

Us and Them. The Image of the Others in the Swedish-American Periodicals for Youth (1890 - 1920)¹

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Abstract

Between 1890 and 1920 Swedish immigrants to America established a well-organized and dynamically working ethnic community. With the increase in their number and the development of ethnic institutions, the question of ethnic identity emerged. It became especially pressing when immigrants' children started growing up and looking for their own, unique space - both within their ethnic group and American society.

Ethnic leaders attempted to respond to this situation with creating an ideology which would correspond with the complex cultural background of young generations. Ethnic press and literature were of crucial importance in this process. The literary leaders strove to present what it meant to be Swedish-American, but also - what it did *not* mean.

The latter was easiest to explain through the useful category of Others. Thus, the focus of this paper is the image of the Others as presented in the Swedish-American writings for youth. Drawing on the material published by the Lutheran publishing house Augustana Book Concern within the years 1890 - 1920, it examines the stereotypes, values and features attributed to Them, as contrasted to Us, "real" Swedish-Americans. Since Augustana leaders made Lutheranism the very core of their message, the Others will be analyzed within the context of religion.

Key Words: The Other, Swedish America, immigrant children, immigrant press, ethnicity, religion.

The Others. Those who do not think like Us, do not behave like Us, who represent other ethnic, religious, racial, national or class background, whose philosophy of life is different from ours. The Others who we compete with, cooperate with, compare ourselves to; whom we ignore, look up to, admire, hate, despise, envy. The Others who are *not* Us and therefore - create Us, our own, unique identity.

This exceptional role of the Others and their significant position in the life of Us is perhaps most clearly visible in the process of forming a

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special type of identity - the ethnic identity. While defining the borders and the components of one's ethnicity, one must also, or perhaps most of all, specify the values and patterns which stand *outside* these borders. Thus, to develop a clear and consistent identity model one has to experience other types of identities.² Such an encounter produces an urgent need for a more precise definition of Us as opposed to Them, the Others.³

This paper examines the image and the position of the Others in the periodicals for youth and children published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the Swedish-American publishing house Augustana Book Concern.⁴ Since without any doubts Lutheranism was the most important component of the ethnic identity model promoted by the ABC and due to the limited size of this paper, the Others will be analyzed within the perspective of religion.⁵

For over seventy years Augustana Book Concern worked under the auspices of the Lutheran Augustana Synod, the most powerful ethnic institution of so-called *Svensk-Amerika* - Swedish America.⁶ The ABC provided the Synod's community with the suitable reading material, putting a special emphasis on publications for children and youth.

Like all the other young people from immigrant communities, adolescent Swedish Americans had a constant contact with many different alternative systems of values within the multiethnic and multicultural American society. As a result, time and again, they tested the boundaries of their own ethnic groups, questioning the worldview of their parents and grandparents. This situation made the process of transferring the value system of the ethnic group onto next generations a serious challenge which required carefully planned strategies. Properly chosen literature was seen as an effective tool of instilling in young people these elements which were considered vital for defining their ethnicity. This was often performed by presenting and denouncing these patterns of behaviour and attitudes which were unacceptable and undesirable to the ethnic leaders. The unwanted elements were usually embodied in the Others.

This strategy is particularly visible in the presentation of groups and individuals professing non-Lutheran denominations. Throughout the ABC stories, articles, books and poems religious Others were constantly criticized, condemned, pitied and juxtaposed with positive Lutheran characters. Exposed to the Augustana publications from the very childhood, boys and girls of the Synod were to internalize that being a true Swedish American was inseparable from being a Lutheran.⁷ Lutheranism was claimed to be the most important heritage of the Augustana youth, and the Synod itself - the main author of the Swedish immigrants' success in America.⁸ Leaving the *Augustana* community was considered as leaving the *ethnic* community and

losing the Swedish-American identity - other, secular versions of Swedish Americanism were ignored or rejected.

