RELIGION AND DIVERSITY IN FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Predominantly Evangelical Lutheran, but secular Finland is facing important demographic and legal changes. Author Pauliina Raento says religion and cultural diversity are subsequently hot topics in the media, shaking the myth of a culturally uniform nation. The subsequent diversification, supported by new attention to the country's 'old minorities', has challenged the Lutheran majority's worldviews and directed attention to regional and local variety. Legal and practical adjustments are being introduced, but these reforms have not yet become natural parts of everyday life in Finland.

Religion is currently a hot topic in Finland. The predominantly Evangelical Lutheran, but secular country is facing a series of important changes that have brought religion to the fore in the media. One change is a new law about freedom of religion, another is the general ethno-cultural diversification of Finnish society due to increased immigration. Secularization and religious non-affiliation are rising, and the country's 'old' religious, linguistic, and other minorities are receiving new attention as well. The Finnish-speaking, white, heterosexual and increasingly middle-class majority culture, this majority's values, and the role of religion in Finnish society are now under critical scrutiny.

The scale and manner of examination affect a country's religious and demographic profile. In European statistical comparisons, Finland is a strongly Lutheran country with a relatively low proportion of foreigners (2.1 per cent of the population of 5.2 million in the beginning of 2005). A closer look at the country reveals significant regional variation in religious affiliation (or non-affiliation) and a gap between statistics and everyday life. Nor are the groups homogeneous. This applies well to the Lutheran National Church, even if 83.7 percent of the Finns are registered members of this institution.[1] The cherished national narrative about a culturally uniform nation thus appears to be an exaggeration.

How has Finland's religious profile evolved and what is it today? In this article history is followed chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present. Major geopolitical and legislative turning points as well as quotidian landscapes, outlooks, and practical adjustments are taken into account in the examination.

A Meeting Point of Influences

Finland's historical position as a borderland between East and West explains much of its religious makeup and identity. Christian influences reached Finland about a thousand years ago along the trade route between Novgorod and Sweden. Some key concepts of Christianity were adopted from the east, whereas Western Christianity changed burial habits. While the first crusade from Sweden arrived in Southwestern Finland in the twelfth century, eastern Christianity took root in eastern Finland and Karelia. Under Sweden's rule, Finland's religious and sociopolitical life came to include the union between church and state, which resulted from the sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation in Sweden. Foreigners residing in Finnish territory were allowed to practice their own religion in 1781. Additional diversity emerged in the form of charismatic Christian revivalism on the west coast and in the north.

Finland's Lutheranism and administrative institutions were respected when Russia took over the territory in 1809, after yet another war against Sweden. Finland was granted autonomy and thus had a considerable say in its internal matters until the policy of Russification in the 1890s. In this western outpost of the Russian Empire, trade flourished in cities like Helsinki/Helsingfors, Turku/Åbo, and Viipuri/Vyborg, adding to their religious and ethno-linguistic diversity. Orthodox merchants, administrators, and soldiers from Russia represented the Empire's official religion, small minority congregations were one proof of Western contacts. Finland's Baptists, Methodists, and other Protestant minorities were allowed to organize in 1889, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Pentecostals did so in the early twentieth century. By this time, Finland's first Jewish and Islamic congregations were well established. That this is the oldest Islamic community in the Nordic Countries underscores Finland's position as a borderland.

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Lutheranism and Liberalism Highlighted

Finland at the time of its independence in 1917 thus had international urban centers and regional strongholds of minority congregations (Figure 1). Freedom of religion was guaranteed by law in 1923. The state chose formal non-affiliation, but both the Lutheran National Church and the Orthodox Church kept a special status within the state and the right to tax their members.

The young state's ruling elite eagerly portrayed Finland as being uniform in faith but liberal (and modern) in its legislation. Certainly, the legislation was in place, the Lutheran National Church had a strong grip on the national schooling system and the general-conscription military, and 98 per cent of the population of 2.7 million had been Lutheran in 1900 – and 95 per cent still were in 1950. The approach had strong roots in the ruling elite's values, ideology, and political preferences. On the one hand, the established nation-states of the West had to be convinced that Finland was a Western civilized nation and part of the cultural hearth of Europe, for the Soviet Union was feared and disliked. On the other hand, Lutheranism was a 'shared value' in the bitter aftermath of the Civil War, fought in 1918 between White and Red troops. Church membership suggested that Lutheranism crossed ideological and class boundaries and could potentially aid in unifying the divided nation.

