

APOCALYPTIC VISIONS AND RESISTANCE TO SECULARIZATION IN FINNISH FOLKLORE

In global terms, reactionary currents within Islam are today the most dramatic examples of a self-conscious defense of traditional values and practices under threat from secularizing forces. In historical terms, however, modernizing and secularizing processes were traumatic even for persons in those societies that we tend to think of as smoothly and unproblematically secularized, such as modern Finland. In using the term 'secularized', I am not focusing on a decreased belief in God among individuals nor even on a decline in the social power of religion such that diverse social sectors become increasingly independent from the domination of religious meanings and institutions. (Berger – Luckmann 1966. 74.; Martin 1978.; Dobbelaere 1987.; Stark 1999). Instead, I examine secularization from the grassroots level of individual experience, as a change in the way people talked about and viewed their universe, a change in which one conceptual currency was replaced by another.

In the first half of the 19th century, rural Finnish inhabitants' only access to broader visions of the cosmos outside their own village or district was that provided by the Bible, Luther's Catechism and occasional religious literature as well as Church hymnals and ministers' sermons. When speaking, the agrarian folk drew widely upon these religious sources to describe their world, to speak from a position of moral authority, and to reinforce the credibility of their arguments. For many Finns in the mid-19th century, earthly government was seen to ideally be a reflection of God's kingdom. God's chosen rulers governed the secular realm, the clergy ruled the spiritual realm, and the family patriarch governed in his own household, all of which reflected God's divine rule in heaven. Within a relatively short period of time, however, this entire symbolic and political order came tumbling down. The Christian discourses and references to Scripture which farmers and labourers used to understand and explain the world became increasingly replaced by fundamentally new materialist and scientific discourses according to which the material world was an amoral series of cause-and-effect relations, and constant change was to be expected in humans' exploitation of it (Bruce 2002. 29). By the early decades of the 20th century, the assumption that everyone shared a religiously-organized world view had all but disappeared from public discourse.

In this essay I examine how rural inhabitants reacted to the loss of culturally dominant modes of thought and behaviour. Rather than viewing secularism as the inevitable triumph of rationality, many ordinary persons saw the shift to a secular society as the abandonment of a divine plan, the forsaking of a promised Christian utopia in which Christ would return in glory. Rural inhabitants viewed modern changes with suspicion and dismay, and the confusion they experienced was exacerbated by the fact that because modern changes occurred later in Finland than anywhere else in Western Europe, they also occurred more rapidly.

My sources are two bodies of material housed in the Finnish Literature Society (henceforth FLS) Folklore Archives in Helsinki. The first is ethnographic descrip-

tions sent to the Archives in response to the questionnaire published in 1939 in the newspaper *Kansatieto* (Folk Knowledge) entitled “How did the common people react to new lifestyles?” These responses comprise 1435 pages of rural inhabitants’ recollections from the last decades of the 19th and first decades of the 20th centuries (see Mikkola 2005, Mikkola forthcoming). The second body of source materials used in this essay are approximately 280 folk narratives recorded between 1882 and 1961 which deal with modern changes and what they were seen to portend. These folk narratives are classified under categories D 1401, 1411, 1441 and 1451 in Marjatta Jauhainen’s and Lauri Simonsuuri’s (1998) *Type and Motif Index of Finnish Belief Legends and Memorates*.

SECULARIZATION IN 19TH-CENTURY FINLAND

There is general agreement that countries in northwestern Europe seems to fit the paradigm of secularization, but these are increasingly seen to be the exception to the rule, rather than the vanguard of worldwide religious decline (Hadden 1995.; Davie 2000.). With as little as 13% of the population attending church once per month,¹ Finland, along with other Scandinavian countries, is often cited as a good example of a secularized society.² The process of secularization among ‘ordinary’ Finnish people is usually assumed to have occurred smoothly and untraumatically, rather than as having been the outcome of an ideological struggle. This is because the reports of secularization which have come down to us were written by its ‘winners’: liberal middle-class educators and reformers. This socio-political group, which had the most to gain from secularization, controlled the public sphere of the media in the last half of the 19th century, and it was therefore their views which tended to dominate public discussion. Using the new forums of the emergent civic society – the press and civic organizations – as well as public schools, they lobbied for their own materialist world view to become the authoritative language of public life. But how did the common people in the countryside react to the rapid shift in discourses and practices they saw around them?

