

# 'The one and only true and salvational faith'

The synthesis of Kulturprotestantismus, German humanism and Western esotericism in Carl Robert Sederholm's written work of the early 1880s

In the 1880s, the religious life in Finland was in the midst of a turbulent period which, for some, presented a threat to traditional moral values and social cohesion while for others it was the beginning of a new, more liberal era. During this period, new ideas and religious currents also stirred in the local milieu. For example, modern Western esoteric currents played a role in the process as well as many other ideological, scientific and religious phenomena. This article scrutinizes the period in question by focusing on a writing individual who entered the field of Finnish public debate somewhat suddenly. For him, the time was all about creating the best possible religion from all the ingredients that contemporary debate could offer.

## Introduction

In December 1883 most of the newspapers in Finland – a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire at that time – were declaring a Christmas season which was expected to have a special religious meaning. The year 1883 had been the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther's (1483–1546) birth and this yuletide was to be the climax of the festivities as well as an opportunity to celebrate the ideals of Protestant European culture and its seemingly undeniable success in the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century (Juva 1960; Sulkunen 1999: 91–4; on a general level, see Hobsbawm 1989: 56–83, 142–64). In the middle of invoking the religious and ideological hubris, a couple of low-key newspaper advertisements reported the release of a new book. P. H. Beijer's paper shop in Helsinki had published a volume by an anonymous

writer<sup>1</sup> (e.g. *Nya Pressen* 13.12.1883), which was entitled *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* ('The Religion of a Spirit or of a Pure Reason'). According to the advertisement in *Nya Pressen* magazine, the book was representing critical views established by 'free historical religious studies', which made it an inflammatory case in the highly charged religious-nationalistic milieu of early 1880s Finland.

After the book was released several public statements were made to proclaim that *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* had made a significant contribution to the ideological breakthrough which was seen to be spreading among the educated elite, as well as the general public (Juva 1960: 9–36). According to some, the book paved the way for 'naturalist', anti-Christian, or even anti-religious, ideas and had thus enabled a series of textual attacks against the state's Lutheran Church by a young Finnish male intelligentsia. For example Axel Fredrik Granfelt (1815–92), a renowned professor of theology and a politician, hastened to publish an apology in the spring of 1884, which focused specifically on criticizing the league of 'Finnish men' – including the author of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* – for their reckless use of scientific worldviews and for turning them against the traditional foundations of Finnish culture, Lutheran theology and its moral values (Granfelt 1884). However, there were important questions that were almost completely drowned out by the religious

1 P. H. Beijer has been mistakenly seen as a pseudonym of the author; for example Gothóni 1996: 36.

and ideological polemics that gathered strength throughout the years 1883–4. Who actually was the anonymous writer, who took – or was publicly forced to take – an appreciable share of responsibility for leading the educated Finnish youth along ‘naturalist’ trails, and what precisely was the basis of his religious critique, which contemporary critics were trying to label as anti-religious or anti-Christian?

In this article, my aim is to study the case of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* by focusing on the historical person behind the scandalous book. The main object of the study is closely related to the questions already presented above. I will try to lay bare some of the anonymous author’s motives that structured his argumentation and locate some anchoring points that connect him to scholarly traditions and other wider cultural and ideological currents that were central in the context of the late nineteenth-century European intellectual milieu. In this respect, the concepts of *Kulturprotestantismus* (Marchand 2009: 75–6), orientalism (Said 2003) and Western esotericism are of crucial importance. These phenomena are known to have played a substantial role in the great Western cultural shift of the nineteenth century, which produced the conceptual and ideological basis for the religious framework that is nowadays often considered to ‘modern’, or in some cases ‘postmodern’, Western religion (for theoretical level, see Heelas 1998; for Western esotericism and modernity, see Owen 2004; Partridge 2004: 8–38; Hanegraaff 2012: 257–380). As we shall see, the same currents – although constructed and layered in a specific, historical way – were also integral to the intellectual backbone of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* and its writer.

The thing I particularly want to emphasize in my analysis is the presence of intellectual coherence in *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*. This may first sound like a self-evident conclusion, but in my opinion there is a historiographical demand for this approach. As stated above, the author of the book was drawn into the ideological maelstrom created by Finnish internal politics in the 1880s despite the fact that, biographically speaking, he actually had very little to do with local political networks. This process created a bias which has blighted historical perceptions of the author in many ways. An important point to be made here is that Finnish historiography – especially the one focusing on the late nineteenth-century history of ideas – has in a way replicated the

interpretation of Axel Fredrik Granfelt which aspired to present the author as a maverick dilettante who did not quite comprehend what to do with the cavalcade of religious and scientific conceptions he was dealing with (Granfelt 1884: 227–382). A very similar tone can be found, for example, in Mikko Juva’s studies, which have been highly influential in the fields of Finnish church history and the history of ideas since the 1960s. Juva treats the author of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* somewhat as an ideological weathercock, who turned from one fashionable current to another, be it Darwinism, the Theosophical Society, or the spiritualist movement (Juva 1960: 11–12, 291–2). Some echoes of this paradigm can even be detected in the religious studies researcher Kennet Granholm’s recent interpretation, presented in his article ‘Theosophy in Finland’, which describes the author as an idiosyncratic thinker, whose views were essentially different than those established by the ‘official’ theosophists operating inside the society (Granholm 2016: 564–5). This paradigm of dilettantism and idiosyncratic thinking is what I hope to revise.