However, the image was incomplete, because legal equality of institutions or individual freedom did not mean practical or symbolic equality in daily life. The religious minorities were mostly 'forgotten' as long as the Lutheran National Church's symbolic hegemony went uncontested – as it did in a country where religious beliefs are generally considered to be private matters. However, action was taken in the 1920s and 1930s to erase the visible legacy of the Russian Empire – the Orthodox churches – off the landscape in prominent, symbolically important locations (Figure 2). Geographer Petri Raivo[2] explains this hostility towards the Orthodox infrastructure with the church's dramatically changed position in Finland and the Lutheran majority's need to consolidate a 'Finnish national identity' in a freshly

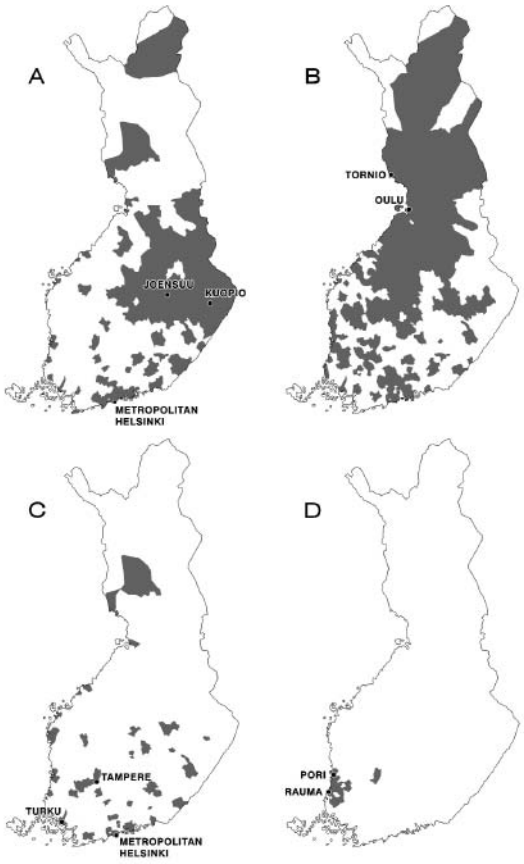


Figure 1 – The predominance of the Lutheran National Church hides considerable regional and local differences on Finland's religious map, some of which exist within the majority church.[1] The historical core areas of the Finnish Orthodox Church (**A**) are in eastern Finland and among the indigenous Skolt Sami in the north. About one quarter of the church's 57,500 registered members now live in Metropolitan Helsinki. The church membership is growing, partly because of immigration from Russia. Conservative Laestadianism (Peace Societies) (**B**) continues to be most influential in its historical core areas in the west, northwest, and north. Some nationally small churches or religious communities may have notable local influence. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) in Finland is predominantly urban (**C**). An extreme example of local influence is the concentration of Supplicationism (**D**) in southwestern Finland.



Figure 2 – Selected Orthodox churches lost their cupolas and were sometimes converted into Lutheran churches in the search for national identity after Finland's independence in 1917. One prominent example is the landmark church of the historical Viapori (Suomenlinna) sea fortress outside of Helsinki. The fortress was home to Russian soldiers before Finland's independence in 1917 and is now among UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage Sites (Author's photo, 2005).



Figure 3 – The first, indirect acknowledgement of the Orthodox Church in Finland's postage stamp imagery was a 1973 view to the Southern Harbor and Market Square in Helsinki/Helsingfors. The prominent Uspenki Cathedral seen in the background is among the city's most popular tourist sights. The restoration of its cupolas in the summer of 2005 attracted considerable media attention.

sovereign country. The official religion of the former oppressor (as Russia was seen in Finland especially since the 1890s) represented an undesired 'Other' in independent Finland. Several prominent Orthodox landmarks were left intact, but remained excluded from the state's propaganda photographs.[3] Finland's postage stamps (which are official state documents) acknowledged Lutheran buildings and individuals, but ignored the Orthodox Church until the 1970s (Figure 3), when the institution celebrated its 800th anniversary in Finland.[4] The ruling (Lutheran) elite's approach for a long time qualified as what students of visual communication call "symbolic annihilation"[5] – the establishment of hierarchies by controlling (in)visibility.

