

Care, longing, and control

Representing corporeal Laestadianism in popular culture

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This article analyses representations of Conservative Laestadianism in contemporary Finnish and Finnish-American popular culture. Drawing from political studies, religious studies and cultural studies, the article sheds light on the ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is present in societal debate and in the cultural imagination. Focusing on religious corporeality, the article scrutinises the embodied practices of Conservative Laestadianism and the ways in which the representations participate in making sense of gender, sexuality, and power in religious communities. Contemporary understandings in popular culture are revealed through the detailed analysis of four cultural products of different genres depicting Conservative Laestadianism: a film entitled *Kielletty hedelmä* (Forbidden Fruit, 2009), a novel entitled *We Sinners* (2012), a reality television show entitled *Iholla* (On the Skin, 2013), and a play entitled *Taivaslaulu* (Heavensong, 2015). As a synthesis of the representations of Conservative Laestadianism, the article presents a dynamic triad of care, longing, and control. Furthermore, the article raises questions about the potential of popular culture in calling for a dialogue between Conservative Laestadianism and society at large.

Introduction

The study of religion and popular culture is crucial today, as forms of religious expression and dynamics are changing rapidly. The rise of new media in the twenty-first century and the expansion of virtual expressions of religions are examples of this

development, alongside a growth of consumption of traditional popular cultures (Beavis *et al.* 2013: 423). Simultaneously, institutional forms of religion have become more distanced from the everyday experience of many people living in Western secular societies, allowing the role of popular culture in constructing imaginaries and impressions of religion to gain significance (Clark 2007: 13–15). Popular culture creates a formative space in which understandings of religions are moulded, and wherein members of different religious groups are encountered (Stone 2013: 403).

This article sheds light on representations of the religious movement known as Laestadianism, more specifically Conservative Laestadianism, in contemporary popular culture.¹ The cultural representations of the movement are examined in relation to an ongoing shift in Conservative Laestadianism, and the reflections of that shift in surrounding societies. Conservative Laestadianism is most prominent in Finland, with around 90,000 members – about two per cent of the population – making it the largest revivalist movement

1 The article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation (Wallenius-Korkalo 2018a).

in the country (Talonen 2016: 134).² Conservative Laestadianism can be found in the United States under the name of the Laestadian Lutheran Church (LLC) and the movement has sister organisations also in Sweden, Canada, Russia, and Estonia (Talonen 2001). Conservative Laestadians are known for their strict theological and moral codes, traditional values, and large families; their lifestyle does not generally include, for example, birth control, premarital sex, alcohol, television, competitive sports, or dancing (Salomäki 2010). In Finland, many members of the movement are active in civil society, business, and politics (Linjakumpu *et al.* 2019).

During the 2000s, Conservative Laestadianism has attracted some critical publicity due to the position of women in the community, the movement's negative stance on female priests, its ban on contraception and certain alleged wrongdoings – such as sexual abuse of children, and spiritual violence – within the community (see e.g. Hurtig 2013b; Linjakumpu 2015; Nykänen and Luoma-aho 2013). Many members have left the movement (Valkila 2013), and some of this development is thought to have happened partly due to the role of media and social media environments in encouraging individuals who are already on the brink of leaving the movement (Taira 2019: 340–1; Hintsala 2016) to go through with the intention. The 2000s also saw a rise in the production of popular cultural products depicting Laestadianism – many of which deal with the very same issues that Conservative Laestadian communities are facing today; such as the negotiation of the norms of the

community, leaving the community, and questions of gender and sexuality.

This article presents a study of four contemporary popular cultural products portraying Conservative Laestadianism; a film entitled *Kielletty hedelmä* (Forbidden Fruit, 2009); a novel entitled *We Sinners* (2012); a reality television show entitled *Iholla* (On the Skin, 2013); and a play entitled *Taivaslaulu* (Heavensong, 2015), adapted from a novel (2013) of the same name. Drawing from political studies, religious studies and cultural studies, I suggest that key aspects of the current debates and the cultural products can be understood with the help of theories of corporeality. I ask how Conservative Laestadianism is embodied in these representations and how the representations participate in making sense of the political potential of the religious body. By means of an analysis of these cultural products, my study scrutinises the power structures of the represented religious bodies; their potential, what is expected and required of them, and how, sometimes, these are violated. I trace the ways in which Laestadianism is corporeally signified in the representations and ask what the interpretations the representations call for are. As such, the study highlights the ways in which corporeal Conservative Laestadianism is present in the wider social debate and cultural imagination.