Ethnographic descriptions sent to the FLS Folklore Archives in response to the questionnaire entitled “How did the folk respond to new lifestyles?” suggest that in the 19th century, the older religious world view was reinforced by strict boundaries between objects, activities and discourses which were either “godly” or “worldly”. Comparative religions researcher Kati Mikkola argues that there was a vast gulf between divine and secular phenomenon in the popular imagination, and newly-introduced objects and ideas which had nothing to do with religion were seen to be sinful in and of themselves. This was true not only among revivalist groups such as Pietists but also the rural population at large. For instance, the reading of non-religious literature published for practical, educational, or entertaining purposes was seen to be

¹ Harri Heino. 1993. “The status of traditional religiosity in the Nordic countries” (<http://www.evl.fi/kkh/ktk/norden.htm>).

² Naturally a decrease, even a dramatic one, in outward religious behaviors does not signal the disappearance of *religion*, nor, necessarily, even the straightforward decline of institutional religion. Roughly 90% of Finns belong to the state-supported Lutheran Church, and rites of baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals organized by the Church are still important for many Finns.

corrupting and a waste of time (Mikkola 2005). Even newspapers could be regarded as polluting. One man from the western part of Finland wrote that the older people did not allow newspapers near the Bible because the newspapers “could infect”.³ Some women from South Ostrobothnia considered it sinful that the same machine – a radio – transmitted both church services and dance music (ibid: 32).⁴

Also regarded with suspicion and confusion was the secularization of public events. At the first general elections in Finland in 1906, some older adults from eastern Finland arrived carrying hymnals. When they realized that there was to be no hymn-singing to mark this important collective occasion, they complained of the world’s “ungodliness” (Mikkola 2005. 27).⁵ Until then, the primary events of formal public life for many rural inhabitants had revolved around the Church. The concept of a collective arena that was both official and secular in nature seems to have been experienced by some persons as incomprehensible.

Objects and technologies perceived as inexplicable from a common sense point of view were often interpreted as the Devil or the work of the Devil. The bicycle was a good example of a device which violated a number of common sense notions about the way the world worked: first, it was balanced on only 2 wheels instead of four, and second it had nothing pulling it from the front. It was said of the first cyclists that they must have sold their souls to the Devil, since otherwise they would not have been able to ride it (Mikkola 2005. 31).⁶ Photography, too, was thought to be a tool by which the Devil could steal a person’s soul (ibid: 30–31).⁷ A woman who saw an airplane for the first time in 1912 was sure that it was the Devil and that the world was coming to an end, bringing with it war, famine and plague (ibid: 31–32).⁸ Locomotives were also seen to be the Devil himself, carrying whole “houses” behind him full of people,⁹ and rolling plows (*rullaäes*) made of iron and wood which became more common at the end of the 19th century were called “field devils”. Some persons in southeast Finland were convinced that no God-given grain would ever grow in a field softened by a devil (ibid: 31).¹⁰

These descriptions of attitudes and beliefs suggest that for many, the only way that rural inhabitants could incorporate into their understanding the strange new phenomena of modern life was to use pre-existing models from the discourses available to them. In addition to ethnographic descriptions, local anecdotes and folktales recorded in rural Finland between 1885 and 1961 depict technological, social and environmental changes in the narrators’ local surroundings as wonders seen by those with second sight – folk narrators were said to have *predicted beforehand*, for instance, headless horses ridden by people, carriages flying through the air like birds, or swimming under water like fish.¹¹

³ Länsi-Teisko. 1939. Kalle Vesa E 150:295.

⁴ Alavus. 1939. Taimi Pitkämäki E 150:203.

⁵ Suomussalmi. Jaakko Hiltunen E 153:328.

⁶ Alavus. 1939. Senja Kaleva E 150:129. – Juho Raisio.

⁷ Koivisto. 1939. Ulla Mannonen E 152:302–306.

⁸ Koivisto. 1939. Ulla Mannonen E 152:242–244.

⁹ Koivisto. 1939. Ulla Mannonen E 152:275

¹⁰ Koivisto. 1939. Ulla Mannonen E 152:289–290.

¹¹ Kokemäki. 1935–36. Emma Mäenpää KRK 62:265. –Niilo Ikola.

Prättäkitti predicted a lot of things, for instance: that an iron horse would travel over Loimijoki River supported by iron runners, nor did it take many decades, because now there run many iron horses every day. This is quite remarkable because in those days no one knew anything about trains, not a single person from Loimaa knew even that such a device existed.

(Loimaa. 1937. HAKS 6188).

Old Man Jussa from Ollila farm in Somero district had prophesied that when people become wiser and progress goes forward, then religion will be abandoned, and faith will give way to progress. There will come a time when people will travel under water like fishes and fly through the air like birds, and headless horses will travel on the roads and people will talk to each other over long distances. That's what happened. Old Man Jussa lived at the end of the 1700s and start of the 1800s.

