

This article is not the place for a thorough analysis of the contents of Hedberg's account of his spiritual battle – be it a conversion narrative or not, according to the rules. Besides, the narrative has already, to some extent, been analyzed by church historian Lauri Koskenniemi (1985) and by church historian Anders Jarlert (2003).

What I wish to underline is not so much the content of the narrative – the actual events that Hedberg refers to – nor what role the narrative has played within the movement – its reception history or how it has been portrayed historiographically. Instead, I wish to draw attention to its structure or narrative form – *how* Hedberg depicts the events. In my view, herein lies the answer to the question: Why does the account stand out as a conversion narrative although Hedberg, as it appears, deprecates such testimonies?

As is evident from my rendering thus far, Hedberg's writing displays elements that could be seen as influences from St Augustine and Martin Luther. There are undoubtedly other possible examples of intertextuality, linking up Hedberg's text with traditions spanning time and space.

For instance, Hedberg's testimony about how he used to fall on his knees in the loneliness of the forest and pray for God's mercy could be a reference to August Herman Francke's famous portrayal of his conversion in 1687. Francke's rendering has often been regarded as *the* exemplar of German Pietism and as a 'rule' for others to imitate and follow. Jonathan Strom, in his book *German Pietism and the Problem of Conversion*, poignantly describes the importance and influence of Francke's narrative:

> No other conversion narrative in Pietism has received as much attention among historians as August Hermann Francke's conversion narrative. His account, considered paradigmatic and a model for Pietist conversion in the historiography, is the most widely analyzed and reprinted narrative of conversion in Pietism. Indeed, its characteristic features of repentance, tears, falling to one's knees, and then a subsequent dramatic turn from unbelief to an assurance of faith, in which doubt vanishes "as quickly as one turns one's hand," have become a cliché in the depiction of conversion in Pietism (Strom, 2018, p. 15–28).

Whether or not Franke served as a template for Hedberg is not possible to determine, even though Hedberg was familiar with the writings of the most prominent German Pietist authors, including those of Francke (Hedberg, 1847, p. 14–15; Takala, 1929, p. 224–232). However, what is true for a fact, is that the imagery of falling on one's knees – employed by both Hedberg and Francke – is very typical of conversion narratives.

The same passage in Hedberg's account illustrates another example of his usage of familiar tropes and figures of speech. In his narrative, Hedberg writes about "wandering about in the wilderness of disbelief" (Hedberg, 1847, p. 12). Considering the Finnish environment, Hedberg retreats not to the desert but to the typical Finnish remote places such as the woods or the winter cold. He writes:

> Often I spent hours reading and praying in the coldness of the winter (a fool talking); in the solitariness of the woods, I lay on my knees on the snowdrift [- -]. (Hedberg 1847, 10–11).[5]

The metaphors of withdrawing into the wilderness or the desert to seek solitude – or to encounter temptations – are pervasive and used by St Augustine and John Bunyan (Littberger, 2004, p. 51). John Freccero (1986, p. 56) even calls the biblical Exodus *the* image of conversion – its visual expression.

One could point to several other pervasive images or tropes as well. 'Conversion through the reading of Scripture' has a long-standing tradition in Christianity, the most famous example being St Augustine's conversion (Littberger, 2004, p. 11). In Hedberg's case, as we have seen, his revelation comes after reading Martin Luther. Furthermore, Hedberg's description of how a "veil fell off my eyes" is a classic metaphor used when describing how someone blind for God's work gets renewed vision (Littberger, 2004, p. 12; Freccero, 1986, p. 123) – the most famous example being the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus.

5. My translation from Swedish. Original quotation: "Så tillbragte jag ofta timtal i winterkölden med läsande och bedjande (en dåre talar); i skogens enslighet låg jag knäböjd på snödrifwan [- -]."

The assertion implied by these examples, namely that most autobiographical conversion narratives fall back on – and are structured in line with – one or more paradigmatic patterns that serve as templates for people putting into words their conversions, is not new but, in fact, suggested by several researchers. For instance, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (1985) uses the conversion narratives of St: Augustine, John Bunyan, and Thomas Merton to exemplify three different conversion paradigms. The first paradigm is represented by a sudden and dramatic conversion (St: Augustine). The second represents a spiritual battle between good and evil, where the conversion is gradual (John Bunyan). The third and more modern paradigm combines the two previous ones and represents more a continuous conversion process that never quite reaches its fulfillment (Thomas Merton).

Referring partly to Hunsaker Hawkins's classification, Inger Littberger (2004, p. 46–51) boils down the amounts of paradigms into one single model that she calls the classical pattern of a conversion narrative. According to her, characteristic features of such narratives are metaphors of death turning to life, old turning to new, and illness being healed. The spiritual battle – often depicted as a fight between good and evil, as a period when stagnation, sickness, and death prevails, or as a desert-like pilgrimage – usually heads towards a decisive turning-point or crisis through which "the old man" dies and is newborn again.