In what follows, I situate my study within the interdisciplinary discussions of lived religion, popular culture, and religious corporeality. Secondly, I briefly introduce the cultural products analysed in this article, place them within the continuum of representations of Laestadianism in popular culture, and describe my method of analysis. Thirdly, with corporeality as my focal point, my analysis explores the ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is portrayed

2 Other major, although significantly smaller, branches of Laestadianism include Reawakening, Firstborn Laestadianism and the Little Firstborn group.

in the items under study. As a synthesis of the representations of Conservative Laestadianism emerging from the cultural products is analysed, the article presents a dynamic triad of care, longing, and control. I conclude by raising questions about the potential of popular culture in calling for a dialogue between the movement and society at large.

Representations of corporeal religion

During the past few decades, the study of everyday religion and lived religion has become an established tradition. Scholars of religious studies and the sociology of religion frame this field as research on religious practices and imagination lived within the structures and realities of everyday life, as opposed to focusing on religious institutions or doctrines (McGuire 2008: 160–1; Orsi 2002: xiii–xiv). It is a culture-specific approach that adheres to religiousness in particular places and times (Hintsala 2017: 16, 25). It is also often interested in corporeal and material aspects of religions – lived religion is inherently embodied; mundane practices and chores, from food preparation to singing, tie the material life to the spiritual (McGuire 2008: 99, 115, 118).

Alongside the study of lived religion, the study of religion, media, and culture has also become more prominent. While not often brought into dialogue with each other, these two approaches have focused on similar questions: both are interested in mundane communal and cultural practices of religions instead of religious elites, or macro-level interactions of religions and states (Lynch *et al.* 2012: 1–2; Forbes 2005: 2). In a broad sense, media and cultural products are approached as sites for religious experience and meaning making, not only as instruments that communicate information or represent a reality that is

‘out there’ (Morgan 2008: xiii–xiv, 3, 5–7). Thus, the questions researchers ask may focus on how religion is represented in popular culture, but also on the relationship media and culture consumption has to the embodied, affectual, aesthetic and ethical basis of religious life (Lynch *et al.* 2012: 3; Mahan 2005: 294; Morgan 2008: 9–10, 16; Forbes 2005: 10–6).³ Cultural products are part of the articulation and presence of religions in societies in that they draw from lived actualities and produce collective imaginations (Morgan 2008: 8–10). This does not happen only at a cognitive level, but rather, cultural products also frame and shape corporeal agency and experience (Lynch *et al.* 2012: 5). Popular culture produces ideas of who we are and what separates us from others (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015: 35–44; Meyer 2012: 168), and thus studying the forms in and through which religious life is mediated is crucial to understanding how religious realities are constructed and maintained (Meyer 2015: 1; Lynch *et al.* 2012: 133).

In my research, I assess the cultural products depicting Conservative Laes-

3 Within this line of research, a more specific debate on the ‘mediatisation of religion’ – formulated most notably by media studies scholar Stig Hjarvard – has focused on media as the prime mediator of religion in secular societies (Lövheim and Lynch 2011: 111–12). According to Hjarvard, the media tends to communicate religion that could be characterised as ‘banal’, a bricolage of elements taken from institutionalised religion and folk religion, combined with elements with no religious meaning (Hjarvard 2011: 128–30). However, the cultural items analysed in this study, while they construct religious imaginations that adhere to popular cultural genres, they do also present rather coherent and elaborate religious propositions of Conservative Laestadiansim, and are thus are not ‘banal’ in the aforementioned sense.

tadianism as representations, but also simultaneously as narrations of a lived, corporeal religion (see also van den Brandt and Wallenius-Korkalo 2020). The notion of representation I use here refers to the production and construction of meaning (Hall 2000), while religious corporeality is conceptualised as reflexive embodiment (Crossley 2006), referring to the interrelation between individuals and their communities, to individuals being embedded in socially defined norms and practices. Representations of Conservative Laestadian bodies are studied in relation to, and as exemplars of, the community. This approach does not translate into a one-sided relation wherein a community dictates over individual bodies. Instead, it recognises the way in which the social gives the context wherein a human ability to abide by collective norms, or go against them, becomes possible (Crossley 2006: 3–4; Shilling 2012: 241–56). The two-way relation between the individual and their community becomes a triplicity in religious communities: the individual body is a manifestation of the self and the group as well as an instrument, or a container, of the spiritual and the sacred (Morgan 2010).

The connection between corporeality and religion has been explored within various studies concentrating, for example, on religious rituals and customs – such as asceticism or fasting – or on religious dress (see e.g. Arthur 1999; McGuire 2008). In Christian traditions over time, the attitude towards the body has been somewhat ambivalent. On one hand, the body represents the opposite of the holy, while on the other hand, God made into flesh – the body of Jesus Christ – is at the centre of the doctrine; Christian theology has thus been interpreted as a corporeal theology (Ammerman 2007: 189–90; McGuire 2008: 97–102). Corporeality can

be seen as an integral part of Conservative Laestadian theology too (Hintsala 2017, 2016). According to theologian Meri-Anna Hintsala, Conservative Laestadian corporeality is flexible and adaptable: faith is embodied in practices of birth control, in the capacity of the emotions and in questions of agency – the body adapts by adjusting and confirming, but also by objecting to or creating new interpretations of religious teachings (Hintsala 2017: 60).