World War II as a Turning Point

Lutheranism supported the Finnish effort in World War II, in good and bad. It helped bring the ideologically and socio-economically divided nation together against a common enemy in the Winter War (against the Soviet Union, in 1939–1940) and provided commonly understood symbols and rituals to cope with the devastation and grief. But Lutheranism also fed the nationalist fervor and dreams of Greater Finland during the more controversial Continuation War (also against the Soviets, in 1941–1944).

One outcome of these military defeats in Finland's religious landscape was that "the establishment of new religious territorial system."[6] Many of the over 420,000 evacuees from the territories ceded to the Soviet Union were Orthodox by faith. Their resettlement across Finland spread this religion beyond its historical core areas, parts of which were now destroyed. The visibility gained through the construction of churches for the new parishes fueled some suspicion and hostility, complicating the evacuees' cultural integration in their new home regions. On the other hand, reconstruction in the east increased interest in visiting these heritage sites, also among the majority population.

World War II diversified Finland's religious landscape also in other, more indirect ways. Industrialization and urbanization, advancement of communication technologies, and a gradual rise and spread of wealth and individualism in Finnish society followed the war. The geopolitically sensitive situation next to the former enemy, now a Cold War superpower, contributed to ideological and spiritual disillusionment, a political-ideological shift towards the Left in Finnish politics, and novel cultural exchanges in multiple spheres. These changes paved the way for an increasingly complex map of religious affiliation and non-affiliation from the 1960s onwards. The leading religions of Asia and charismatic Christian and other spiritual movements from North America found followers especially among the new urbanites who were learning, and searching for, novel lifestyles and ideas.

The Majority's Responses and Challenges

The Lutheran National Church reacted to the changing outlook and experiences of its members in the 1960s. By accepting diversification of views and increasing individualism it defended itself against alienation and competition. Many members have, however, resigned because of internal disagreements over doctrine and values. One such disagreement flared up in the 1980s over the acceptability of female ministers, who finally began their work in 1988 after decades of struggle. They now number about 900, representing one-third of all the Lutheran National Church's ministers.[7]

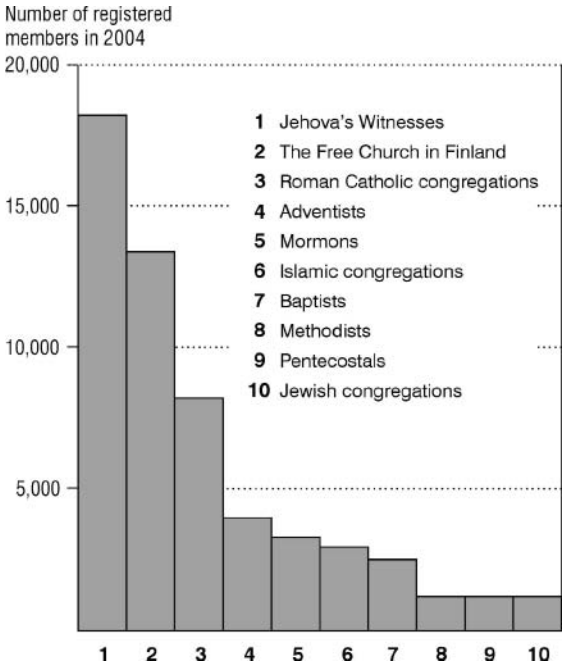


Figure 4 – That non-affiliation does not necessarily mean lack of faith or non-participation in religious practices is clear in the gap between national statistics of registered members of congregations and observations in daily life in Finland. Many new immigrants find formal membership in a religious congregation unnecessary or alien to their spiritual life. By way of example, the number of Islamic congregations in Finland has grown considerably over recent years (15 groups were registered in 2004), but their total membership of roughly 3,000 individuals is estimated to represent about one-tenth of all Muslims residing in Finland. The number of registered Islamic cultural and other associations far exceeds the number of congregations. Similarly, Finland's active Pentecostals may number 50,000, but are invisible in the membership statistics, for some have maintained their membership in the Lutheran National Church, whereas others have resigned but preferred non-affiliation over registration with Finland's Pentecostal Church.[11]

