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CHAPTER NUMBER

"EDUCATION HESITANCY" IN THE OSTROBOTHNIAN BIBLE BELT?

JAKOB DAHLBACKA & GERD SNELLMAN

Introduction

> "What is needed to turn the grandson of a woodsman and a log driver into a Professor of Literature – a miracle, no more no less, if we are to believe the author himself."

These are the words of Charlotte Sundström, in her review of the book *Min österbottniske far* (My Ostrobothnian Father), written by Raoul J. Granqvist (Sundström 2013). The implicit idea that the quotation relies on is that it is a long way from the factory floor to the university hall for anyone living in the northern parts of Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia on the Finnish Westcoast. This idea, or prejudice, is widely spread. Ill-concealed it is echoed, for instance, in the statements made by university lecturer Barbro Schauman in 2012, when plans to locate an educational program of art and culture in the city of Pietarsaari was discussed in the media. The fact that Pietarsaari is "the main town of the Bible belt" was, according to Schauman, reason enough not to place it there, if we are to believe the report in the *Hufvudstadsbladet* (2012).

These two statements represent two sides of the same coin, namely, the image of the northern parts of Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia as a rural and peripheral area where—in this case—(formal) education is valued rather low. Regardless of whether the image is self-chosen and internalized—as in the former quote—or imputed—as in the latter—it is relatively widely spread. This article aims to discuss whether there is something more to these alleged attitudes that could be labeled "education hesitancy." This concept, introduced by this article, refers to anyone doubtful about or disdainful of education even when it is readily available. As such, the concept derives

from another established concept, namely "vaccine hesitancy," which refers to "anyone who is doubtful about vaccinations or who chooses to delay or refuse immunizations even when they are readily available" (McKee & Bohannon 2016, 104).

By comparison with the rest of Finland, the northern parts of Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia show several divergences historically, demographically, socioeconomically, politically, and religiously. In popular parlance, these are often summed up into the concept of the "Ostrobothnian Bible belt" (see image). It should not be confused with the Bible belt of Conservative Laestadianism as described by Harjumaa and Nykänen in this volume, which is located some 200 kilometers further north, in Northern Ostrobothnia. Despite its often negative connotations and pejorative usage (Häger 2017; Dahlbacka 2017), scholars of religion have been able to fix the borders of the Ostrobothnian Bible belt with reference to surveys that chart religious views, religious affiliation and church attendance among the Swedish speaking population in Finland. These surveys imply a higher church attendance than in other parts of the country, and a larger percentage of the population than average believing in God (Herberts 2008, 162; Herberts 2003; Björkstrand 2008).

The religiosity of the Ostrobothnian Bible belt dates back to the pietistic, Lutheran revival traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. In particular, some branches of the Laestadian movement are represented in the area. Above all, the so-called Word of Peace branch (in Finnish called *Rauhan Sana-liike* and henceforth abbreviated to the WoP) is strong in the districts of Luoto and Pedersöre, two municipalities in the area. Laestadianism is generally known for its conservative values and strong social cohesion. As its members very much adhere to the biblical advice of living in the world but not of the world, this has led to a view of them as intentionally isolating themselves from the surrounding society (Snellman 2011, 61, 85–86).[1] These descriptions correspond with Andreas Häger's portrayal of the same

[1] According to the WoP, there are two ways of looking at the world; as an arena for sin, where you run the risk of being affected, or as an arena where you, like anyone else, have the possibility to make a change and affect others. The first option tends to serve as a breeding ground for isolation. See Snellman 2011, 61, 85–86. However, as Andreas Häger states in his chapter in this book, the isolation or "othering" is equally often made by external forces, such as, for instance, the media.

Laestadian group as being “a religious elite,” i.e., more religious than the society by which it is surrounded (Häger in this book).

Being a religious elite by definition entails standing out in comparison with Finnish society at large. Therefore, another concept applicable to the Laestadian movement[2] is Peter Berger’s term “cognitive minority,” which he defines as “a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society. Put differently, a cognitive minority is a group formed around a body of deviant ‘knowledge’” (1970, 6). However, the deviation constituted by the Laestadian faith is perhaps even more tangible in its practical manifestations. Laestadianism is often and widely associated with, for instance, temperance, large families, a critical attitude towards cultural or competitive events, and not watching television. Therefore, Laestadianism not only also stands out or deviates from society at large or from its mainline or liberal counterparts, but also from other conservative Protestant groups or traditions in Finland.[3]

Interestingly enough, the northern parts of Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia also differ as regards education. For instance, traditionally, the number of

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[2] As regards the relationship between the WoP and other Laestadian branches, for instance Conservative Laestadians, the former is generally considered more moderate. Whereas Conservative Laestadianism can be described as “spiritually exclusive” (Harjumaa & Nykänen in this book), the WoP shows a diversity of various religious-theological accents that makes it more pluralistic than the latter (Talonen 2019, 46).