(Somero. 1938. Eeva Laato TK 53:104 – Kustaa Lehtinen, b. 1879).

Ninety-one such folk narratives are housed in the FLS Folklore Archives. They were recorded from throughout Finland, and narrated by persons born between 1841 and 1899. They most likely functioned in rural communities as bits of rumour or gossip that people might tell each other over coffee in the farmhouse or while working together in the fields.

Technology and modern innovations in these folktales are reinterpreted within a supernatural paradigm. They are portrayed *not* as the fruit of scientific or material progress, but as something foreseen by a magic-worker, hermit, madman or a village fool. The “prophets” in these narratives were folk figures such as a vagabond named *Kihovauhkonen* (*Vihovauhkonen*) or a female witch named *Rättäkitti* (*Prättäkitti*) whom each narrator assumed had lived at some time in the past in his own locality. Similar sorts of prophecies are said to have been given by folk figures with names like Kirsperi, the King of Tattara, Crazy Kallu, and even a clergyman from Ostrobothnia. More rarely, particular persons known to the narrator had repeated these prophecies as if they were their own.

These folktales tell us which changes received the most notice by ordinary people and were perceived to be the most wondrous or strange in their daily lives. Folk prophets were said to have predicted in advance the coming of automobiles, telephone lines, electricity, radio waves, airplanes, submarines, bridges, hospitals and sanatoriums, glass windows, the smoking of tobacco, store-bought clothing and even high-heeled shoes. By far the most frequently mentioned changes, however, were the coming of railroads and the growth of towns and human habitation in areas which had formerly been fields or wilderness. In twenty of these folk narratives, modern changes are said to have heralded the end of the world:

The older folk of Lapua district believed that the end of the world would come in time, and sought its omens. A certain minister of Lapua said that it will come when people ride around on headless horses. Then, when people actually began to ride on such things through Lapua (first on trains, then in cars), the older people were of the opinion that the last days were approaching.

(Lapua. 1935-36. Vihtori Latvamäki KRK 182:251. –Juho Kujamäki, alias “Strawberry Jussi”).

In the 1800s, the master of Nuhi farm in Koljola village, Daavetti Nuhi, lived here. He studied the Bible intensely and prophesied accordingly. He had a detailed familiarity of the Bible and predicted world events. He was also versed in law, and local inhabitants always went to him to ask for advice in all kinds of legal matters. I remember once when I was five years old, and I was with my father at Nuhi farm (...) Juho Etu-Prami also came there, and there was a lot of talk of prophesying world events and the end of the world. Juho talked, among other things, of overpopulation and of great wars which will start when headless horses travel from Jaffa to Jerusalem and people fly through the air. He predicted that in those days, people will begin to control the human birth rate with fine words and methods, but they will have mischief on their minds. Man is God's image, it is not allowed to control his birth rate. Northern countries will get off easier, since in mischief-making as in other things, they lag behind those who are too clever for their own good. Half of the world's peoples will die in war, and the plague and hunger will take care of the other half. Daavetti died, if I remember rightly, in 1885.

(Nousiainen. 1949. Frans Leivo 3802).

In 35 folk tales, however, the modern objects and events believed to herald the end of the world were linked to a terrible bloodbath in which few men would be spared, in which the rivers would run with blood and "*women will compete with each other to kiss men's feet and even the footprints where the men walked.*"¹² In an additional 18 tales, modern changes were seen to directly *predict* this final battle (see Simonsuuri 1950: 155):

...Thirty to forty years ago, on the basis of old sources, perhaps from the times of the monks, a copper smith named Ståhl predicted that after the town of Rauma was encircled by three different kinds of iron bands, there would come a terrible war in which so much blood would run in the street gutters that people would have to wade through it up to their knees. When the railroad was built in Rauma in 1906, it was said to be the second iron band. The first was the network of telegraph and telephone wires, and just now Rauma is being encircled by iron water pipes, so that the terrible prediction is about to come true. Iron bands in the air, on the ground, and inside the ground.
(Rauma. 1935–36. A. Linnell KRK 38:9).