From a secular point of view, often also adapted by research, religion stands for authoritarianism and traditionalism, especially when it comes to questions of gender or sexuality (Yip and Nynäs 2012: 6, 8–9; Hunt and Yip 2012: 3–4). Stressing the regulatory aspects of religion has, however, been criticised, as such research might fail to consider the diversity of religious everyday life (Yip and Nynäs 2012: 9–10). Studies have, for example, shown positive correlations between the experiences of womanhood and religion in Conservative Laestadianism (Rantala and Kuusisto 2013: 67) while highlighting some of its challenging aspects, too (Kutuniva 2007; Hurtig 2013a). Nevertheless, the practices and representations of lived corporeal religion cannot be separated from mechanisms of power and difference. Previous social scientific and political studies have approached questions of power in Conservative Laestadianism through the theories of power as introduced by philosopher Michel Foucault (1980, 1999). Foucauldian analysis sees power as an omnipresent relation which produces subjects through discourses and practices, while the subjects are both subordinate to power and able to resist it (Kantola and Lombardo 2017: 1; Butler 1993). According to political scientist Tapio Nykänen, the power that Conservative Laestadian communities wield can be interpreted, using Foucauldian

concepts, as pastoral power, power founded on sacred authority (Nykänen 2013: 154–5). Political scientist Aini Linjakumpu differentiates between disciplinary power and normative power based on governmentality: religious guidelines in Conservative Laestadian communities produce disciplinary powers that regulate the religious life, while governmentality is based on apparent freedom, wherein an individual regulates their actions without any direct orders (Linjakumpu 2013: 107–8; Foucault 1999: 63–5; Foucault 1980: 158). The former type of power creates the norm of a good and righteous life and directs believers to continuously strive to achieve it (Nykänen 2013: 155–6).

In this study, I approach representations of religious corporeality both as permeated and governed by power structures, while at the same time being lived, experienced and productive of these structures. I propose that the power at issue constructs, maintains and divides the religious collective and is focused on, materialises in, and originates from the body. The representations of Conservative Laestadianism in the chosen cultural products under study performatively reiterate and produce the material and discursive orders of Laestadianism. Equally, they portray doing things differently, overturning rules and embodying disorder. The orders of Laestadianism become tangible in the representations of everyday practices and especially in the corporeal control of gender and sexuality. The political potential of bodies lies in creating, affirming and challenging these orders. Secondly, the conditions of the representations are themselves permeated by power structures (e.g. Butler 1993: 15). I identify power as part of the process wherein popular cultural representations participate in giving meaning to and making sense of Conservative Laestadianism. This is also a question of

the politics of representation; how cultural products contribute to societal discussion.

Tracing Conservative Laestadianism in popular culture

This article focuses on four cultural products of different genres depicting Conservative Laestadianism: a film, a novel, a reality television show, and a theatre play, all produced around the turn of 2010. The items analysed in this study are best-selling stories and, thus, emerging from and shaping a strand of popular culture about Laestadianism. The notion of *popular culture* used here refers to a widespread, multiform culture, encompassing literature, movies, music, and, for example, video games (Forbes 2005: 2–4; Beavis *et al.* 2013: 421). Instead of being the opposite of what is generally referred to as ‘high culture’, popular culture, as it is understood here, refers to ‘common culture’, to products that involve emotions and ideas and mediate expressions and experiences of identity (Morgan 2008: 11). I thus place the representations analysed in this study into the category of popular culture in this wider sense and use the term ‘cultural products’ to refer to the specific works of popular culture examined in this study.

The cultural products studied here are a part of a long continuum of representations of Laestadianism. The character of Lars Levi Laestadius and other notable historical characters of the movement, as well as different branches of Laestadianism have featured rather extensively in literature and movies, especially in Finland, but also in Sweden and Norway.⁴ A vast

4 Some examples of popular works include novels such as Timo Mukka’s *Maa on syntinen laulu* (1964), Anna-Maija Ylimaula’s *Papintyttö* (1976), Hannu Raittilä’s *Ei minulta mitään puutu* (1998), Riikka Pelo’s

majority of these cultural representations are historical stories, focusing on the period of Laestadius's lifetime in the mid and late 1800s, or on the more recent history of the movement, up until the 1970s. However, the focus of this study is neither on an extensive analysis of all the representations of Laestadianism, nor on the depictions of the movement's past and its different branches in various countries.⁵ Instead, I focus on representations of contemporary Conservative Laestadianism. I am interested in a specific context; the early twenty-first century, wherein I place the emergence of several of the issues Conservative Laestadianism is facing today. Thus, historical narratives are not included in this study. In many works of popular culture, Laestadianism also appears as the background to the story of a character, and such works were also excluded from this study.