In all the ABC stories those who decided to live outside the Lutheran church inevitably ended up as moral and material bankrupts. Such fate threatened particularly these young people who had yielded to the temptation of so called freethinking, identified with atheism. Karl, the main character of the story "Olika vägar" ("Different ways"), can serve as a model example. Upon his arrival in the USA he decides to exercise his newly gained freedom in all possible dimensions, including the religious one. Thus, instead of becoming a godly church-goer, he joins secular ethnic entertainment clubs. Before long this results in his dismissal from work and loss of his friends and health. In the end Karl realizes that only coming back to his church, that is to his *real* ethnic community, could save him from poverty and despair.⁹

Except for carelessness and stupidity, freethinkers in the ABC stories were often associated with cowardice, anxiety, lack of life experience and most of all - deep unhappiness. Usually they were depicted in some critical moment of their lives which invariably proved their philosophy worthless in the face of tragedy or danger. When a fierce storm breaks out in the sea, the dispute between a young and arrogant freethinker and a pious ship captain from the story "Gudsförnekaren" ("The God-denier") is immediately settled. Facing a terrible death in a shipwreck, the old captain simply keeps praying - calm and fearless. The freethinker on the other hand is going through the moments of madness and horror.¹⁰ Thus, freethinking turns out to be the ideology of the lost or the fool, while religiosity is attributed to the worldly-wise and life-experienced.

Naturally, the latter applies exclusively to Lutheranism. Non-Lutheran beliefs and denominations were portrayed in a very critical manner. The prayer of an Episcopal priest in one of the stories was described as "irreproachable," but in the same time - depressingly cold and official.¹¹ A meeting of "the speaking in tongues" in turn was called hysterical and "abracadabra."¹² Moreover, one of the American churches (its exact name was not specified), although admittedly "more elegant" than the ethnic denomination, was said to fail to give its members a real Christian attitude in everyday life.¹³

The most heavily criticized religious Other was Roman Catholicism. "I am not a Catholic, I don't want to be a Catholic" - declares one the characters. Although she lives a sinful life as an apostate, unfaithful wife and a careless mother, by this declaration she refuses to recognize herself as an entirely fallen woman.¹⁴

All the ABC publications alike accused Vatican of greed, idleness and sinful pride. According to one of the authors, Roman Basilica of St. Peter could be called "anything but holy" as a place meant exclusively to contribute to papal worldly splendour.¹⁵ "Papists" were blamed for forcing

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peace-loving Swedish nation into deadly wars,¹⁶ as well as of terrorizing the Catholic believers and hindering their spiritual development. As one of the authors emphasized,

Only these who were born and raised in the Roman Catholic Church know this enormous fear with which the power of clergy can capture human souls.¹⁷

The ABC publications were particularly critical of the Catholic monastic life, portraying monasteries as the nests of either conspiracy and intrigues or a useless life.¹⁸ Catholic nuns and clergy, especially the Jesuits, were described as greedy, hypocritical and ruthless, a "brood of vipers," "servants of the Devil" or at best - fanatical and ignorant.¹⁹ Their spiritual vanity and darkness manifested even in their looks. One of the monks in the stories has "deep-set eyes" shining with a "grim light" and a pale, sallow face,²⁰ another - "a corpse-like face with dark, burning eyes."²¹ The positive Lutheran characters in turn have "big, honest, blue eyes"²² or sunshine in their eyes.²³

The only religious Others who received a similar level of the ABC authors' disapproval as Catholics were Mormons, particularly the ones with Swedish origins. The Mormon missionary activities in Scandinavian countries resulted in establishing a Scandinavian community in the state of Utah, the American heart of Mormonism. The leaders of the Augustana Synod made serious efforts to win their Mormon countrymen back for the Lutheran church. Soon enough, though, Utah proved to be the least productive field of Augustana missions²⁴ and the Synod's leaders focused on preventing their young believers from joining "the prophets of lie."²⁵