Something needs to be said about the article’s theoretical and methodological orientation. As my way of frequently using concepts such as ‘historical’ and ‘ideological’ probably implies, I am a historian, specializing in the history of ideas. Therefore my analysis also relies on approaches that are used in contemporary historiographical studies and especially – besides the history of ideas – in social history and historical biography. During the last couple of decades these fields have emphasized the meaning of religious conceptions and convictions in the history of modern European institutions and scrutinized this often contradictory relationship by using the concept of ‘lived religion’ (see Markkola 2002; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2016). As is known, the origin of the concept lies in religious studies, but within historiography it has often become intertwined with social constructionism. The approach has been used to study religious ideas and beliefs – not as fixed categories or institutions, but as specific ways of giving meaning to the contingent social reality (Markkola 2002: 14–18; Utrianen and Salmesvuori 2014: 1–14). To use the vocabulary of religious studies, it can partly be considered as a parallel to emic readings (Suojanen 2000: 11–13). Keeping these premises in mind, I aim to interpret works by the anonymous author as linguistic expressions made by one historical subject

in historically specific circumstances that can shed some light on the question of how the religious shifts in late nineteenth-century Finland may have been conceived of at the individual level. I will concentrate here on two of his books published in the 1880s: *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* (1883) and *Buddha den Upplyste* ('The Enlightened Buddha', 1886), a pamphlet, in which he took new themes under consideration after the public dispute concerning *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* had calmed down.

### **An officer and a German-style idealist**

In relation to the main objective of this article, it is crucial to begin by revealing something about the identity of the author. An intriguing starting point is that it is not easy to consider the person behind *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* as a member of the 'young' Finnish radical intelligentsia, even though the contemporary critique implied otherwise – nor was he particularly young in the true sense of the word. The author was Lieutenant General Carl Robert Sederholm (1818–1903), a retired Russian army officer in his late 60s, who had been born into a German-speaking, upper-class, though somewhat economically declining, family in Parikkala, a parish in eastern Finland. As a teenager, Sederholm enrolled to a military academy in the city of Hamina, Finland and later continued his studies in St Petersburg by participating in an officers' class. After his graduation, Sederholm commenced on a career as an engineer officer: he served in the Crimean and Southern Russian army bases and served in the Crimean War (1853–6) as well as the Russo-Turkish War (1877–8) before retiring as a Lieutenant General. After his military career Sederholm moved to Helsinki in 1883 and quickly adopted a new occupation as a non-academic historian of religion. He published more than twenty books and pamphlets considering Asian religions and historical-critical studies of Christianity and the Bible, as well as Western esoteric currents such as spiritualism and theosophy. Sederholm was also an important figure in Finnish esoteric circles at the turn of the twentieth century, not least because of his elite status as a war-hero general. He had both the social and financial means to support, for example, a group of Finnish theosophists at the turn of the twentieth century, when the Finnish arm of the Theosophical Society did not yet exist. Sederholm

died in 1903 at the age of 84 (Gothóni 1996: 13–30; Klinge 1997: 63–4).

An obvious conclusion rising from Carl Robert Sederholm's dates is that in terms of age, he definitely was not a young radical in the turbulent years of 1880s. Of course, his mere age does not exclude the possibility of him being a supporter of the most relentless scientific naturalism of the late nineteenth century. However, it does somewhat fracture the picture of a socially and ideologically solid 'naturalist league' which has had a visible impact on historiographical interpretations of the religious debate of that time, as well as Sederholm's role in it. In this respect it is noteworthy that Sederholm was actually a coeval of his fiercest critic, A. F. Granfelt (born in 1815). In turn, this observation makes possible the idea that the two public rivals might have been much closer to each other in an intellectual sense than has often been assumed.

The fact that Sederholm spent his childhood and youth in the parishes and cities of southeastern Finland contradicts, to some extent, generalizations that emphasize the influence of Anglo-American naturalism on his thinking (see Juva 1960: 11–14). This is because the scenes of his childhood milieu – especially the environs of the city of Vyborg – were heavily accented with German culture, supported by the large German-speaking communities which inhabited the major cities of the lower eastern area of the Gulf of Finland, such as Vyborg and St Petersburg (Ijäs 2015: 45–63). As already mentioned, Sederholm's first language was German and his upbringing was based partly on Pietism, partly on the intellectual heritage of German Romanticism and idealism – 'the world of Goethe and Schiller' – as it was expressed in a biographical essay published after the General's passing (Ahrenberg 1904). When we look at the *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*, Sederholm's literary debut, it seems very plausible that this cultural background was still active in the core of his argumentation by the time he was embarking on a new career. The book itself was a religio-historical retrospective, which provided an analysis of all the prominent civilizations and their religious traditions from Ancient India and Egypt to a modern-day Europe. The nucleus of this grand narrative was the historical development of a 'religion of the spirit' (*andens religion*), a monotheistic, inwardly-experienced religiosity, which could be developed into an ideal religion, a 'religion of a pure reason' (*det rena förnuftets religion*),

if mixed with the most elaborate philosophical and historical-critical views of that time. An interesting thing is that Sederholm supported his interpretation by referring almost exclusively to German philosophers and liberal theologians, many of whom had an epistemological background in the speculative idealism of the early nineteenth century – which was also A. F. Granfelt's intellectual point of reference (Luukkanen 1993: 43–89).