[3] In addition to outlining some characteristics of Laestadianism, these peculiarities reveal similarities with, for instance, so-called Conservative Protestantism in the American setting, as described, for instance, by Marty (1993) or Greeley & Hout (2006). Building on classifications developed by Smith (1990) and Steensland (2000) respectively, Greeley & Hout (2006, 6) use the term Conservative Protestantism for the groups otherwise called “evangelicals” or “fundamentalists”, namely for those who endorse a literal interpretation of the Bible, accept Jesus as their personal savior, and consider it important to spread the good news. By and large, these prescriptions apply to Laestadianism as well. Referring to the American setting, Greeley & Hout note that Conservative Protestantism and Mainline Protestantism certainly differ from each other with regard to moral values, family values, lifestyle, education, etc. but that these differences are not always as significant as “outsiders imagine nor as different as it could be” (2006, 149). To some extent this is true also of the relationship between Laestadianism and other Conservative Protestants in Finland; there are differences, but they are not necessarily as significant as outsiders imagine.

primary school students continuing their education to the upper secondary school level has been much lower here than in many other parts of Finland. A mere 30–40% of students in Pedersöre and Luoto—the very districts housing a large number of Laestadians—have continued to upper secondary school (Geber and Lojander-Visapää 2007, 35–38). In 2017, the percentage in Pedersöre was even lower, down to 32 % (Henricson 2017), compared to 64 % among all Swedish speaking students and 45 % among all students in Finland (Ekholm 2017). Instead, a large number of students tend to go to vocational school (Thomasfolk 2017, 9). The question is whether or not this has anything to do with the religiosity of the area. Is there a connection between living in the Bible belt (i.e., belonging to a conservative religious group) and a tendency to a lower education level? Is there some degree of truth to be found in the prejudiced views on education presented in the introduction? In a country that takes pride in and is noted for its high-quality educational system, the question is of interest. Moreover, to our knowledge, such an investigation has not been done previously.

Research question and methodology

The current article examines the alleged "education hesitancy" in the northern parts of Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia. As shown in the introductory remarks, there is, generally, a certain degree of education hesitancy in the area that is supported by recent statistics. However, just as the concept it is derived from—"vaccine hesitancy"—is attributed to some regions of conservative religion and motivated by that specific religiosity (McKee & Bohannon 2016), this study searches for possible historical and theological roots for the practice of refraining from education among this group of Laestadians. It also studies the contemporary implications of this hesitancy. The question is whether we can speak about education hesitancy being explicitly particular to the Ostrobothnian Bible belt, or, is the hesitancy religiously motivated?

In this article, we will focus on one of the sub-branches of Laestadianism, the WoP, which is also the topic of Andreas Häger's chapter in this book. Up until 1934, the WoP was part of what is known as Conservative Laestadianism, which also comes under scrutiny in the chapter by Harjumaa and Nykänen. Whereas Conservative Laestadianism is the largest Laestadian fraction in Finland, the WoP—with its 24 000 members—is the third-largest (Talonen 2001, 25).

Regarding previous, adjacent research on this subject, on a national level, quite a few studies have been conducted in order to identify factors that affect pupils' school results. From a Finno-Swedish perspective, the longitudinal research project "Vem väljer vad" (Who Chooses What) (Linnanmäki 2011) can be mentioned as well as some investigations published by the Finnish national agency for education (Nyyssölä and Jakku-Sihvonen 2009; Metsämuuronen 2013). Conditions that are said to affect school results are, for instance, socioeconomic background, gender, geographical differences, the level of education among parents, language background (Lappalainen 2009). Religion, however, is not mentioned as a separate factor.

In comparison, research dealing with the Laestadian views on education in the Nordic countries has only been done to a limited extent. Finnish conditions are even less represented. However, the question is touched upon by Snellman (2011), in her thesis concerning women as mediators of Laestadian traditions, and superficially by Talonen (1988) and Palola (2010; 2011). In brief, the research conducted concurs with the general conclusions drawn by, for instance, Finnäs and Talonen, who found that the level of education in Luoto has been comparatively low, and the attitude among the Laestadians towards culture and education has been relatively tardy compared with, for instance, the Evangelical movement (Snellman 2011, 7, 13 referring to Finnäs 1989, 3, 45 and Talonen 1988).

Sometimes, the ambitions of conservative religious groups to live a "historical life ideal" in a modern world—a notion coined by historian Johan Huizinga (1984, 77−85)—culminates in them creating their own educational institutions as a way of preserving and protecting their religious tradition from the society they are surrounded by, despite also being part of it. In these cases, school education is seen as an arena where the identity and values of the groups are contested (Leganger-Krokstad 2009, 247−253). An example of this is the Netherlands, where, due to a so-called "pillarization" in society, Catholics and the Reformed Church have created their own schools, newspapers, et cetera, because of the modernization process that started in the late 19th century (Schrover 2010, 332−333). The idea is not altogether unfamiliar to the Laestadians, either. Like many other revivalist organizations, representatives of the Conservative Laestadianism founded a folk high school in 1923. Among the motives were their concerns about children losing their faith during their time in school, and the desire to have "Christian teachers, who—in the spirit of the Bible—convey knowledge and information that Christian children need as well" (Palola 2010, 252−256).

However, compared to many other countries, Finland—with its relatively few private religious schools—makes an interesting exception. Here, the school institution rather functions as a kind of “secularized room,” providing an arena with logics and regulations, which in earlier times bore a religious stamp, but which is nowadays shaped in accordance with the nondenominational ideals of the secular state, and which the religious groups must find a way of contending with for themselves. The question is if, and how, this affects their view on and attitude towards education.

The study will approach its research question from two angles. First, a historical approach will be applied, through which theological notions that suggest religious motives for education hesitancy will be extracted from the newsletter of the WoP and board protocols. The view on education, as expressed through these channels, can be regarded as the official doctrine or desirable norms of behavior of the movement—the institutional religion as opposed to popular religion, to use the words of Robert Orsi (1985).