Each and every encounter with a Mormon character was to convince the readers about their ungodliness and duplicity. Mormons were depicted as lewd, deceitful people who abandoned their real families to enjoy an immoral, polygamous life in Utah and to lead the Swedish youth astray.²⁶ In the story "Lurad" ("Deceived") young and innocent Margareta almost falls victim to their sinful trap. The girl is about to emigrate to the States to marry a Swedish American from Utah. Upon her arrival she discovers that her fiancé already has several wives and realizes that "the life awaiting her would be worse than death."²⁷ Fortunately, Margareta is saved from the "Satan's snare" by her old friend from Sweden and together they come back "to the country where God and his laws are respected."²⁸

While talking about religious Others in Christian churches, the ABC authors did not overlook the opportunity to talk about non-Christian religions. Their attitude to them was somewhat ambiguous. A number of

texts presented non-Christians as treacherous and cruel. In “Bref från en mohammedansk gosse till kristna gossar” (“Letter from a Mohammedan boy to Christian boys”) a young Muslim from Sudan enthusiastically describes the lawlessness of his country, his father’s brutal disposition and his contempt for women. “Our nature loves cruelty” - explains the boy. - “It is our nature that wants to do evil.”²⁹ “Missions of Islam have been... terrible” - assure the ABC authors in another text. - “Their driving force has been furious fanaticism, their means - destruction, fire and sword.”³⁰

This highly pejorative attitude towards the non-Christian Others reaches its culmination point in the story “Jonathan, den gode juden” (“Jonathan, the good Jew”). The title character is a greedy Christian-hater, compared to the spider spinning its web around its prey. After having tricked a thoughtless Christian lady into bringing him the Host from the church, Jonathan tries to “kill” “the God of the Christian dogs.”³¹ Miraculously, the Host remains intact and the Jew is punished with a cruel death.

Still, a careful reader would also find texts of a more favourable undertone among ABC publications. In the story “En ädelmodig handling” (“A noble act”) a young hero who saves a drowning Christian turns out to be a Jew. The irony lies in the fact that nobody else wanted to help the victim for *he* was wrongly believed to be Jewish. “The aversion towards Jews, which one can find even among children, is wrong and vile” - emphasizes the author of the story. - “Were Jesus Christ and his apostles not the Jews?” - he asks rhetorically.³²

Generally, the dominant perspective of presenting the non-Christian religions was a missionary one. Missions were the focal activity of the Augustana Synod ever since it came into being.³³ Young readers were encouraged to pray for missionaries and for those ignorant of the Christian faith. The typical motive in the stories is children giving spiritual or financial support to the Augustana missions, often at the cost of their own pleasures or even health.³⁴ In return, they could read (authentic or fictionalized) testimonies of faith of the converts, like the one of a Japanese soldier who expresses his devotion to Christianity on the pages of *Ungdomsvännan*:

I came to the conclusion that Christianity was the religion which everybody should practice... Only if we believe in Jesus Christ, we can fulfil our duty in a right way.³⁵

Conclusions

The process of constructing the identity of a group (any group but not the least an ethnic one) certainly requires a specification of the group’s characteristics. Paradoxically though, this task seems to be equally well performed by specifying the elements which are recognized as incompatible

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with the constructed identity model.³⁶ This would not be possible without the meaningful and multidimensional category of Others.

Meeting some of the Others in their everyday life, young Swedish Americans could meet them also on the pages of their favourite ABC publications. The latter encounter, as the editors intended, was to interpret, explain and, finally, shape the former. These interactions, whether competitive, cooperative or confrontational, were the starting point for teaching Swedish immigrants' children who they were *not* or who they were *not to become*.