### Rage against the religion on the basis of a Protestant conviction

In the case of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*, it quickly becomes apparent that the idea of a confrontation between anti-religious naturalism and Protestant Christianity does not resonate consistently with Sederholm's emic views. For example, in the preface of the book, where the General was defining the religious and intellectual yield of the work, he wrote that it was about finding a historical and universal viewpoint that could bring together all the significant holy texts and recognized religious writers and yet remain inside the concept of religion, from which he felt he could extract an individual sense of 'inner peace and satisfaction'. In Sederholm's words, the book was

not about how one or another writer has conceived the religion, but more about the *uniform result to which all the celebrated seers, the most deep-thinking and morally advanced men have come*. Therefore, may the basis of ideas that the reader finds here, promote and inspire a pure faith – the one and only true and salvational faith – a faith in God's or pure reason's reign. Its holy will be done! (Sederholm 1883: 1–2, italics in the original)

The above quotation is difficult to reconcile with interpretations that emphasize *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion's* role as one of the heralds of 'full-blown naturalism', which was derived from the ideas promoted by Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel, as Mikko Juva has stated (1960: 10–48). It is also questionable whether Sederholm was really as distant from Lutheran Christianity, and tilted towards the 'clean cultivated rationalism' promoted by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy as Armo Nokkala claims in his study (1958: 31–2). The final lines of the

quotation, where Sederholm emphasizes the need to 'promote and inspire pure faith' and adapts the lines in the Lord's prayer ('thy will be done') are implying especially that he aims rather at a negotiation in which the Protestant Christian concepts play a definite role instead of being merely criticized, let alone abandoned. It is however relevant to notice, that the idea of replacing the personal pronoun (thou), used in the Lord's prayer, with the impersonal pronoun 'it', was obviously a statement against the conception of a personal God, which may refer to several philosophical and Christian theological currents – including the rationalism and rationalist theologies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet if we take a closer look at the context in which Sederholm was making this manoeuvre, we find out that the impersonal 'it', as well as its 'will', is intimately connected to the sphere of individual emotions and inward sensations; 'inspiration' and 'satisfaction', as Sederholm himself stated. The emphasis on human emotions implies that the General's ideas were attached to liberal Protestant currents of the nineteenth century (on these currents, see McGrath 2011: 101–41).

Previous interpretations can be linked to a reading made by the religious studies scholar René Gothóni in his concise but fruitful biographical study of C. R. Sederholm and his literary productions (Gothóni 1996). Gothóni has made an important break with the paradigm presented by Juva and some of his late twentieth-century successors in the history of ideas by stating that Sederholm's literary work should be taken seriously and as a justified commentary on individual religiosity at the turn of the twentieth century. This interpretation has become an important fulcrum for my study. Gothóni has also presented a partial critique of Juva's reading of Sederholm by claiming it to be one-sided and inaccurate when it focuses on the General's relation to concepts of Christianity and religion (*ibid.* 68–9). On the other hand, Gothóni does not elaborate this criticism very extensively – partly due to the concise character of his work – and is at some points notably contributory to a paradigm that emphasizes the idiosyncratic essence of Sederholm's conceptions, mentioned in the introduction of this article. In Gothóni's view the General was 'ahead of his time', an exceptional religious thinker, whose individualism could transcend the contemporary ideological milieu (*ibid.* 5–6, 56). However, the flipside of this kind of generalization is that it can also exclude Sederholm from the



Carl Robert Sederholm, 1890s. Photo by Eric Sundström. Finnish Heritage Agency, CC BY 4.0.

concrete socio-cultural environment and networks of the late nineteenth-century international intelligentsia, thus blurring the historical specificity of his character. Especially on this point – though there are also some others – my interpretation will differ from the one Gothóni offers.

In contrast with most of the interpretations that connect Sederholm's religious and intellectual views to the scientific naturalism of the late nineteenth century, Gothóni has inspiringly derived some his observations inside the *longue durée* history of Christian theology. He has seen Sederholm's conception of 'the essence of religion' to have its origins in Catholic scholasticism, represented for example by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), Benhard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and Pierre Abélard (1079–1142) (Gothóni 1996: 37–43). In a strict theological sense, this kind of continuum may be justified, at least if the focus is kept on a doctrinal history of scholasticism and a Christian philosophy of religion that is searching for a synthesis between the Bible, Christian theology, philosophical concepts and individual religious experience at least since the Pelagian disputes of the

fifth and sixth centuries (McGrath 2011: 34–42). However, Sederholm's ideas can also be understood as being part of a continuum to a more specific set of theological and philosophical currents – German *Kulturprotestantismus*.