Secondly, the historical survey will be complemented with semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the WoP. This part investigates the ways in which these members themselves have experienced and conceptualized the view held on education within the movement. The aim is to identify overarching collective dimensions and patterns rather than merely looking at individual experiences. Special attention will be given to experiences expressing religious motives and explanations. Thus, the method resembles a deductive qualitative content analysis. We wish to determine whether the perceived (or practiced) view of the members corresponds with the “official” view, as expressed in the newsletter, and whether it confirms or calls into question the idea of education hesitancy in relation to conservative religion. Hopefully, this may uncover how conservative religion negotiates with mainstream culture as regards education, and why some parts of education are being adopted and others rejected.

Historical traces
The official view expressed in newsletters and protocols

In the late 1860s, the Laestadian movement reached Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia, where it established prayer houses around Kokkola and

Pietarsaari and in Vaasa (Wentin 1986).[4] When, at the turn of the century, the movement fragmented, “Conservative Laestadianism”[5] became the predominant branch. Another division in 1934 caused the main part of the Swedish-speaking Laestadians in Ostrobothnia to form a separate faction—the WoP—together with a group of Finnish-speaking Laestadians from Kokkola and further north (Wentin 1986, 94). Although most activities were bilingual, Swedish became the principal language in 1968, when the various prayer house congregations founded a joint umbrella organization, The Federation of the Laestadian Associations of Peace (*Laestadianernas Fridsföreningars Förbund*, henceforth abbreviated to the LFF**)** (Snellman 2011, 49).

The LFF is one of five subdivisions within the WoP. Despite being geographically divided, there is a certain amount of communication across the subdivision borders, such as overlapping family ties and an exchange of preachers. Moreover, the newsletter Sion’s Mission Magazine (*Sions Missionstidning*, henceforth abbreviated to the SMT) serves as a unifying forum, since both its writers and readers are found in all five subdivisions.[6] As this article confines itself to the Ostrobothnian Bible belt, we will limit our focus to the LFF area of the WoP community,[7] and thus henceforth, we will use the terms LFF or LFF-Laestadianism. When speaking of the LFF or LFF-Laestadianism, we are therefore referring to the members of the WoP in the northern parts of Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia.[8] Whenever we make reference to the leadership of the LFF, or any other organ within the LFF, we will point this out. Moreover, the results we reach are not necessarily representative of the WoP community as a whole.

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[4] About Laestadianism in Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia, see Erik Wentin, *Laestadianismen i svenska Österbotten* (Lappeenranta: Etelä-Saimaan Kustannus, 1986).

[5] See Nykänen & Harjumaa in this book.

[6] At the beginning of 2018, *Sions Missionstidning* had 2516 subscribers. LFF archives (LFFA), LFF annual report 2017.

[7] The study concerns the members of the seven LFF prayer house congregations, in Kokkola, Luoto, Pedersöre and Pietarsaari that, in 2016, amounted to 6300 people, including children. The number is based on the congregations’ lists of members.

[8] The term LFF is used throughout the study, although the LFF as an organization was founded as late as 1968.

The primary source for the historical inquiry, the SMT, is a monthly newsletter that LFF has been responsible for publishing since the 1970s. Ever since it was originally established in 1914—save for a few years in the 1920s—it has served as a newsletter for the Swedish-speaking people among the Conservative Laestadians. When, in 1934, Rauhan Sana detached itself from Conservative Laestadianism, the responsibility for its publication was assigned to an individual editor belonging to the WoP (Snellman 2017, 167–194; Enkvist, Petterson, and Snellman 2018, 24). As of 1958, these editors were Finno-Swedish Ostrobothnians. Furthermore, the number of Ostrobothnian writers increased. In addition to Bible meditations, which made up the majority of the content, necrologies, reviews, and poems were included in the newsletter.[9] Overall, the newsletter represents LFF-Laestadianism, and, throughout the years, its theological line has been in harmony with the teachings in the prayer houses. However, the theology expressed both in preaching and in the SMT has not always appeared as uniform (Snellman 2011, 260–263). This is also the case with the views on education. Considering the long period that is being investigated, education has not been a frequently discussed theme. In a few meditations, the subject is treated exhaustively, while, in others, it is merely touched upon incidentally. In the following, we will consider more carefully how education is treated in the SMT.

The view on education up until the 1980s

At the beginning of the century – at the time when the folk school became more common in Finland – education was not only a subject for discussion in society as a whole but also in Conservative Laestadianism. Among the latter, the new educational system was perceived with both skepticism and hope. While non-believing teachers and ungodly schoolbooks were regarded as demoralizing for children, it was also acknowledged that Christians, being members of society, needed education. Furthermore, by educating themselves, Christians were given the possibility to exert an influence on social progress actively. In the main, the leadership was positive towards education (Talonen 1988, 153–155; Palola 2010, 104, 255–257).[10]

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[9] The main part of the Bible meditations consists of spiritual encouragements and messages of spiritual awakening. See Snellman 2016, 13–15.