While four cultural products can hardly be considered to amount to a comprehensive sample of Laestadianism in popular culture, they can be considered to be representative; they are among the major productions published during the time-period, aimed at a wide audience, and have contemporary Conservative Laestadianism as the

Taivaan kantaja (2006), Tanja Kaarela's *Saara* (2013), and Paulina Rauhala's second book *Synninkantajat* (2018). Several film adaptations, as well as plays, have been made based on many of these novels. Recently Laestadianism was also featured in an original crime drama series *Kaikki synnit* (2019). In Sweden and Norway, popular representations of Laestadianism include Mikael Niemi's *Populärmusik från Vittula* (2000) and *Koka Björn* (2017), as well as the film *Kautokeino-opprøret* (2008) by Nils Gaup.

- 5 For example, Laestadius and Laestadianism in the Swedish context in Tornedal and Sami texts have been extensively studied by Anne Heith (2018) and have been omitted from this study.

focus of the story. Within the parameters of these four cultural products, common themes can already be identified, such as negotiations of the norms of the community, leaving a religion, and questions of gender and sexuality. By not restricting the study to a single genre, and instead including examples from more traditional genres, such as literature and theatre performances, to film and reality television, I aim to reflect the 'multimediality' of today's cultural environment. As scholars of religion, media, and culture remind us, studying the diversity of cultural products enables a discernment of the conditions and resources through which people practise and encounter religious life (Lynch *et al.* 2012: 3). In what follows, I briefly introduce the four cultural products and my methodological approach to their analysis.

The first cultural product studied here is *Kielletty hedelmä* (Forbidden Fruit, 2009), a fictional Finnish movie directed by Dome Karukoski, written for the screen and produced by Aleksis Bardy. It is a coming-of-age story about two Conservative Laestadian girls, Raakel and Maria. In the film, the two girls leave the shelter of their religious community one summer and go out into the city searching for freedom. At the end of the movie, the two girls face the choice of either returning to their community or leaving it, and they arrive at opposing conclusions. *Forbidden Fruit* was a national and international success. In Finland, over 115,000 people saw the film in cinemas in the year of its release, making it the third most-watched Finnish film (Finnish Film Foundation 2020). *Forbidden Fruit* continues to be featured in the all-time favourite Finnish films list, highlighting its popularity and wide audience (Elokuvauutiset.fi 2020). The film also participated in several international film festivals between 2009–11, and won more than ten prizes,

such as the Gold Dolphin for best film at the Festroia International Film Festival (Kielletty hedelmä, IMDb 2020).

The second cultural product examined in this study is *We Sinners* (2012), a critically acclaimed debut novel by a young American-Finnish writer, Hanna Pylväinen. It is one of the very few works of literary fiction written in English which features Laestadianism. The novel brought the movement into international attention in an unprecedented manner and, thus, including it in a study of key contemporary representations of Conservative Laestadianism is well justified, even though the setting of the story differs from that of the other three stories. *We Sinners* follows the Rovaniemis, a family of eleven with Finnish origins, who belong to the Laestadian Lutheran Church, a sister organisation of Conservative Laestadianism, in the modern-day American Midwest. The Rovaniemis balance between meeting the expectations of a well-knit religious community and secular society; as the children grow up, some of them stay in the movement while some leave. The novel is not an autobiography, but draws heavily on the author's personal background; Pylväinen is a fourth-generation Finnish immigrant and her family is Laestadian, while she herself has left the church. *We Sinners* appeared on Amazon's Best Books of the Month list, and was noted by, for example, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Chicago Tribune* (Amazon 2020; Pylväinen 2020).

The third cultural product examined here expands the perspective from fiction to reality television. *Iholla* (On the Skin) is a documentary reality television show in which ordinary Finnish women are given video cameras to film their everyday life for six months. Aired on the Finnish Ava channel in spring 2013, season two of the series

features Sanni, a young woman with a background in Conservative Laestadianism, who has recently left the movement. Sanni's story focuses on her struggle with identity and the expectations and norms of her religious community and her new life. Mostly the show depicts the mundane life of Sanni: her relationship with her then fiancée Roman, her work and studies, Sanni brushing her teeth, choosing her clothes, visiting relatives, agonising over her insecurities, planning her wedding, and going out with friends, but also visiting her relatives, who remain within the movement, and attending Conservative Laestadian religious gatherings. Sanni's story highlights the ways in which an individual might manage the transformation of identity after exiting a religious community. The season two featuring Sanni's story was a nominee of the Finnish Television Academy's Golden Venla Award for the best reality programme of 2013 (Kultainen Venla 2013).