The principal role in this process was played by the religious Others. Augustana Lutheranism, repeating after M. Marty, was indeed “the skeleton of ethnicity” offered to the Swedish-American youth.³⁷ Being a member of the Augustana Synod was presented as the one and only, real Swedish-American identity. Although some authors admitted that Augustana past “showed... mistakes, and failed hopes”³⁸ no inglorious pages of the Lutheran history appeared in the publications for children. On the side of hypocrisy, violence and spiritual vanity young readers could find almost exclusively representatives of other religions and denominations.³⁹

The crucial element of this strategy was the practice of presenting Us and Them, that is good and bad patterns, always close together. As Ludwik Stomma claims, the group's images of strangers are an antithesis, a peculiar negative of the group's images of itself.⁴⁰ Thus, careless Karl who denies Swedish-American Lutheranism is accompanied and rescued by a model Swedish American - God-fearing Einar. The young and foolish freethinker from “Gudsförnekaren” is counterbalanced by the godly and wise ship captain. Furthermore, unlike Roman Catholics, “educated in hatred of a different faith,”⁴¹ Lutherans of the troubled Reformation times are described as tolerant and respectful towards every Christian.

As indicated before, in some stories even the exterior of the characters reinforces and highlights the contrast between Us and Them. Nowhere is this clearer than in the above mentioned letter from the young Muslim to Christian boys. The Muslim expresses it through white and black colours, unmistakably associated with good and evil:

You, white boys, are altogether so different from me, both
outside and inside. My skin is black and yours is white. My
heart is black and yours is white.⁴²

The similar idea lies behind the story about Jonathan, the evil Jew. He lives in one of the gloomiest houses in town, willingly choosing its darkness over daylight and sunshine. Not accidentally, right next to the house

there is a Christian church whose high spire stands out against the background of the white, bright skies - the view Jonathan fears and loathes.⁴³ Such juxtapositions let the good patterns shine even more effectively and left young readers with no doubts which of the characters kept the path of righteousness and which groped in darkness. This perspective was to provide youth and children with a starting point for comparisons which could not but result in the full affirmation of their own ethno-religious group and a strong conviction of its superiority.

Some of the religious Others in the publications were not as much despised, as taken pity on. This attitude can be seen most often in the texts regarding missions. The mentioned Muslim boy from "Bref..." does not know Christianity, neither does he realize that cruelty and violence are something abominable. Therefore it is not his fault that he is evil, that he is "the Other." Thus, young ABC readers were encouraged to do anything possible to make the Others - Us, that is to help to win them for the Lutheran Church. For becoming one of Us was, according to the Augustana, the only alternative to unhappiness and damnation. As one of the authors wrote,

We can hardly understand how greatly privileged we are; we who since our childhood may learn the word of God and hear the right evangelical teaching about Jesus. Perhaps we would value it more if we understood how gloomy it must be for those, who had not been taught about it, but instead had been given a false teaching.⁴⁴

The last statement is undoubtedly the essence of the ABC authors' attitude towards other religions and religious Others.

Notes

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² K Neils Conzen et al., 'The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.' *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 12, no 1, 1992, p. 14. Cf also: Conzen et al., 1992, p. 4; J F McClymer, 'Symbolic Rivalries among Yankees, Swedes, and Irish in Worcester, Mass., 1880 - 1920. Ethnicity and Assimilation As Forms of Cultural Triangulation', in *Migrants and the Homeland. Images, symbols and realities*, H Runblom (ed), Uppsala University, Uppsala, 2000; H Kubiak, *Rodowód narodu amerykańskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1975, pp. 25 - 26.

³ Cf for example: Kubiak 1975, pp. 26 - 27.

⁴ The focal sources for this study are three most popular and literary advanced ABC magazines for children and youth printed between 1889 and 1920: *Ungdomsvännen. Illustrerad Tidskrift för Hemmet (The Youth's Friend. Illustrated Periodical for Home)*, *Nytt Bibliotek för Barn och Ungdom (New Library for Children and Youth)* and *Barnens Tidning (The Children's Magazine)*. Additionally, the analysis includes several book titles, both Swedish and Swedish-American ones. The chosen period is considered to be the first of the two phases of the ABC activities, dominated by the Swedish language publications.