[10] As we mention earlier in this chapter, a wish, among the advocates of education, to exert influence led to the founding of a Laestadian folk high-school. In general,

During the first decades of the century, the same two attitudes can be perceived among the Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnian Laestadians (Snellman 2011, 86–88). The Lutheran approach was evident in both of these attitudes; education was regarded as inevitable for society, but faith always needed to rule over worldly knowledge (Hägglund 2003, 192–193; Öberg 2002, 246–251). For instance, two texts from 1927 and 1928 make a clear distinction between godly and human wisdom. While one of the authors stresses the fact that knowledge is a gift from God, and that education is necessary, the other author is more pessimistic. He considers education to be bad and regards the increasing secularization as a consequence of increased human knowledge and education (SMT 12/1927, 181–183; SMT 4/1928, 61–62).

As from the mid-20th century, this kind of education hesitancy was further specified. In an article from 1943, the upper secondary school receives its share of negative critique. According to the author, an educated person runs the risk of despising less educated people. He also emphasizes that true knowledge is found in the Bible (SMT 5/1943, 74–75). It is not far-fetched to believe that this point of view was supported within LFF-Laestadianism. Until his death in the 1980s, the author was an influential lay preacher not only in one of the LFF's congregations but in the whole of the WoP community.[11]

In a text from the 1960s, the upper secondary school—much more so than the vocational school—also posed a potential threat to women's calling to become wives and mothers:

> No, a decent profession for anyone with practical skills is equally as worthy [as a theoretical education], and I would warmly recommend it to all girls who aim at marrying and becoming housewives. At home, among children and laundry, a mother has less need for the student's cap (SMT 9/1960, 134–138).[12]

One decade later, in 1970, a very different view vis-à-vis the upper secondary school appears. This article encourages students to prepare

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according to Harjumaa and Nykänen (in this book) the Conservative Laestadians have been encouraged to actively participate in society. This constructive attitude originates from the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine.

[11] The argumentation is based on the *ethos* of the writer, the credibility he possesses. See Boréus & Bergström 2013, 91–92.

[12] On women's calling, see Snellman, "Sions döttrar," 272–273.

themselves for examinations through prayer and by reading the Bible (SMT 3/1970, 46–47).[13] Even though the author was not a part of the LFF-community—thus lacking the authority that the author in the previous example possessed—the fact that the article was published in the SMT reveals that these two different views lived side by side.

Theology was especially subjected to scrupulous observation. The skepticism towards theological studies was connected to the view of a dead faith, which was considered to particularly prevail within the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Snellman 2011, 88–89). This distrust of theological training also originated from the period in which the Laestadian movement established itself in Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia when conflicts arose between the movement, led by laymen, and the clergy of the Lutheran Church. Although these relations gradually improved during the century, theological studies, at times, were considered a great strain for true Christendom—especially in light of the role the simple Sàmi girl Mary of Lapland (Milla Clemensdotter[14]) played in the conversion of Laestadius (Wentin 1986, 22–49, 75–76, 142–148; Snellman 2011, 87).

The dichotomy appeared in two articles published in the sixties. “You do not gain access to heaven by reading, studying, praying and doing good deeds, et cetera, not even if you pass through all the theological institutions of this world, if you have read the Bible by heart, and have helped the poor, and so on. None of this will grant you salvation” (SMT 3/1964, 40–42). “Simple ‘maids’ like Naaman’s servant girl may even teach a priest that heavenly lesson that no theological faculty ever can. Only the school of the Holy Spirit can offer this kind of education” (SMT 5/1969, 73–75).

The view on education between 1980 and 2000

In February 1984, a report from an LFF preacher meeting was published in the SMT. In the meeting, the preachers had discussed education under the heading “The tree of knowledge of good and evil.” According to the report, the preachers defined good knowledge as emanating from the right kind of communion with God and as something that was used to honor God. Knowledge became damaging when used to seek one’s own glory. However, the preachers regarded education hesitancy—a legacy still visible in the movement—as unbiblical. Stating the simple fact that education was

[13] The article had been published earlier in the newsletter *Rauhan Sana.*

[14] For more information about Milla Clemensdotter, see Østtveit Elgvin 2018, 51–72.

part of societal development, they wished for Laestadians to educate themselves in different fields (SMT 2/1984, 29–31). Nevertheless, they noted the dangers associated with women over-educating themselves, as in practice, these women ran the risk of not wanting to stay at home raising children (LFFA, LFF preacher meeting protocol, September 8, 1983).

During the 1980s, education was portrayed as either necessary or unnecessary. The discussion, to some extent, is reminiscent of the discourse among the Conservative Laestadians in the early 20th century; namely, that too much education would lead to a lack of labor in the countryside (Palola 2010, 104). In 1986, one author distinguished between necessary education and a thirst for knowledge that extended to "much more than what belongs to professional education." In the article, the question of education was treated alongside phenomena such as music, art, theatre, dance, and sports—in other words, cultural phenomena predominantly considered as sins within the LFF (SMT 10/1986, 134–135). The author does not explicitly mention different study programs or lengths of the studies. However, for a reader familiar with the locality, the word "professional education" clearly indicates the vocational school in Pietarsaari, nowadays called Optima. Therefore, it is probable that the author argues in favor of vocational schools at the expense of upper secondary schools.[15] In a sense, one can observe here an adaptation of the need for formal vocational education, which was prevailing in the society at that time. The following year, another article covered the topic of necessary education, observing that the need for education and continuous further education is inevitable in professional life (SMT 7–8/1987, 98–99).