The fourth cultural product studied here is a theatre play based on Pauliina Rauhala's acclaimed debut novel *Taivaslaulu* (Heavensong, 2013). The novel was the publisher's bestselling debut novel, with over 40,000 copies sold, and it won a number of national prizes, such as the Christian book of the year award (Gummerus Publishers 2020). *Heavensong* is a contemporary story of a young Conservative Laestadian couple and their family. The author has a background in the movement, but has since disaffiliated from Conservative Laestadianism. *Heavensong* is a love story, but also a story about the pressure put upon women as a consequence of conservative views on birth control – in Conservative Laestadianism, reproduction is a religious issue (Ruoho and Ilola 2014). In the story, Vilja and Alekski grow up in the Oulu area, sometimes labelled as the Finnish 'Bible belt'. The couple fall in love, marry, and start a

growing family. Vilja's repeated pregnancies eventually land her in hospital suffering from severe depression. At the end of the novel, the husband Alekski secretly undergoes sterilisation, hoping to give Vilja time to recover. This leads to Alekski being cast out of the community, while Vilja remains within. In 2015, the novel was adapted into a theatre play *Heavensong* by two Finnish theatres, in Tampere and in Oulu, further highlighting the story's popularity. I have focused especially on the play by Oulu City Theatre,⁶ scripted by Seija Holma and directed by Heta Haaperä (OUKA 2020). The play was a success in the author's hometown of Oulu: 77 performances between September 2015 and December 2016, and 34,750 people seeing the play, made it one of the most popular performances of the theatre's history (Teatterin Taikaa 2017).

The cultural products studied here are popular interpretations of Conservative Laestadianism. As such, they have been influenced by, and have an effect on, the public discussion surrounding the movement. Regardless of being different genres, they are all aimed at wide audiences, and have been seen and read by people both outside of and within the Conservative Laestadian movement. The studied cultural products somewhat blur the boundaries between fictional and autobiographical narrations, as well as 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives on the movement. While the film *Forbidden Fruit* is a fictional

6 In addition to studying the actual performance in the theatre by attending the play and its rehearsal, and reviewing a film recording of the play and reading the script, I have interviewed the director and the four actors in the leading roles. I also collected experiences from the audience via an open questionnaire. This material is further analysed in a full-length study of the play, see Wallenius-Korkalo 2018b.

representation originating from outside the movement, the reality television show *On the Skin* depicts real people who either belong to or previously belonged to the movement. The authors of *We Sinners* and *Heavensong* base their stories on their lived experiences within the religious communities they are describing, but, like Sanni in the reality television show, they have distanced themselves from Laestadianism. In this study, I am not aiming to compare the cultural products to lived reality, but rather, take these representations seriously as a part of the reality, as they participate in creating experiences and a comprehension of the world we live in (Hall 2000: 15).

Methodologically, I have analysed each of the four popular cultural products separately, and then in a later phase, I have analysed them together to form a synthesis of the representations of Conservative Laestadianism. To begin with, I have asked how Conservative Laestadianism is portrayed in the cultural products. This type of holistic reading (van Manen 2016) aims to find key content of the material. I have looked at what kinds of things, people, places, characteristics, and practices are connected to Laestadianism. I have also paid attention to what is portrayed as non-Laestadian. During this analytical phase, I became increasingly aware of the significance of the representation of bodies and the embodiment of religion in communicating Conservative Laestadianism. In the second phase of the analysis, I focused my attention more specifically on the role of representations of corporeality in Conservative Laestadianism. This was the phase of selective reading (van Manen 2016) wherein the analysis focused on particular phenomena that appeared crucial to understanding the research subject. I asked what are the embodied ways, manners, acts, and feelings that signify and make

sense of Conservative Laestadianism. With the represented body as my analytical location, I focused on the micro-level: on pregnant bellies, painted toenails, hands joined in prayer or busy making food, on feelings of safety, joy, anxiety, and exhaustion.

Through the analysis of the body, I was also able to trace the interaction of bodies and things, shedding light on the cultural, discursive, and material conditions and structures that the representations of Conservative Laestadian bodies are embedded in. Thus, corporeality here does not merely translate into singular bodies, but instead, corporeality is a means and medium for studying the construction of Conservative Laestadianism; a way to look at a community and society (Shilling 2012: 250). In addition to representations and corporeality, I used the analytical concepts of gender, agency, belonging, identity, and performativity to structure the analysis of the cultural products. My analysis thus combined and alternated between data-based and theory-based analysis. In the later phase, I re-read the material in order to formulate ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is embodied in the representations. Based on what the characters in the cultural products are made to consider to be viable, desirable, and legitimate Conservative Laestadian forms of appearance, actions and experiences, and how these norms and practices are presented to be lived and often struggled with, I synthesised a triad of care, longing, and control. In what follows, I discuss that triad in more depth.⁷

7 Here I focus on presenting the key results of the synthesis based on the dissertation, see Wallenius-Korkalo 2018a. For more detailed analysis of each of the four cultural products see also Wallenius-Korkalo 2013; Wallenius-Korkalo and Valkonen

Care, longing, and control

In this article, I have taken the perspective of corporeality as my focal point in order to examine how Conservative Laestadianism is represented in popular culture. As a synthesis of the representations of Conservative Laestadianism, I propose a dynamic triad of *care*, *longing*, and *control* (Figure).