If we take a closer look at the theological references to which Sederholm himself gives a special meaning, it is easy to agree with Gothóni about the fact that many of the General's textual sources were of German origin (Gothóni 1996: 57–8). But what I think Gothóni has excluded from his analysis is the consistency with which Sederholm was drawing the information concerning religion from a specific cavalcade of 'deep-thinking and morally advanced' men, as the latter ceremoniously expressed it in *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*. Sederholm's system of source references implies that two scholars in particular have been well studied by him; Otto Pfeleiderer and Albert Kalthoff are names that stand out in his references. Pfeleiderer (1839–1908) was a German Protestant priest and theologian; a pupil of the celebrated Tübingen School leader Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), who became one of the most influential liberal Protestant theologians of the late nineteenth century (McGrath 2010: 123–6, 190). Pfeleiderer's work was based on a historical-critical method of Protestant theology, which was greatly influenced by Baur. Also Pfeleiderer kept much of his focus on studying the evolution of both religion and Christianity as a historical, philosophical and dialectical process that could transcend the perspective of the Old Testament both temporally and geographically (see Pfeleiderer 1886) – a theme, which had become a substantial intellectual trend in European humanist-theologian studies since the first translations of Hindu scriptures were produced at the end of the eighteenth century (Marchand 2009: 57–63).

The Pfeleidererian mode of historical criticism is already tangibly present in the preface of *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*, where Sederholm claims to study the historical and universal progress of religion, which could still be welded together with the idea of 'inner' individualist experiences and reflections, just as liberal Protestant classics, such as Baur and Friedrich Schleiermacher's had pointed to. Kalthoff (1850–1906), for his part, was a *scandaleuse* radical theologian, whose main interest lay in *Sozialtheologie*, a branch of late nineteenth-century liberal theology which emphasized the political left-wing social critique as a key approach in Protestant and

socialist interpretations of the New Testament and the character of Jesus (Marchand 2009: 264).

Intellectual influences such as the above suggest that Sederholm was grounding his concept of religion in a phenomenon of an intersectional character, which became highly influential in German-speaking culture after 1850s. According to the historian Suzanne Marchand, *Kulturprotestantismus* was an emblematic conviction of the rising German middle class; she has stated that theologically and philosophically speaking *Kulturprotestantismus* embedded the liberal Protestant theory, established by the Schleiermacherian current in the early nineteenth century, into both the modernizing German society and the individual modern middle-class consciousness. At the core of the phenomenon was the idea of embracing sober scientific research and artistic work as true creeds of the Protestant Christian faith (Marchand 2009: 75–6). Such a maxim resonates strongly with Sederholm's assignment, which regarded 'the one and only true faith' as the product of a comparative, historical-critical analysis of culturally mature religious texts and the most sophisticated writers that world history could offer. Marchand has also noted that a specific by-product of *Kulturprotestantismus* was the wide field of popularized religious literature, which opened up the public religious debate to include authors who did not have academic orientation or qualifications. It is noteworthy that Marchand presents Albert Kalthoff as an active representative of this very field (*ibid.* 264). Thus, it seems relatively safe to state that as a retired army official, who launched a new literary career with a book on 'free historical religious studies', Sederholm's character seems to be firmly linked to identities generated by *Kulturprotestantismus*.

The context of German cultural Protestantism can be treated in many ways as a productive angle from which to analyse and explain the case of C. R. Sederholm and his literary debut of 1883. First of all, it supports the ethically positive interpretation of Sederholm not being the dilettante and fly-away provocateur that, for example, A. F. Granfelt labelled him as, but rather a serious writer who based his message on intellectually recognized concepts of his time. It also generates a supplementary historical background for Gothóni's reading, which emphasizes the role of Christian scholasticism as the foundation of Sederholm's view of the essence of religion. In comparison with this, the frame-

work of *Kulturprotestantismus* has the advantage of being compatible with the personal life course of Sederholm. As a member of the German-speaking upper middle class – and later on even of the elite – whose adult years were temporally parallel to the birth and climax of the period of German cultural Protestantism, the current can be seen to be an organic part of his social and intellectual environment. Another interesting thing is that inside this framework it becomes historiographically possible to explain how Sederholm could overcome the problem of a modern ambiguity between maintaining ideals such as a 'true faith' and inwardly-experienced religious sentiments at the same time as being a stern critic of certain doctrines in Christian theology, such as anthropomorphic divinity, the hegemony of the state church, and theological supranaturalism. In the context of *Kulturprotestantismus* he could sense that his work was carried by the authority established by Pfleiderer, Baur and Schleiermacher, which declared that a scientifically enlightened critique of the history of religion is the one salvational Protestant faith that a modern individual must commit to.