Strongly divisive and alienating issues currently include the majority church's negative views about homosexuality and 'gay marriage' (civil registration of same-sex partners was begun in Finland in 2001) and about extending fertility treatments beyond heterosexual marriage. The steady decline of the Lutheran National Church's membership since World War II has accelerated in the 2000s. From 2000 to 2004, the institution lost over 23,000 members, while the number of those without any affiliation rose by almost 73,000.

The Lutheran National Church's own recent study[8] concludes that the institution is losing its credibility. Only 14 per cent of the survey's respondents go to church monthly, whereas almost one third of their fellow Europeans do so. On the other hand, the study found that the Finns are among Europe's most religious people, at least if measured by the frequency of praying by the survey respondents. Roughly four-fifths said they had prayed over the recent years, whereas two-thirds of Europeans do so "rarely." The key teachings of Lutheranism are still valued and believed, which challenges the institution to find new ways to reach its members.

That these people are a heterogeneous group adds to the challenge. Finland's west coast continues to be known for its fundamentalism (Figure 1), whereas southern urbanites tend to be more liberal, secular, and private in their views



Figure 5A – The landscape of the oldest Islamic cemetery in Helsinki/Helsingfors (**A**) shows a mixture of cultural influences, reflected in the linguistic and ornamental details of the gravestones, their material, style and arrangement, and the individual's names. Many of the city's new Islamic congregations and cultural centers (**B**) have modest "store-front-style"[iii] facilities. (Author's photos, 2003)

and practices (in Helsinki/Helsingfors, one quarter of the residents are not affiliated with any religious community). The most important reasons for the Finns to maintain their membership in the Lutheran National Church are (and have been) normative and symbolic. Lutheran rituals of the life course are thus deemed important, but not everyone considers them irreplaceable. It is also known that economic reasons motivate non-affiliation. It is thus clear that resignation or non-affiliation does not necessarily mean lack of faith or non-participation in religious practices (Figure 4). Three associations in Finland openly oppose the special status of the Lutheran National and Orthodox Churches within the state, promoting non-affiliated, 'religion-free' worldviews.

The Finnish-speaking, white, heterosexual and increasingly middle-class majority culture, this majority's values, and the role of religion in Finnish society are now under critical scrutiny.

Legal Reforms, Individual Experiences

The current diversification of Finland's religious, linguistic, visual, and culinary landscapes (Figure 5) owes much to yet another series of geopolitical changes, including the fall of the Soviet Union, Finland's membership in the European Union (1995), and the global increase in inter-nationally mobile workforce and refugees. The number of foreigners in Finland began to rise in the late 1980s, climbing from 26,000 in 1990 to 108,000 by 2005. The newcomers center in the south, in the cities, and in the border regions so that their local and regional impact is considerable.[9] Almost one-third of these foreign nationals are from the European Union, that is, from predominantly Christian countries. The four largest immigrant groups are the Russians (24,600 in 2004), Estonians (14,000), Swedes (8,200), and Somalians (4,700). In absolute numbers, Helsinki/Helsingfors is the capital city of all these groups and most of the country's 'old' minorities as well.

The change demanded more precise and receptive immigration and integration policies than the previous, ad-hoc-based approaches had been. Finland thus reformed and amended its legislation, including the constitution, in the 1990s. The 2003 replacement of the 1923 law about freedom of religion was designed to make an individual's life easier by offering more options and reducing bureaucracy, while the status of religious communities as independent entities was strengthened. For example, an individual can now simultaneously belong to more than one congregation, but each congregation may decide whether to accept this or not.