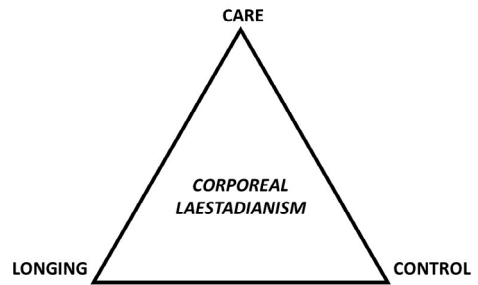


Figure. Dynamics of care, longing, and control: representations of corporeal Conservative Laestadianism in popular culture.

I suggest that corporeal Conservative Laestadianism is manifested in the popular culture products under study here as an interplay of, and tension between, care, longing, and control. These three aspects are crystallizations of the representations of Conservative Laestadianism that also call for framing a societal discussion on Laestadianism. In the following, I take a closer look at each of the three aspects.

Care

Care is all those things people do to maintain, continue and repair the world they inhabit (Tronto and Fisher 1990: 40). Care here, thus, refers to acts of taking care of each other that simultaneously maintain the community. In the popular cultural representations, Conservative Laestadianism is embodied in practices of care. Care is

2016; Wallenius-Korkalo 2017; Wallenius-Korkalo 2018b.

the corporeal and emotional way in which Laestadianism is acted out and lived in the everyday. Mundane chores from cooking to looking after children are actions of care that support the Laestadian lifestyle. Care is focused on family members, especially children, but also between spouses and towards other believers. Family is often regarded as the basic unit of the Conservative Laestadian faith; a miniature of the community (e.g. Hurtig 2013b) and the care provided for the family reflects the wider concern and care given within the community.

The forms of care prevalent in the representations could be characterised as feminine or motherly. Taking care of the household and nurturing the children are examples of the types of traditional care considered feminine and practised by almost all female characters represented in the cultural products studied here. The female characters of *We Sinners* and *Heavensong* participate in the organisation of religious meetings by doing chores behind the scenes, such as cooking and baking. In their homes they learn to participate at a young age – Leena, one of the Rovaniemi siblings in *We Sinners*, to help her mother get up at night to clean the house – and even outside of home the characters are often portrayed working in various kinds of caring services such as education and nursing. The primary role for women within Conservative Laestadianism is, however, first and foremost that of a mother (Kutuniva 2007: 27–9; Ruoho and Ilola 2014). The character of a caring mother is found in all the representations, but most focally discussed in *Heavensong*. *Heavensong* especially emphasises the embodied experience of childbearing. Being pregnant, giving birth, and raising children is the ideal of how Conservative Laestadian women are supposed to live out their faith.

The female characters will even look at each others' bellies first, and into their eyes only after. Repeated pregnancies and non-use of contraception significantly dictate the life choices of Conservative Laestadian women in the representations and while some characters embrace motherhood, some struggle with these expectations.

The fact that some ways of caring are represented, or can be interpreted, as feminine does not, however, mean that such practices would be feminine in themselves or that men would be unable to take on such roles and to perform the same acts. Still, if men act in ways that are generally thought of as feminine, breaking the conventional gender norms, they might encounter some resistance (Jokinen 2004: 6; Tronto and Fisher 1990: 36). This is exactly what happens to Alekski in *Heavensong*. As a young boy, he prefers to help his mother with cooking and taking care of his siblings. Alekski's sisters make fun of him for this and his father tries to direct Alekski towards more masculine chores, such as chopping firewood. Even as an adult Alekski is seen to be taking exceptional care of his family, not only providing for the family, but also supporting the emotional and physical welfare of his wife and children. Meanwhile Alekski's wife Vilja finds out she does not fit into the conventional role of a woman in Laestadianism, as she becomes exhausted and eventually depressed, and thus unable to take care of her family. What is considered normal or the norm, is pointedly revealed when someone is acting against it.

In addition to more concrete or material forms of care, pastoral care and counselling form an integral part of care in representations of Conservative Laestadianism. Prayers, hymns, and services, as well as the practice of asking for absolution from family members, reflect the spiritual care given among the community of believers.

From a gender perspective, it is typical for male characters to perform this type of role in the representations; men are portrayed performing acts of pastoral care or as religious authorities in all the cultural products in this study. The men might, however, experience difficulties in taking on these roles – in the same way as it might be difficult for the female characters to adapt to the role of being a mother. Both *We Sinners* and *Heavensong* feature a father character who reluctantly becomes a layman preacher. While pastoral care aims at ensuring the welfare of the people and the community, it does not always succeed in this.⁸ In fact, it might be harmful or a violation for both the individual and the community, as it is at times portrayed in the representations – for example, young girls are oppressed by the elders in *Forbidden Fruit*, and a father denounces his son in *Heavensong*.