Starting in the 1980s, a more positive view on theological education also appeared. The meeting for lay preachers, mentioned above, stated—with reference to Luther—that there was a need for men with theological training, especially since liberal theology was gaining terrain (SMT 2/1984, 30). Several years later, in 1990, the annual meeting of the LFF organization gave theological studies its clear support. The youth was encouraged to choose a teaching career or to work in a congregation. Christian teachers were considered "a great blessing for our schools," while priests and lay workers "served an important purpose" in parish life (SMT 4/1990, 58). One could say that the positive signals of the leadership concerning education were signs of a change in the attitude towards the surrounding world. Instead

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[15] About tacit knowledge transfer, see Boréus and Bergström, "Argumentationsanalys," 113–116.

of isolating themselves, the LFF adherents realized the benefits of actively exerting influence on both church and society.

The view on education in the 21st century

During the 21st century, the question of education was treated neutrally in the SMT. Most probably, studies had become a natural part of life, even in the LFF community.[16] For instance, when interviewing young people, studies were incidentally mentioned, and elderly writers gave practical advice to students. Most of this advice encouraged the youth to live their faith and to maintain contacts with other Christians students wherever they studied (SMT 7–8/2013, 14–15; SMT 9/2014, 12–13; SMT 7–8/2012, 2–3, 7; SMT 4/2016, 16–17). Marriage and children were no hindrance to education (SMT 9/2010, 5–6). In other words, studies were no longer considered such a threat to the family, which was so highly valued both within LFF-Laestadianism (Snellman 2011, 269) and in Conservative Laestadianism (Harjumaa & Nykänen in this book). One could perhaps speak of this change as an adaptation to the reality the Laestadian youth now lived in, where studies were seen as something natural.

It also became less common to favor or reject specific fields of study. However, the idea of theological knowledge as an opposite to the true faith recurred in some articles (SMT 9/2009, 6–7), especially in articles discussing the secularization of the Church (SMT 1/2011, 12–13; 4/2016, 4–6).

The positive or negative consequences of knowledge were not discussed very often; however, this topic was treated in an article about the work at the prayer houses. The study material was seen as a challenge for the youth since “schoolbooks are not always written on the basis of God’s words.” The unfamiliar environment, to which the student had to move, posed another challenge since people with different views of life endangered the beliefs of the Christian students (SMT 1/2015, 13). However, with the increase in the students’ means of keeping in contact with their Laestadian environments, the risk diminished of them going astray from their spiritual roots. Therefore, moving to another city did not automatically expose the youth to doubtful spiritual influences or plunge them into a spiritual

[16] The change of attitudes vis-à-vis education was probably part of a larger restructuring within the LFF towards the end of the century, which made its activities more versatile. The initiative was initially taken at grass roots level, but later inoculated at an official level in 2011. See Enkvist, Petterson, and Snellman 2018, 49–52.

vacuum. This might explain the somewhat more neutral attitude towards studies.

As early as 1973, when the board of the LFF discussed the importance of an inner mission in Helsinki, the question of caring for the students' spiritual well-being was raised. It was decided that the youth residing in the city needed spiritual nourishment. To supply this demand, preachers were encouraged to visit the city whenever possible (LFFA, LFF board meeting protocol, September 20, 1973). In Turku, another popular city among students from the LFF, gatherings were arranged from the end of the 1990s (LFFA, LFF annual report 1999; LFF board meeting protocol, September 4, 2003). A similar kind of spiritual nourishment was provided by the Tuesday-meetings in Vasa; these started in the seventies and were occasionally visited by preachers from the LFF. The meetings particularly attracted and united students and were marketed as "an oasis during weekdays" in the SMT (SMT 3/2012, 16–17; SMT 7–8/2006; SMT 10/2012). What additionally helped students to maintain contact with their Laestadian environment was the digital advancement. The LFF opened their webpages in 2008, and these made it possible to take part in LFF meetings all around the world (SMT 10/2008).[17] Thus, the imminent danger of students losing contact with their spiritual background was, to some extent, neutralized.

According to the SMT and the protocols, the attitudes towards education shifted over time within the LFF. The most significant change is to be found in the attitude towards theoretical education. Starting with skepticism in the middle of the 20th century, the development moved on to looking at theoretical education as something unnecessary in the 1980s. Finally, towards the turn of the century, the phenomenon was accepted—theological education was included—as a natural part of living in society.

Contemporary implications
Interviews with the grassroots level

By scrutinizing how education has been portrayed in historical sources, we have outlined what could be called "the official view" on education within LFF-Laestadianism. In the following, we will complement this view with

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17 See also, the LFF home page, accessed August 29, 2018, <https://www.lff.fi/start/>.

an analysis of interviews conducted with seven LFF adherents.[18] Following an appeal on Facebook, the seven informants contacted us. The single criterion for participation was that they had to have a connection to LFF-Laestadianism in the northern parts of Ostrobothnia. All the informants belonged to or had belonged to, one of the prayer house congregations within the LFF. Two had been born and raised in Vaasa and Sweden, respectively, but had, later on, lived in the northern parts of Swedish Ostrobothnia. One informant was male, and the ages of the informants ranged between 20 and 60. Therefore, variables such as age or gender are not problematized in this article, nor are the possible differences between different LFF prayer house congregations within the Bible belt area. Moreover, the fact that the number of interviews was limited to seven, and all the informants have some form of further education, obviously hinders us from declaring any absolute representativeness. However, the mere fact that there is a concordance between the historical material and the informants is a considerable argument for the proposition.