We need not dig deep in Hedberg's narrative to identify several common elements with the models portrayed by Littberger and Hunsaker Hawkins. In addition to the imagery of remote places already mentioned, taken as a whole, Hedberg's narrative is most certainly a spiritual battle where good fights evil. At points, for instance, he speaks about "the darkness of doubt," how "he is being cast down into the bottomless mud of his misery," how the devil assaults and attacks him, and so forth. And when he finally finds peace, or when he "finds the right path" as he calls it, he describes it as an "unveiling of his eyes," as if "the light of mercy and salvation which is God's word was revealed to his soul" (Hedberg, 1847, p. 15).

Following Hunsaker Hawkins's third conversion paradigm, Hedberg's conversion appears as a continuous process with several turning points. When looking at Hedberg's account of his spiritual development, one can distinguish three obvious turning points. The first is set in 1826 when Hedberg is only 14 years old and comes to the realization that "his soul has gotten lost from living God." The second one appears in the mid 1830:s when he first comes in contact with the Pietist movement and its representatives and later with Martin Luther's Church Postil. The last one is around 1842–1843, which marks his deprecation from the same Pietist movement.

Referring to literary theorist Northrop Frye, Bruce Hindmarsh argues that this back-and-forth movement can actually be traced back to the biblical plot of suffering, humiliation, and redemption:

> What was the pattern that structured these narratives? [- -] Northrop Frye argues that the pattern of original prosperity, descent into humiliation, and return is the overall structure of the biblical story and of the small narratives within it, such as the parable of the prodigal son. He also argues that this pattern has distinctively shaped much of Western literature. This was true for a figure such as John Newton, and it has also been true for the narrative identity of many Christians throughout history. Their personal story replicated the biblical story in miniature and often took the form of an episode in the larger story of God so that their narratives have the same shape as the larger drama of salvation history (Hindmarsh, 2005, p. 345; Frye, 1982, p. 198).

4 THE UNINTENTIONAL CONVERSION NARRATIVE

What the discussion above suggests – both on a general level but also when speaking explicitly about Hedberg's narrative – is that authors of autobiographical conversion narratives seem to rely on general patterns both on the level of detail – such as recurrent and' recycled' figures of speech or metaphors – but also the level of structure – such as the plot and intrigue. This is true, as we have seen, at least when speaking of Hedberg's account. Consequently, a conversion put into a narrative is, at least to some degree, fiction in the sense that it deploys different narrative strategies in its storytelling (Littberger, 2004, p. 14–15).

Some narrative strategies are more or less conscious and deliberate. For instance, the author selects certain events, omits others, and arranges the chosen ones in a specific – often chronological and logical – order. Other strategies, on the other hand, are more or less unconscious. However, they are nonetheless inevitable in order to facilitate the communication between author and reader. According to history theoretician Hayden White, such narrative strategies are actually what makes historical narratives comprehensible. He suggests that to comprehend a story, its *form* is equally as important as its *content* (White, 1987, p. 42).

As the historian's task is to make the unfamiliar historical events familiar to the audience, he needs to employ figurative language that renders the unknown history comprehensible (White, 1978, p. 94):

> For if the historian's aim is to familiarize us with the unfamiliar, he must use figurative, rather than technical language. [- -] The historian's characteristic instrument of encodation, communication, and exchange is ordinary educated speech. This implies that the only instruments that he has for endowing his data with meaning, of rendering the strange familiar, and of rendering the mysterious past comprehensible, are the techniques of *figurative* language. All historical narratives presuppose figurative characterizations of the events they purport to represent and explain (White, 1978, p. 94).

White calls the process by which familiar images and plot structures are "encoded" or transcribed onto the historical events, *emplotment.* A successful encodation – i.e., a well-structured or emplotted narrative – uses figurative language with which the readers are familiar. Such language White calls" pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings" (White, 1978, p. 88). In other words, he asserts that there are several generic, conventional tropes or plots that keep recurring in our culture, and which are therefore easily identifiable and recognizable by everyone:

> This suggests that what the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the *types* of configurations of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which he is writing. [- -] *How* a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. [- -] [N]ot only are the pregeneric plot structures by which sets of events can be constituted as stories of a particular kind limited in number, as Frye and other archetypal critics suggest; but the encodation of events in terms of such plots structures in one of the ways a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts (White, 1978, p. 84–85).

The rhetorical power of these pregeneric plot structures and tropes lies in the cognitive and affective resonance they conjure up in the audience (Zarzycka, 2017, p. xx). One could say that the form eases identification with the content. In other words, because the tropes and images are universal, conventional, and immediately recognizable for most people, they are also appealing to the readers and capable of conveying the story even to those who are not familiar with it from before.

The point is that despite Hedberg's explicit and apparent efforts to avoid the genre of conversion narrative, he nevertheless uses a plot structure and figurative language so typical of conversion narratives that he unintentionally ends up producing one himself. At least his account is interpreted as one. The metaphors, archetypes, and pregeneric plots are necessary encodations in the emplotment he creates to familiarize his audience with his experiences. He attaches familiar metaphors to his personal (and therefore other people's unfamiliar) experiences to make them understandable. One could say that Hedberg attempts to create a narrative appealing to the mind. However, he cannot do this without using language that also appeals to emotions.

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