Care implies a question; to whom does the care extend? Is care similar for those inside and outside of the movement; will it cease if a person leaves the Laestadian community? Who we care for is inevitably a question of the boundaries of our communities – acts of care build up a sense of togetherness, but also define who belongs to ‘us’ (Yuval-Davis 2011: 195). In the *Forbidden Fruit*, the relationship between a girl who leaves Conservative Laestadianism and her own mother is dramatically changed. On the other hand, in the reality-television series *On the Skin*, the boundaries between those who are active members of the movement and those who are on the outside are more gradual and under near-constant negotiation.

8 On the discussion of meetings of pastoral care in Conservative Laestadianism see e.g. Linjakumpu 2013; in fiction, this thematic is strongly featured in Pauliina Rauhala’s second novel *Synninkantajat* (2018).

(Be)Longing

In addition to an emphasis on care, popular cultural representations of Conservative Laestadianism highlight *longing*. Longing refers to the human longing for *belonging*, for being part of something bigger. It includes longing for God, and for other people; spiritual and corporeal. The word ‘belonging’ itself combines both the be-ing, and the longing (Bell 1999: 1; Probyn 1996). The idea of Conservative Laestadianism is formed in and through sensual and affective experiences that either tie the characters to the religious community, or distance them from it. Finding comfort and solace as well as the ability to gather strength and carry on in the face of adversities are part of the Conservative Laestadian narrative, while doubts and misgivings are signs of a division growing between an individual and the religious community. Longing for togetherness and belonging becomes tangible in shared religious rituals, but also in the ways in which Laestadianism includes conventions of habitus and dress. The ways in which we dress locate ourselves and others in our social environments (Arthur 1999: 3) – modesty in dress and non-use of make-up or jewellery is especially characteristic of Conservative Laestadian women (Kutuniva 2007: 21). Cohesion and distinctiveness are thus communicated through the outward appearance of Conservative Laestadian characters. Sanni in *On the Skin* is considering whether or not she wants to wear earrings to Conservative Laestadian summer services as this would be an act of proclaiming that she has distanced herself from the movement. Female characters in *Forbidden Fruit*, *We Sinners* and *Heavensong* signal religious doubts or rebellion against the religious community by using make-up or using nail polish.

A key feature in the representations is longing and desire for other people. Most

of the stories are love stories. However, physical intimacy and sex are not unproblematic. Corporeal lust and sexual desire, particularly, are portrayed as threats to the religious community. Premarital sex, use of contraception within marriage, and homosexual love, are issues in the lives of the characters which are repeatedly being debated. Sexual behaviour in Conservative Laestadianism is structured and restricted through religious morality – although attempts to control sexuality are, to some extent, present in most, if not all, religions (Hunt and Yip 2012: 3–4). In the representations studied, the homosexuality⁹ of Simon Rovaniemi in the novel *We Sinners*, illustrates the way in which homosexual orientation causes a crisis of conscience for both Simon and his family. Homosexuality is seen as a grave sin that makes it impossible for Simon to belong to the community. An internalised sense of sin and the experience that one is not worthy of God's love or the membership of the religious community leads to religious melancholy, which is typical of Evangelical Christian movements (Rubin 2000: 6, 211). Contrary to what one might think, in the representations the experience of sin or being a sinner does not necessarily lead one away from the community – sin is a shared feeling. The lack of grace and forgiveness from the community does however separate an individual from the group.

Homosexual longing forces the individual to weigh their being and life choices against both the standards of their religious community and their personal spirituality, while heterosexual desire attests to a desire to belong in the community (Kejonen and Ratinen 2016: 6, 17). Furthermore, longing

9 Homosexuality is discouraged, and homosexual acts are generally forbidden in Laestadianism (Kejonen 2014).

for heterosexual intimacy and sexuality is a crucial aspect of the continuity of the movement. Despite a high number of people leaving Conservative Laestadianism (Valkila 2013), the movement keeps its membership somewhat steady because of the notably high birth rate rather than because of conversion or missionary work (Linjakumpu 2015: 209). This causes a tension between the expectation of multiple childbirths, sufficiency of individual resources, and what's actually wanted in terms of family size. *Heavensong* focuses especially on the mother's struggle with reconciling her religious conviction and inability to cope with the growing size of her family.