Several points can be mentioned regarding the intersections between the interviews and the historical material. Firstly, the majority of the informants recognized the education hesitancy, which was discernible in the historical material (LUK 2018: 005; 003; 007). Some even explained that their participation in the survey was because they were aware of (what is believed to be) the prevailing opinion (LUK 2017: 001; LUK 2018: 004; 006; 007), and wished to show that alternative views exist:

> There were three Laestadians in my form when I went to the upper secondary school in Pietarsaari. I mean, three girls from Luoto, among approximately 50 students. That says something about Laestadians and further education. - - - I believe that I have a different view on education and that I have grown up differently than other Laestadians. - - - Hence, I want to give my view on it (LUK 2018: 005).

Only one of the informants said she was not familiar with the low tendency to attend upper secondary school, or with education hesitancy. However, later in the interview, she admitted to having heard of it. Moreover, she moved to Ostrobothnia in her twenties (LUK 2018: 002).

Secondly, the informants confirmed that the view on education has changed over time and that studies are nowadays regarded as a natural part of life.

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[18] The interviews are filed in The Church Historical Archives at Åbo Akademi University (ÅKA): Laestadians' view on education and work, Interviews (LUK 2017: 001 and LUK 2018: 002–007).

According to the informants, this becomes evident in the higher number of LFF adherents studying, in the broader spectrum of conceivable fields of study, and in the fact that students were prayed for at prayer house meetings (LUK 2017: 001; LUK 2018: 003; 004; 005; 006). The informants suggested a variety of explanations for this. For instance, they mentioned the scandal in 2009, when it became clear that a highly respected lay preacher had been a pedophile (LUK 2018: 004).[19] They also said that currently, there are "functioning [Laestadian] congregations in all major university cities in Swedish-speaking Finland" (LUK 2018: 005). However, in accordance with the analysis of the newsletter, they emphasized that the view on education is still far from uniform. They spoke of a division in terms of "differences between Laestadians," "more conservative Laestadians fractions," and of "families," among which education is equated with sin (LUK 2018: 003; 004; 005).

Although the informants suggested a variety of explanations for education hesitancy, they did not, nevertheless, consider LFF-Laestadianism equivalent, for instance, with a low tendency to attend upper secondary school; even though they believed there was some kind of relation. They also offered a few more universal (i.e., non-religious) interpretations. These were, for instance, the excellent reputation of the vocational school "Optima," bullying of those who choose studies instead of practical work, logistics, or simply that children tend to follow their parents' example (LUK 2017: 001; LUK 2018: 003; 005; 006). However, we have focused exclusively on interpretations that suggest a connection between education hesitancy and religion. The categories of explanations presented below are derived through a close reading of these interviews. They do not necessarily correspond with the informants' personal opinions, but rather mirror how they interpret the general view within the LFF. One could say that the informants identify a religiously motivated education tendency, but they do not personally identify *with* it, let alone endorse it.

Education hesitancy due to theology

Purely theological explanations for education hesitancy often equate education with sin or claim that education leads to sin. As such, they resemble the discourse in the SMT at the beginning of the 20th century, where pride was seen as a consequence of education. One informant expressed this line of thought with a fictitious argument: "If I study and get

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[19] About the scandal, see Andreas Häger's chapter in this book.

a good and well-paid job, I might end up being vain or something, and then I become superior to others" (LUK 2018: 005). However, education does not merely potentially lead to sin, but indeed even intrinsically it forms a sharp contrast and is in opposition to the teaching in the prayer house. As one of the informants expresses it: "The more you study, the more enlightened you become, and the more you question whatever is said from the preacher's pulpit—whatever is discussed in families" (LUK 2018: 005).[20] It should, however, definitely be noted that there also exists a reverse argumentation, according to which Christians should do their schoolwork well. Here, being capable of quickly learning new things is considered a gift or talent of which one should make the most (LUK 2018: 004).

Education hesitancy due to fear of apostasy

The theological interpretations relate to a desire to induce members to hold on to the true faith by not letting them "warm themselves by foreign campfires."[21] Apparently, there is a substantial fear of leaving the safe and familiar home environment—the "bubble," as two informants call it (LUK 2018: 003; 004). If children "leave for Vasa, Turku or Helsinki, the temptations are so big they will remain there or find other congregations," or they will "bring back 'some guy' and then leave." An easy solution is to "keep the family here, because then we have control" (LUK 2018: 005), which, in sociological terms, sounds like a case of groups seeking to isolate themselves from their surroundings.[22] The "bubble" manifests itself not only regionally or nationally, but also locally. Three informants mentioned the loneliness and vulnerability that comes with attending school, especially upper secondary school, as Laestadians, since, according to them,

[20] Interestingly enough, according to Greeley and Hout (2006, 35–36), who have studied Conservative Christians in America, lack of education does not explain disbelief in or dislike of, for instance, science among Conservative Protestants. They state that "Conservative Protestants take their stands not because they are uneducated but because they hold strong religious beliefs that take precedence over scientific facts." Higher education, in other words, "does not eradicate faith in biblical inerrancy."

[21] The expression relates to the risks of attending religious meetings outside one's own group. Such a view has existed alongside a more inclusive view within the WoP. According to the latter view, the earthly kingdom of heaven is transcendent, and thereby not necessarily related to the membership of the WoP. See Snellman 2011, 243–244.

[22] Such tendencies have also been ascribed to the Laestadians, see e.g. Linjakumpu 2000.