### Sederholm the occultist?

As I tentatively mention in the introduction here, Sederholm is also known to be a Finnish pioneer in the realm of ideas that point to the field of modern Western esotericism. In this respect, an influential interpretation has again been made by Mikko Juva, who has connected Sederholm's written career to the tide of 'occultism' and 'mysticism' of the 1890s (Juva 1960: 291–2). According to Juva's reading, Sederholm was mostly interested in the spiritualist movement, which partially originated in the United States, where the movement had become a popular mass phenomenon during the 1850s and 1860s, mostly due to its flashy public seances and appealing promises of a physical afterlife. In addition, the movement had intellectual leverage due to its European roots going back to Mesmerist and Swedenborgian currents in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that were fundamentally intertwined with both the Enlightenment and the subsequent idealist/romantic periods.<sup>2</sup> As Gothóni has stated, Sederholm was familiar with Emanuel Swedenborg's works and published books considering the spiritualist move-

2 For concise summary of spiritualism, see Hanegraaff 2013: 36–40; Faivre 2010: 69–78.

ment at the turn of the 1890s, but in my opinion, this does not go far enough to give a balanced picture of Sederholm's striking expertise in Western esoteric currents of the late nineteenth century.

An interesting source that can reveal something about Sederholm's interests in the field of Western esotericism is a pamphlet entitled *Buddha den Upplyste*, which was published in 1886. The book is a concise and obviously orientalist representation of Buddhism, and Western studies of it, but it also includes an interesting appendix called 'Hemligbuddhismen' ('Secret Buddhism') (Sederholm 1886: 42–61), in which Sederholm analyses Buddhist doctrines by means of concepts established by the Theosophical Society, founded by the Russian emigrant Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and the American journalist Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in New York, 1875 (Godwin 1994: 282–308). As we know from several recent studies, the Theosophical Society was an intellectually ambitious endeavour to mount a critique of popular aspects of the spiritualist movement and to re-organize the language and ideology of modern Western esotericism so that it could align with Western scientific premises of the late nineteenth century (Godwin 1994; Asprem 2014: 534–61). Unfortunately, it would take up far too much space here to give a thorough description of how expertly Sederholm was able to reference the basic ideas established by the Theosophical Society. It is enough for my purpose to state that in *Buddha den Upplyste*, Sederholm presented many key concepts used by Theosophical Society – such as a modified idea of the law of karma and the cycle of reincarnation, as well as the seven-phase structure of human essence, including the concepts of the 'astral body' and 'Devachan' – to the Finnish reading audience (Sederholm 1886: 45–52). An intriguing detail is that he executed this with a strong sense of timing, considering that the Theosophical Society had started to promote Buddhist and Hindu doctrines with its own orientalist additions systematically just a couple of years earlier – in the early 1880s, after the nucleus of the society had moved from United States to India (Godwin 1994: 303–8; Goodrick-Clarke 2013).

Also in this case, Sederholm's source references yield some information that can be utilized perhaps even further than the actual text. According to his listing (Sederholm 1886: 3), among the main sources for the chapter 'Hemligbuddhism' is a volume of *The Theosophist* magazine from 1881. This implies

that the General had most likely been following the Society's publications almost in real time, given the fact that the magazine started in late 1879. It is also noteworthy that instead of Helena Blavatsky, Sederholm assigns the essential theosophical authority to Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), an editor of *Pioneer*, the key newspaper of the British 'Raj' in India, and a theosophist who rose quickly into the Blavatsky inner circle since their arrival in the country, and shortly after this became an internationally-renowned figure (Goodrick-Clarke 2013: 290–4) for his two books, *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). I believe that no further elaboration is needed to posit a meaningful connection between Sinnett's second book and Sederholm's title 'Hemligbuddhismen' (Sederholm 1886: 3).

The previous observations made here create some leverage to conclude that the idea of Sederholm acting as a spokesman for the spiritualist movement in the early 1890s is in many ways inaccurate. He was undisputedly familiar with the Theosophical Society and its doctrines from the mid-1880s, but it is highly plausible that he had become acquainted with the Society's written campaign in real time, since the turn of the 1880s. This reading creates a break with Juva's generalization and may be said to do the same with Gothóni, who – like Juva – has detected a theosophical and spiritualist turn in Sederholm's thinking from 1889 onwards (Gothóni 1996: 70–2). However, based on Sederholm's first books, it is possible to claim that this kind of turn did not happen. There are several features in Sederholm's thinking that rather suggest the case was quite the opposite: theosophical – and spiritualist – doctrines and ideologies seemed to be for him a transfiguration of already-existing concepts, a novel appendix to German liberal Protestantism and *Kulturprotestantismus*. This kind of continuum also distances Sederholm from the popular and ritualistic scene of *Fin de Siècle* 'occultism' to which, for example, Juva is referring.