In the national schooling system the emphasis was put on each pupil's "own religion" and conscience in the law's spirit of individualism and freedom of choice. Non-affiliated education about religious worldviews, offered in Finnish schools since 1985, gained relative strength. The school (or the municipality) must now arrange the teaching of a minority religion, if the parents of three pupils so request and the congre-gation in question is a registered entity. A pupil can refuse to participate in lessons and rituals that violate his or her personal views. According to the Finnish National Broadcasting Company's television news in August, about 20 different religions are currently being taught in Finnish schools. Islamic, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Buddhist classes are among the most popular minority religion classes taught in Helsinki/Helsingfors.

The law challenged the resources in many schools, but sought to offer a fairly simple practical solution for the need to accommodate different beliefs, values, and customs. From the perspective of an individual pupil's rights the law's idea is an improvement, but practices and values change slowly. In a relatively monocultural community those three minority students are still likely to stand out like a sore thumb in the eyes of teachers and peers. Legal protection still does not guarantee spiritual and symbolic equality at the level of individual experiences. To make macro-level, legal-administrative improvements experiential reality in daily life remains a major challenge in Finland.

A Long Road Ahead

Many Finns are only beginning to question their belief in a monocultural Finnish nation and scrutinize their regular practices and ways of thinking, even if religious, linguistic, and other cultural differences have been present for a long time. Regional and generational gaps are evident in the understanding of what constitutes Finnishness – what is multicultural routine to urban youngsters in the biggest cities may be alien to their parents and grandparents, or their peers in a predominantly Lutheran Finnish-speaking town somewhere in rural Finland. It also seems that immigration history, national background, and linguistic skills steer integration and interaction in Finnish society more powerfully than religion, as the congregational atomization of some religions suggests. Doctrinary and territorial competition complicates the situation further. For example, the Finnish Orthodox Church has not celebrated the recent interest of its Russian counterpart in the souls of Finland's Russian immigrants.

Top-down regulation is only one necessary dimension in the adjustment to cultural and demographic change in Finnish society. Better understanding and quotidian accommodation of the diversity's regional, local, and group-specific nuances and history are much needed. Success may point out that the 'odd habits' of one's neighbor are a relative characteristic that everyone shares.

Notes

[1] Official population statistics can be consulted at <www.stat.fi> (Statistics Finland) and <www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi> (Population Registration Centre).

[2] P. J. Raivo (1997). The limits of tolerance: the Orthodox milieu as an element in the Finnish landscape, 1917–1939. *Journal of Historical Geography* 23, 327–339.

[3] P. Lähteenkorva & J. Pekkarinen (2005). Ikuisen poudan maa. WSOY, Helsinki.

[4] Raento, P. & S. D. Brunn (2005). Visualizing Finland: Postage stamps as political messengers. *Geografiska Annaler Series* B 87, 145–163.

[5] George Gerbner first coined the term in 1972 in his article "Violence in television drama: trends and symbolic functions," published in *Television and Social Behavior* (eds. G. Comstock & E. Rubinstein).

[6] P. J. Raivo (2002). The peculiar touch of the East: reading the post-war landscapes of the Finnish Orthodox Church. *Social & Cultural Geography* 3, 11–24.

[7] Statistics are available at the Lutheran National Church's website at <www.evl.fi>

[8] K. Kääriäinen, K. Niemelä & K. Ketola (2005). Religion in Finland. *Church Research Institute Publication* 54. Tampere.

[9] Raento, P. & K. Husso (2002). Cultural diversity in Finland. *In* "Finland – Nature, Society, and Regions" (eds. P. Raento & J. Westerholm). *Fennia* 180, 151–164.

Figures notes

[i] The maps are adapted from Fig. 2 and CD-Fig. 2 in the 2002 article "Cultural diversity in Finland" by P. Raento & K. Husso, published in "Finland – Nature, Society, and Regions" (Special Issue of *Fennia*, vol. 180, eds. P. Raento & J. Westerholm).

[ii] Estimates by Tuomas Martikainen (Åbo Academy) and Kimmo Ketola (Church Research Institute) in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* August 7, 2005.

[iii] The term has been used by the geographer Wilbur Zelinsky. See, for example, "The uniqueness of the American religious landscape" in *The Geographical Review* 91, 565–585 (2001).