Although some narrators interpreted the predictions of the final battle to have meant the battles fought during the Finnish Civil War of 1918 and the skirmishes which preceded it, others in the period 1930-61 reported that persons in their district were still waiting for the final battle to take place:

In Pyhäjärvi in former times lived a highly remarkable man, who was called Kihovauhkonen (...) In those days when Kihovauhkonen lived hereabouts, there was only one house on Tikkalanniemi peninsula, Tikkala farm. But Kihovauhkonen said that someday there will be so many houses in Tikkalanniemi that a squirrel can circle the whole peninsula by jumping from roof to roof. And now in Tikkalanniemi (in Pyhäsalmi) there are. Kihovauhkonen had predicted that an iron horse will at that time

¹² Kokemäki. 1935-36. Emma Mäenpää KRK 62:265. –Niilo Ikola.

travel over the straits, and that when that happens, the great war will come (...) Many elderly persons around here still remember Kihovauhkonen and believe it will come true, just as the prediction concerning the iron horse has come true. (Valtimo < Pyhäjärvi. 1955. Siiri Oulasmaa 3095. –A. Leppisaari).

Near the city of Sortavala along the road to Uukuniemi, on the lands of the current pastor's residence there used to be a small cottage (...) In the cottage lived a hermit who had come from Russia and wore a long habit like monks do. Nobody visited the hut, but the old man sometimes visited his neighbors to say a few words. If he saw a nice man walking along the road, he waved his walking stick to stop the traveller and talked to him of remarkable prophesies. There was no city at that time. And he called himself Vihovauhkonen, so that no one would notice that he had escaped from Russia, perhaps for religious reasons. He predicted that in that place a city would be built and that its boundaries would lie just where they lie now. And then he said that Kisämäki church would be built, as it now has been. And then that a railroad would be built outside the city, along which an iron horse would snort. This has indeed happened and the railway runs outside the city. Then he said that people would fly through the air in machines that make a great buzzing noise. And finally will come such a massive war that a log will float in blood in the Läsälampi Pond near the church hill. All of Vihovauhkonen's prophesies have come true, but not yet the great war, which nonetheless can be expected, since a lot of that sort of thing is also prophesied in the Bible. (Mikkeli. 1937. Pekka Brofeldt KT 69:5).

One hundred and eighty-eight recorded examples of apocalyptic narratives predicting a final terrible battle are housed in the FLS Folklore Archives. These narratives appear to represent an older tradition which was, starting in the mid-19th-century, combined with newer narratives regarding predictions of modern change at a time these changes began to manifest themselves in rural inhabitants' daily lives or were rumoured to exist. From the perspective of Scripture, Christianity is an undeniably eschatological religion. Jesus himself is quoted as having discussed the end of the world numerous times with his disciples:

Ye shalt hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that ye be not troubled; for it is necessary for all this to be. But this is not the end: for nation shalt rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there shalt be famines, plagues and earthquakes. (Matt. 24: 6-7).

Yet Finnish apocalyptic folk narratives were not modelled only on Biblical prophesies such as those in the book of Daniel and Revelations. They were also influenced by the 16-page booklet "Prophecies of the Sibyl" (*Sibillan Ennustus Kirja, Prophetia Sibilla*) dating back to Ancient Rome, of which ten different printings were made in the Finnish language in the 19th century (Simonsuuri 1950: 151).

The fact that modern changes were interpreted in Finnish apocalyptic folk narratives as signs of a final impending catastrophe provide some insight into how traumatic the processes of modernization and secularization were for some rural inhabitants. The fact that modern innovations were reinterpreted following eschatological models from the Bible can also be seen as a defence of the older rural world view

against the increasingly secular discourses promoted by the educated middle classes. Within the sphere of public discussion comprised by the 19th-century press and secular literature, religion was increasingly argued to have little or no authority over the materialist and scientific realm. But folk prophesies countered with the argument that even modern phenomena were merely the signs of an apocalyptic ending ordained by God, ultimately understandable only within a religious master narrative.

What I suggest on the basis of these examples from Finnish folklore is that the ‘cultural protectionism’ implicit in all forms of religious conservatism is not so much a defence of traditional beliefs and values *per se*, but represents a struggle to resist cognitive dissonance and the disintegration of prevailing meaning structures. Religion does not simply relate individuals to the supernatural: it relates them to the natural, the moral, and the communal, to understanding themselves, their activities, and their place in the physical and metaphysical cosmos. In many cultures, religious rhetoric and argumentation provide standards not just for evaluating the *morality* of information, but also the *reliability* of it. Secularization is thus more than the delegitimization of religious beliefs: it is a breakdown in the accepted standards for *truth evaluation* and thus an entire way of categorizing and engaging with the world. In order to better understand expressions of religious fundamentalism today, we must take a careful look at the history of secularization processes in the West from the perspective of those who were defeated in the struggle to define our fundamental visions of reality, our core values and our common measures of fact.

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