For those who are familiar with recent studies of the history of Western esotericism, my interpretation might perhaps seem little odd. After all, the established paradigm of nineteenth-century esoteric trajectories usually suggests that after a loosely defined 'romantic' period at the beginning of nineteenth century, the impact of German thinkers declined and the intellectual focal point shifted to France, England and the United States. For example, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke has stated that the German philosophy of

religion and Christian theosophy was given only an antiquarian value by some underground Behmenist groups in the wake of the modern occult revival (Goodrick-Clarke 2013: 290–4; see also Godwin 1994: 227–34). Obviously, I am not about to contest Goodrick-Clarke’s reading, as long as the focus remains on Anglo-American and French frameworks. The case of C. R. Sederholm however implies that if the scope is turned away from this geographical axis, the picture might be a little different. As Marchand reminds us, German humanism was far from withering away, even though its key figures, such as Goethe and Hegel, as well as Romanticism as a movement, had exited the scene after the 1830s. For example, the so-called *Vormärz*, a wave of left-wing social critical philosophies coined by Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx inspired the international intelligentsia in the middle of the nineteenth century, and was later on woven into the intellectual texture of *Kulturprotestantismus* by authors such as Albert Kalthoff. Another important theme was the German tradition in the academic study of oriental scriptures, which had become something like an international brand thanks to celebrated scholars such as Max Müller (Stone 2002: 1–25; Marchand 2009: 95–6, 157–211). As we shall see next, these frameworks had considerable influence on the conception that Sederholm had of Western esotericism, as well as on religion in general.

### **The theosophical concept of reincarnation through the lens of orientalism and *Kulturprotestantismus***

The idea of Sederholm being already familiar with modern Western esoteric currents at the beginning of the 1880s can be further supported by scrutinizing *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*. Besides Buddhism, considered above, in his debut book Sederholm placed a lot of thematic emphasis on historical Hindu scriptures. According to him, the ancient history of ‘Aryan’ peoples in India was the most authentic source of the ‘religion of the spirit’ (*andens religion*), a monotheistic theology that manifested itself in a historical sense of dialectic development as well as in self-expressing *cogito*, disengaged and critically-observing individual consciousness (Sederholm 1883: 9–23). Despite the historical awe that Aryan traditions seemed to be invoking, Sederholm was absolutely sure that the actual peak of religious progress was to be found in modern

European Protestantism, which in turn was on the verge of achieving the ultimate ideal of a ‘religion of the pure reason’ (*det rena förnuftets religion*). He saw this goal to be worthy of all possible effort, because a religion of the future standing on firm scientific ground could solve many of the intellectual as well as social problems of European societies.

This kind of intellectual enthusiasm may sound exaggerated from our point of view, but it can be understood in the context of scientific and technological developments of the nineteenth century. According to the historian Corinna Treitel, several breakthroughs in physics, chemistry and medicine, as well as in other sciences, had created an atmosphere which sought to question the boundaries of visible and concrete reality. For example, the fields of bacteriology, electrochemistry and radiology had produced solid evidence concerning phenomena that could not be perceived by the ordinary human senses. Treitel has stated that in an epistemological sense, these ‘invisible’ worlds inspired the late nineteenth-century European thinkers to challenge Immanuel Kant’s persistent maxim considering the restrictions of human reason. This meant that theologians and philosophers also started to search for solutions that potentially would provide access to the reality *an sich*, and thus go beyond the Kantian criticism that it is not possible to know the transcendent without correlations of the human mind and its categories. In Treitel’s interpretation, the urge towards ‘knowing’ invisible realities and even God was commonly shared by *Kulturprotestantismus*, German humanism, the natural sciences, and esoteric circles in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Treitel 2004: 3–108). This is also a key context which explains the title of Sederholm’s debut book: the idea of a ‘religion of pure reason’ (*det rena förnuftets religion*) was about sketching a form of religiousness in which the human *cogito* and the transcendent could be aligned in an empirical way.

On the other hand, the same enthusiasm was supporting certain forms of political and cultural supremacism, which according to Marchand and Edward Said constituted in many ways an inseparable part of the Western gaze towards ‘the Orient’ throughout the nineteenth century (Said 2003: 49–166; Marchand 2009). The supremacist bias was visible also in contemporary humanist studies, which Said has famously scrutinized in terms of the concept of orientalism. The orientalist context was present

also in Sederholm's interpretations as demonstrated in the way he made European Protestantism and intellectualism the centre of religious world history. In turn, it must be recognized that in a contemporary context Sederholm's thinking was hardly to be labelled in terms of nationalist, let alone racist hierarchies. For him, the religious history of the Aryans was a valuable source of positive religious knowledge. He considered it to be a means of reviving the Christian tradition which was struggling in the grip of modern culture, and simultaneously bringing extra value to scientific paradigms which so far had not been able to generate social and cultural welfare in the way that was expected. This kind of positive approach was, for example, represented by Max Müller (1823–1900), a German-born academic orientalist, who had emigrated to England at the turn of the 1850s (Stone 2002: 1–25). In relation to the question of how idiosyncratic a thinker Sederholm finally was, it is worth noticing that the General was considerably open about his constitutional relationship to Müller's theories. In Sederholm's reading it was specifically a coinage of Müller's that the Aryan peoples were not to be taken as degenerate heathens, but representatives of an elaborated culture that could sustain sublime ideas concerning God and the cosmos (Sederholm 1883: 20–1).