Laestadians keep to themselves—as do non-Laestadians (LUK 2018: 002; 005; 006).

Education hesitancy due to tradition

Sometimes, the perceived education hesitancy is not explained theologically or biblically, but by tradition or culture, or a variety of circumlocutions (LUK 2018: 007 LUK 2018: 007). The informants talked about "group pressure" and about not moving away as "the right thing to do," while studying is "not the right thing to do." Someone chose the vocational school because "you're supposed to," another remembered that some fields "were not even on the map," especially for women to study, at the beginning of the 21st century (LUK 2018: 004; 005).[23] She also admitted to having asked a preacher about why it was not common among Laestadians to study, and his reply was simply, "I guess one just wasn't supposed to study."

Education hesitancy due to family values

LFF adherents generally think highly of traditional family values. This is evident when looking at the historical material, and the informants indeed confirmed it. The appreciation of the family also applies to other branches of the Laestadian movement, and it shows itself in various ways. Harjumaa and Nykänen, for instance, argue that the politics of Conservative Laestadian council members are often clearly family-orientated (Harjumaa & Nykänen in this book). The thought of marrying and having children at a young age is encouraged, especially among women. Consequently, education is not regarded as necessary, since members are supposed to stay at home (LUK 2018: 003). The alternative is completing studies quickly, which implies choosing a vocational school instead of an upper secondary school:

> Well, in former times, having a practical education was something natural, for instance, among… that is something I come to think of now, that, especially among women, it was common to have children at an early age. Say you went to upper secondary school and finished at the age of 19, then maybe you married and got kids around the age of 20. In that case, for practical reasons, it was complicated to study. That is why I think it was common among women—or is common—to choose a practical field, considering that family is held so high. I think that has played a part—one

[23] According to the informant, the specific fields of science that a woman was not supposed to study, were, for example, medicine, geology, archelogy and agrology (LUK 2018: 005).

> considers work as a part of a totality with family and everything, and one is not prepared to offer such things (LUK 2017: 001).[24]

Sometimes the thought is expressed as something less self-chosen:

> It's the duty of women… not to fulfill herself in that sense. You're not supposed to go out to work. You're supposed to stay at home and take care of the kids. I don't believe these things exist more widely anymore. Nevertheless, they do exist (LUK 2018: 004).

Another explanation for the fact that many women choose a vocational school, and especially fields that offer competence in child-care, geriatric-care, or nursing, is the flexibility of these professions. It is possible to work part-time or for a shorter time, and there is a great need for such labor (LUK 2017: 001; LUK 2018: 004). For men, on the other hand, the housebuilding or boatbuilding trades offer excellent possibilities for employment or even entrepreneurship. By earning money, they are capable of providing for a family (LUK 005; 001; 006).

Education hesitancy due to work ethics

If women give up studies in favor of the family, men give up studies in favor of work. LFF adherents have the reputation of possessing a strong work ethic. In this regard, the LFF demonstrates striking similarities with other both previous and current groups of conservative Protestantism. For instance, in the so-called Norwegian Bible belt, thanks to their principles of social and employer responsibility and contentedness in work, the revivalist leader Hans Nielsen Hauge and his followers have always been ascribed significant importance for the Norwegian industry and commerce (Grytten 2000). Similar feelings towards work can be found in Sweden. On the west coast, the Schartauanist ideals of vocation and moderation led to a view on work as something one should perform impeccably and with which one ought to be content (Lewis 1993). In the Swedish Bible belt of today, in the Gnosjö region in southern Sweden, the concept of "Spirit of Gnosjö" (*Gnosjö-andan*) bears witness to the many industries and enterprises that are based in the area, as well as to the diligence and work ethic, for which the inhabitants are renowned (Wigren 2003). Moreover, as Harjumaa and Nykänen highlight in their chapter, Conservative Laestadians in Finland traditionally value hard work and economic activity (Harjumaa and Nykänen in this book; Linjakumpu 2018).

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[24] See also LUK 2018: 003; 004; 005; 006; 007.

In our study, several of the informants had been raised in families that focused on work—meaning that their parents encouraged them to start working early. They considered this as characteristic for the LFF; working life—explicitly physical work[25]—starts at an early age, often part-time in the family business or a relative's company, and often while still attending school (LUK 2018: 003; 004; 005; 006; 007). The result, according to one informant, is school fatigue (LUK 2018: 005). Having a strong work ethic also implies giving a little more than required, working long days, and just "making a real effort" (LUK 2017: 001; LUK 2018: 002; 003; 005; 006). Often, the connection to the Christian faith is explicit; as a Christian, one should do one's work and make the most of one's talent (LUK 2018: 002; 004; 007). Many choose vocational school partly to reach working life more quickly and partly because of the persistent idea that a practical profession is better than a theoretical one. The connection to religion here was not as apparent among the interviewees as in the historical material, but occasionally there was a glimpse:

> I guess it shows in the sense that one should somehow, hmm, stay humble. And in the sense that physical work is the *real* work, that there is this idea that if you study—I could imagine that there has been this idea—that if you study too much, you somehow become your own master. I don't have any proof of this; I'm just guessing (LUK 2017: 001).