Throughout the text "ABC" will be used interchangeably with "Augustana Book Concern."

⁵ Many researchers claim that religion and religious institutions play a crucial role in the process of constructing ethnic identity of immigrants and their children; see for example: T Smith, 'Religion and Ethnicity in America'. *The American Historical Review*, vol. 83, no 5, 1978, especially pp. 1160 - 1161, 1167, 1174 - 1175, 1181; M J Yinger, *Ethnicity. Source of Strength? Source of Conflict?*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, pp. 142, 255 - 300; R Breton, 'Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants'. *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 70, no 2, 1964, especially pp. 200 - 201; M E Marty, 'Religion: The Skeleton of Ethnicity in America'. *Church History*, vol. 41, no 1, 1972. See also: G Babiński, 'Etniczność i religia - formy, płaszczyzny i poziomy powiązań', in *Etniczność a religia*, A Posern-Zieliński (ed), Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań, 2003.

⁶ See for example: H A Barton, *Folk Divided: Homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans, 1840 - 1940*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1994, pp. 332 - 334; D Blanck, *Becoming Swedish-American: The Construction of an Ethnic Identity in the Augustana Synod, 1860 - 1917*, Reklam & Katalogtryck AB, Uppsala, 1997, pp. 43 - 51; C Bergendoff, 'Augustana in America and in Sweden'. *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, vol. XXIV, no 4, 1973, p. 238.

⁷ See for example: A J Ryden, 'En rätt Augustana-typ'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1918, p. 26; V Berger, *Svensk-Amerika i målbrottet*, [Bonnier, New York, 1933], pp. 6 - 7; P Nilsson, 'Nu ringer det samman'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1913, p. 280; 'En hälsning från Svensk-Amerika. Tal hållet af Amandus Johnson vid medborgarfesten å Skansen i Stockholm den 1 maj 1909'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 201; M Olofsson, 'I korsets tecken'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 38 and many others.

⁸ See for example: 'Ungdomsmöten'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, pp. 255, 298 - 299; J A Krantz, 'Den sköna lefnadskallelsen'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 71; 'Den svenska lutherska kyrkans i Amerika grundläggare'. *Barnens Tidning*, 15.10.1908, p. 3; Berger, [1933], p. 7; G H Bomgren, 'Vår Augustana-ungdoms fädernearf'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1912, p. 299.

⁹ C W Andeer, 'Olika vägar', in C W Andeer, *Augustana-Folk. Några Bilder och karaktärer ur vårt kyrkliga arbete*, ABC, Rock Island, Ill., 1911, pp. 44 - 45. See also: J A Nordling, 'Nora'. *Ungdomsvännen*, March, 1918; E Schuch, 'En dubbel seger'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 23.

¹⁰ S Lagerlöw, 'Gudsförnekaren'. *Nytt Bibliotek*, vol. X, 1914. See also 'Ensam och dock icke ensam'. *Nytt Bibliotek*, vol. VI, 1909.

¹¹ M J E., 'Den sorgklädda kyrkbänken'. *Nytt Bibliotek*, vol. X, 1914, p. 149.

¹² 'En timma med andedöpare och tungotalare'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1918, pp. 156 - 157.

¹³ E Schuch, 'En dubbel seger'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 23.

¹⁴ J A Nordling, 'Nora'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1918, p. 87.

¹⁵ O Olsson, 'St. Peters-kyrkan i Rom'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 59.

¹⁶ Next to the Catholics, the guilty ones were also "the enemies of freedom," that is Russia, and those who in their carelessness provoked and angered the "Swedish Lion"; O Ebb, 'Den blågula fanan'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 56.

¹⁷ 'En bibels underliga öden'. *Nytt Bibliotek*, vol. XIII, p. 65.

¹⁸ S G Youngert, 'I klostrets skydd'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 283.