There was nonetheless one particular concept that seemed to define a break between Sederholm and his key source of authority. *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion* demonstrates that the General was, at least to some extent, a proponent of reincarnation. When analysing the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu holy scripture assembled between 200 BC and third century (Parpola *et al.* 2005: 119–21), he declared that it 'wonderfully explained the basis of Christianity'. According to Sederholm, the key point of this revelation was that the scripture told how 'these mortal bodies contain an eternal spirit, which is inexplicable and boundless. ... Just as a man takes off his old clothes, so the spirit leaves the old body and goes into a new one' (Sederholm 1883: 46). A peculiar thing in the quotation is that it is to be found in a chapter in which Sederholm is claiming to be framing an argument under the influence of Max Müller. There is an inevitable paradox in this composition, because Sederholm is basically presenting a reincarnationist creed, when Müller was by contrast known to be highly unresponsive to uncritical implementations of Buddhist and Hinduist eschatologies to the Western

religious imagination (Djordjevic 2014: 23–4). In my opinion, the situation is not necessarily a sign of Sederholm being intellectually off track. On the contrary, he was again consistently extracting his arguments from the framework of *Kulturprotestantismus*.

In order to figure out how Sederholm constructed his ideas on reincarnation, it is perhaps easiest to scrutinize what he was excluding from the image. First of all, in Sederholm's definition there are just minor traces of the complicated mechanism of planetary chains and 'cosmic evolution' that were intrinsic elements of the doctrine of the Theosophical Society in the early 1880s (Sinnott 1883; Godwin 1994: 319–46; Goodrick-Clarke 2013: 286–93). On the other hand, it neither seems to be reminiscent of spiritualist ideas that conceived of the afterlife often in ontologically more dualistic and concrete ways which created parallels with traditional Christian doctrines – though on many occasions theosophical and spiritualist eschatologies became thoroughly intertwined (Oppenheim 1985: 94–7; Godwin 1994: 200–4; Holm 2016: 40–3, 146–7). One thing that is always present in Sederholm's descriptions of reincarnation can nevertheless be seen in the above quotation. He based his reading on a somewhat simplistic concept of dialectic progress, which was set to the pace of the ingoings and outgoing of the human spirit, like metaphysical breathing, aimed at developing the true and eternal 'inner self' until it became reunited with its monistic origin. As Sederholm himself crystallized his thinking in *Buddha den Upplyste*, the path of transcendent progression created by the dynamics of karma and reincarnation was described as a 'flow' (Sederholm 1886: 51), which secured the individual's perfection by finally returning the striving soul to its fountain – to God.

The idea of a 'flow' that proceeds dialectically and carries the divine inner self towards the God from which it has originally emanated refers to concepts established by two key figures of Western esotericism who however are not of modern origin. First of all Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328), a Dominican monk and Catholic-Thomasian scholar, who established besides his recognized theological work a system of vernacular teachings which, according to Bernard McGinn, are based on the metaphysical concept of 'flow'. In Eckhart's thinking, the ontological totality is structured by a dialectical process between 'flowing-forth' and 'flowing-back' which regulates both the flowing of the universe as well as flowing of the

‘ground’ or the divine part of the human soul – first out from God’s hidden ground and then back into it, simply to start flowing out again (McGinn 2001: 71–5). Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), a German shoemaker and a self-taught Lutheran mystic, was also using concepts of ground and flowing motion to explain the progressive manifestation of God and the ascension of the human soul through the spheres of creation (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 87–105).

At this point the crucial question is, why did Sederholm slant his reading of reincarnation so considerably towards the concepts used in the German tradition of mysticism and Christian theosophy? One plausible answer can be found by reading the General’s foremost references, such as Otto Pfleiderer. In several of his works, Pfleiderer declares Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme to be the first ‘theosophical’ heralds, who attempted to approach Christian theology and the Bible from a scientific point of view and should therefore be treated as the founders of the modern German philosophy of religion. According to Pfleiderer, Eckhart especially was ‘holding out his hand right across the five centuries’ to inspire modern German thinkers (Pfleiderer 1878, 1907). Besides Pfleiderer, also Albert Kalthoff was drawing inspiration for his *Sozialtheologie* from anti-elitist and social radical ideals of Western esoteric currents (Marchand 2009: 264). In this respect, Sederholm’s interpretation was a logical one: he modified the image of reincarnation coined by the Theosophical Society to align with the earlier theosophical current which was carried by the German philosophy of religion, and which from his point of view was supported by both of the canonized European (male) thinkers. From Sederholm’s perspective, this argument was most likely irrefutable. As is well known, German *Naturphilosophie*, romanticism in the arts as well as idealism in philosophy, had already spotlighted the names of Böhme, Eckhart, Swedenborg, Paracelsus, von Baader and other Western esoteric landmarks during the turn of the nineteenth century. The endeavour was made under the authority of revered figures such as Goethe, Schlegel, Schelling, Novalis and Hegel (Faivre 2010: 69–88), which made it convincing in Sederholm’s contemporary milieu. An interesting thing in Sederholm’s case is that this paradigm apparently survived the break in the 1830s and was quickly integrated to the rising tide of *Kulturprotestantismus*, backed up by different branches of German humanism and the social lever-

age of a rising middle class. It was through this transfigurative lens that Sederholm was also constructing his view of the doctrines of the Theosophical Society of the 1880s.