Concluding remarks

As far as we know, the concept of "education hesitancy" has only been coined and used in this article. By analogy with the concept it derives from—vaccine hesitancy—it stands for anyone doubtful about education even when it is readily available. The phenomenon—indicated by statistics to exist in the Ostrobothnian Bible belt—is confirmed by both the historical material and the interviews analyzed in this article. Obviously, religion is not the only, nor necessarily the primary explanation, but the material is silent about *how prevalent* the hesitancy is, and about *how much* of it should be ascribed to religion.

Our aim was never to reach full representativeness either when speaking of the WoP or specifically of LFF-Laestadianism. For us to achieve this, we would have needed more than seven interviews. Our aim has rather been to

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[25] Many informants talk about work, meaning physical work. See for instance (LUK 003; 007; 002).

uncover the possible historical and theological roots of education hesitancy within the LFF by using a variety of material. In this respect, a clear concordance between the archival document and the interviews emerges, confirming both the phenomenon and the assumption of religion being one of its reasons. This is the principal outcome of our investigation.

Interestingly enough, education is not treated extensively in the movement's newsletter. Considering the long period investigated, one would expect it to appear more often. Neither do the interviewees testify to education or school being frequently touched upon in sermons. Despite this, all the informants were more or less acquainted with the phenomenon of education hesitancy, and they discussed its theological explanations unimpededly. This suggests that a hesitant view on education has not been actively and extensively imputed "from above" but, rather, passed on by indirect means, and understood implicitly. In this respect, there seem to be some close points of similarity between our study and the one made by Harjumaa and Nykänen, despite the difference in topics. With regard to the question of circulation of political preferences among the Conservative Laestadians, Harjumaa and Nykänen namely speak of an "autonomous mechanism," implying that "people pass information by word of mouth, like in old times" and that political discussions are arranged "from bottom up," rather than by any formal body or institution within the movement (Harjumaa & Nykänen in this book).

Just as the information appears to be primarily passed on from the bottom up, our material also suggests that the changing of attitudes often has been initiated at the grassroots level, and only later on adopted (or legitimized) by those in a leading position. One informant expressed it quite poignantly;

> Sometimes I've thought that I'm indebted to my older siblings for this. I believe that had they not paved the way for us who were younger, it would have been tougher for us. But they dared to turn against dad. They dared to say no to traditions (LUK 2018: 005).

The protocols from the late 20th-century bear witness of the same. Even though the board meeting protocol from 1970 reveals that Laestadian youngsters were studying, for instance, in Helsinki, it was not until the preachers' meeting in the 1980s and the board meeting in the 1990s that it was concluded that the movement's legacy of education hesitancy was unbiblical and that the youth was encouraged to educate themselves in different fields. This inertness of traditions supports the statements made by Harjumaa and Nykänen, namely that a stance once taken in a strong religious group is difficult to modify (Harjumaa & Nykänen in this book).

On the other hand, whereas the investigation of the historical material suggests that education was largely accepted by the end of the 20th century, the interviewees quite unanimously testify to there still existing some hesitancy towards education in parts of the movement. It should also be admitted that the interviews show that religion has been used to counteract education hesitancy – not merely to provoke and justify it. Furthermore, the historical material bears witness to a gradual change of attitude within the movement, from skepticism towards education to it becoming a natural part of life. Hence, the inertness of tradition should not be mistaken for stagnation, even when speaking of a conservative religion. This is something that Dutch researchers John Exalto and Gerdien Bertram-Troost wish to point out, in their article about Christian private schools in the Dutch Bible belt:

> However, the [Dutch] Bible Belt itself is not an unchangeable block of rigid convictions. While the religious ideology has remained the same over the years, some attitudes towards ethical issues have changed in the emancipation process that the Bible Belt culture went through (Exalto and Bertram-Troost 2019, 3–4).

Perhaps such a change is discernible in the evolution of vocabulary used in the SMT. At the beginning of the 20th century, a distinction was made between "godly" and "human wisdom." By the end of the century, the line was drawn between "necessary" and "unnecessary education."

This probably also explains why, in general, the hesitancy seems less directed at the nine-years of compulsory school and more at the upper secondary school and university studies, i.e., the supposed "unnecessary education." With reference to the negotiation taking place between modern, secular society and groups believing in a conservative religion, suggested in the volume's introduction, one could say that the words "negotiation" and "adaptation" best describe the Laestadians' attitude towards school and education. When speaking of the compulsory school, there is hardly any evidence of a manifest opposition, except for a few references to abstaining from taking part in athletic contests or dance during school gymnastics. Nor are there any specific plans of the Laestadians establishing their own Christian private schools, at least in the material scrutinized here.

Concerning upper secondary school and university studies, the study has been able to identify some religiously motivated oppositional tendencies. This opposition shows itself primarily in advocating a dissociation from studies, rather than an open combative attack. According to the informants, these tendencies still exist in some parts of the movement. However, over

time and generally speaking, a more adaptable attitude is visible. University studies are acknowledged as a natural part of life, preachers are encouraged to visit university cities to meet the students' spiritual needs, and students are prayed for at the prayer houses. Towards the end of the century, the historical material also reveals a somewhat more negotiating stance, or should one say a more proactive attitude, by encouraging the Laestadian youth to choose a teaching career or work in a congregation. The reasoning is that, especially in teaching, Christians can exercise some influence on schools.

Finally, the mere fact that the informants did choose to take part in the study—many with the explicit purpose of voicing an alternative point of view—might be seen as a development towards a more positive attitude towards studies within the LFF. At the very least, it shows that education is something negotiable within the movement, and choosing studies over work does not lead to social exclusion.

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