¹⁹ Z Topelius, 'Judith and Holofernes', in *Masterpieces from Swedish Literature in English Form*, vol. I, ABC, Rock Island, Ill., 1906, pp. 118, 121. See also: P Thomasson, 'Charles IX and Agnes the Nun', in *Masterpieces from Swedish Literature in English Form*, vol. II, ABC, Rock Island, Ill., 1908, pp. 177 - 179.

²⁰ Thomasson, 1908, p. 177.

- ²¹ Topelius, 1906, p. 119.
- ²² A C., 'När stenarna tala'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 280.
- ²³ H S., 'Borgholms slottsruin'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, p. 199. See also Thomasson, 1908, p. 177 and E A Zetterstrand, 'Lars Wivallius. Ett trehundraårs-minne'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1905, pp. 332 - 333.
- ²⁴ P Peterson, 'Our Missions at Home', in *After Seventy-five Years 1860 - 1935. A Jubilee Publication: Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Augustana Synod and Augustana College and Theological Seminary*, ABC, Rock Island, Ill., 1935, pp. 193 - 194 and P Peterson, 'The Missionary Enterprises of the Augustana Synod', in *The Augustana Synod. A Brief Review of its History 1860 - 1910*, ABC, Rock Island, Ill., 1910, pp. 78 - 80.
- ²⁵ A Edström, 'En svensk folkskald. Några anteckningar om skalden och smeden Johannes Olsson i Bråna'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1905, p. 84.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 85.
- ²⁷ A J., 'Lurad'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 264.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 265.
- ²⁹ 'Bref från en mohammedansk gosse till kristna gossar'. *Barnens Tidning*, 1.02.1907, p. 4.
- ³⁰ 'Muhammedanismen kristendomens gissel'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1911, p. 26.
- ³¹ S Ankarfelt, 'Jonathan, den gode juden'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1910, pp. 312 - 131. About the pejorative image of Jews in the Polish-American textbooks (till the 1930s), see: A Walaszek, 'Naród, bohaterowie i wrogowie w podręcznikach szkolnych Polonii amerykańskiej (do lat 30. XX w.)', in *Kobiety i młodzież w migracjach*, Jan E. Zamojski (ed), Wydawnictwo Neriton, Warszawa, 2005, pp. 438 - 439.
- ³² 'En ädelmodig handling'. *Barnens Tidning*, 15.01.1907, pp. 1 - 2. The plot of this story is located in Krakow, Poland.
- ³³ O J Johnson, 'Our Missions Abroad', in *After Seventy-five Years...*, 1935, p. 199.
- ³⁴ See for example: 'Hon gjorde hvad hon kunde'. *Barnens Tidning*, 1.01.1900; 'En glad gifvare'. *Barnens Tidning*, 1.12.1900; 'Hildurs offer'. *Barnens Tidning*, 1.01.1909 and many others.
- ³⁵ 'En japansk underofficers historia'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 126.
- ³⁶ Conzen et al., 1992, p. 14.
- ³⁷ Marty, 1972, the title.
- ³⁸ F M E., 'Vår historia'. *Ungdomsvännen*, 1909, p. 113.
- ³⁹ This tendency was weakening with years. Particularly in the English-language publications the ABC editors published more and more positive texts about religious Others; see for example: A Codrington, 'Family Fellowship'. *The Olive Leaf*, 10.02.1952, p. 2, where the father in the story explains to his children the stupidity of discriminating Jews because of their religion. After this conversation, the children decided to organize a performance showing Jewish contributions to the history of humanity and all "the wonderful things that [Jews] have done for our country."
- ⁴⁰ L Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa, 1986, p. 25; after: Walaszek, 2005, p. 440.
- ⁴¹ Topelius, 1906, p. 118.
- ⁴² 'Bref från en mohammedansk gosse till kristna gossar', 1907, p. 4.
- ⁴³ Ankarfelt, 1910, p. 311.
- ⁴⁴ 'Ett kloster på Sinai', 1900, p. 1.

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