### **C. R. Sederholm and the esoteric transfiguration of nineteenth-century German humanism**

When I mentioned above that Sederholm seemed to have taken the doctrine of the Theosophical Society for his ‘transfigurative’ gaze at the debate over the religious ideals of the late nineteenth century, I was referring to the philosopher Charles Taylor’s definition of transfiguration as an affirmative social and cultural power. Taylor has used the concept – very roughly speaking – to explain the dynamic between Western religiosity and secularization. He has demonstrated how, instead of clinical breaks the modern Western ‘secular age’ is running on a contingent network of amplifications and modifications of the pre-existing religious convictions and ideas which support the substantial modern narrative of individual and collective progress (Taylor 2007).

In my opinion, this is also a fruitful point of view of describing what Sederholm was trying to express in his first books. The idea of religious transfiguration can be taken as an answer to one of the main research questions of my article: at the base of the General’s religious critique lay a synthesis, which sought to put together and amplify several intrinsic currents of nineteenth-century continental humanism. It was definitely not about creating a confrontation between Darwinist ‘naturalism’ and oversimplified ideas of ‘Christianity’, let alone ‘religion’ as has previously been stated. As a matter of fact, Sederholm’s religious critique was, thematically speaking, similar to the German Protestant liberal theology that had already been a somewhat institutional form of Christianity in continental universities and city parishes for decades (Marchand 2009: 252). Instead of creating polarities, Sederholm aimed to construct a syncretistic modern religion – in his own words ‘true Protestantism’ – which would be able to assimilate many of the important contemporary philosophical, theological, and ideological currents partly in order to fulfill the creed of *Kulturprotestantismus* – to produce the most thorough religious study one could imagine.

The concept of transfiguration seems to resonate also with contemporary research on the history of modern Western esotericism. In many influential

studies (e.g., Oppenheim 1985, Godwin 1994; for some parts Hanegraaff 1996, Owen 2004, Faivre 2010, Aspren 2014) the constitutive outlines that have marked out the field of post-Enlightenment esoteric currents have been created by emphasizing the intellectual impact of Anglo-American and French sciences, arts, and the culture of the cosmopolitan elite. This kind of configuration has enabled a paradigm which has located a break following the German *Naturphilosophie*. The break is seen itself to be followed by a shift of the Western esoteric focal point from Germany to France, England and United States, which paved the way for a ‘modern occult revival’ at the turn of the twentieth century. I suggest that scrutinizing Sederholm’s writings might supplement this picture. In the General’s perspective, for example, the ideology of the Theosophical Society was clearly comprehended in terms of a continuum of continental humanism, in which the German tradition was playing a leading role practically throughout the nineteenth century (Partridge 2004: 87–118; Marchand 2009). When Sederholm read volumes by leading esotericists of the 1880s, such as A. P. Sinnett and Blavatsky, it could be fully justified for him to see them amplify the already-existing ideological and religious messages that had also been declared by mid-nineteenth-century German orientalism, Hegelian left-wing social radicalism and liberal Protestant religious criticism. The fact that Sederholm recomposed the doctrines of the Theosophical Society as a seamless continuum for the Pfeleidererian concept of ‘philosophy of religion’ is surely pointing in this direction.

In addition, my interpretation can be seen as being in parallel with an important heuristic opening made by Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer. In the *History of Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* the two scholars suggest that the grand narratives of the history of Western esotericism should be exposed to angles drawn from the European geographical and cultural margins (Bogdan and Hammer 2016: 1–3). This is also one of the most essential outcomes in the case of C. R. Sederholm; it demonstrates how strongly local traditions, specific social networks, and even personal backgrounds can affect the ways in which an individual structures his religious and ideological views. If we look at the conceptual measures that Sederholm used when interpreting the key esoteric currents of his time it is clear that his youth in eastern Finland and amongst Russian German-speaking

communities had forged the intellectual basis that he seemed to rely on, even during his writing career at the turn of the twentieth century.

Building the approach on cultural margins can also have an impact at the level of research ethics. In Sederholm’s case it is noteworthy that distancing the interpretation from the culturally and geographically established contexts makes it possible to find positive definitions of Sederholm’s views, which are not always easily fitted into the intellectual framework that would seem logical from our contemporary perspective. However, by tracing the historical layers behind the ‘marginalities’ in Sederholm’s thinking they became understandable in contexts that are hardly defined as marginal. This notion serves also as an answer to the question considering the idiosyncrasy of Sederholm’s written work. It is, for example, undeniable that – as Kennet Granholm has stated – Sederholm heavily modified the concepts coined by the Theosophical Society in his texts. Nevertheless, from the point of view of a certain historical framework which I have tried to reconstruct in this article they can be seen not as mere idiosyncrasies, but as justified solutions made by an historical individual living in a specific, historical situation. ■



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