Control

The third aspect I highlight is *control*, which governs the life of Conservative Laestadians in the popular cultural representations. Control refers to regulation of bodies, to norms, skills, and practices and to the boundary work that determines what is expected of members of the community. When the characters debate whom they care for, control is present. Moreover, while choosing to follow a coherent dress code or deciding not to use make up might testify to togetherness and belonging, these actions are part of the control of the group, too. If a character – such as Nels, one of the Rovaniemi siblings in *We Sinners*, or the girls in the *Forbidden Fruit*, as well as Sanni in the reality television show – is dancing at a night club, or using alcohol, or if one is questioning religious teachings on the internet like Alekski, or pondering a hysterectomy like Vilja in *Heavensong*, they are acting against the community and risk taking the consequences of their transgressions.

The most notable embodiment of religious control in popular cultural

representations are the laymen preachers; Conservative Laestadian elder men, with their habitus of sternness and severity and strict interpretations of faith. Such characters can be found in all the studied representations, much like the figure of the caring Conservative Laestadian mother. However, unlike the 'mother', their way of taking care of their parish resembles disciplinary power that regulates the members of the community and controls their actions (Linjakumpu 2013: 107–8). In *Forbidden Fruit*, for example, the Conservative Laestadian elders follow the girls to their apartment in the city to check on them and on several occasions it is specifically these characters who expel rebellious individuals from their communities.

Disciplinary power appears to be authoritative and masculine in the representations studied here, but an internalised normative power that regulates behaviour (Nykänen 2013: 155–156) is present also in everyday mundane interactions between any of the characters. The Conservative Laestadians of the representations observe and keep watch over themselves and each other as they strive to lead a good and righteous life according to the religious norms. Even arbitrary, seemingly insignificant deviations might lead to severe consequences. In *Heavensong*, Vilja's mother is reported to have been seen wearing nail polish on her toes by another Conservative Laestadian mother, who had spotted her in the shower of the maternity ward. This leads to a pastoral care meeting being convened and a demand for her public repentance in order to avoid expulsion from the community. Internalised control is also repeatedly portrayed in terms of the consumption of cultural products: Sanni in the reality television show agonises over make-up and alcohol usage even after leaving the Conservative Laestadian community,

and in *Forbidden Fruit* the girls experience physical symptoms, such as shaking and nausea, after breaking religious norms. Typically, the stories in the representations revolve around what happens when the rules of the religious community are challenged or broken. Often this leads to the rebellious character leaving¹⁰ the movement. At other times, stretching the boundaries of community might lead to minute changes in the Conservative Laestadian lifestyle.

Even though I have presented the principles of care, longing, and control here separately, they are quite deeply intertwined and should rather be approached as the apexes of a single triangle (see Figure). Care contains aspects of control, and control often implies an intention of care. Similarly, longing includes elements of both care and control; a longing for God, for inclusion into the religious community, and for other people creates caring emotions and practices on one hand, and, on the other hand, might contribute to controlling behaviour. The dynamics of care, longing, and control are indicative of the ways in which, to an outside observer, Laestadianism might look like a community which is held together by control and rules, while from the inside the caring aspects of the community seem prevalent. However, neither one of these perspectives

10 Leaving Conservative Laestadianism can also mean changing positions within religious tradition (cf. Ensted *et al.* 2019: 1). In Finland, Conservative Laestadianism is officially part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and leaving Laestadianism does not necessarily mean leaving the church. For example, Raakel's character in the *Forbidden Fruit* visits the more liberal Lutheran church and continues to wear a religious symbol, a cross necklace, while distancing herself from Conservative Laestadianism.

alone captures the full range of the experiences of lived Conservative Laestadianism.

The three apexes of the triangle are also contrasting forces. In relation to the continuity of Conservative Laestadianism and the way the community is changing, care, longing, and control can act as motors for change, or as anchors for stability. Longing for togetherness might pull individuals more tightly into the community, but longing for love and finding meaningful relationships outside Laestadianism might just as well push people away. Care maintains community, but the existence of limits to the giving of care – towards ex-members for example – make the borders of the community explicit and harder to cross. Control keeps the community cohesive, but, at the same time, it might evoke doubt, dissatisfaction, and even rebellion. Balancing between care, longing and control is the tension that upholds a close communal collective such as Laestadianism. Without any one of these aspects, the community might have trouble remaining intact. Without some control, regulation and governance, it is very hard for a community to be particularly identifiable, or work together towards common goals. On the other hand, if either the aspect of care or longing should be missing between an individual and the community, the aspect of control might become over-emphasised and religious membership experienced as enchaining and coercive; the experiences of those who have left the movement often reflect similar processes.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined the ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is portrayed in the popular culture of the twenty-first century, and, especially, how religion is embodied in its representations. Through the study of popular cultural representa-

tions it is possible to outline the ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is present in societal debate and in the cultural imagination, and also to identify some of the focal issues that the movement is faced with today. Struggles for Conservative Laestadian identity, agency, and belonging – questions of who can belong to the community and on what conditions, what happens at the borderlines of the community – are all emphasised through the representations. The struggles of Conservative Laestadianism are characteristically gendered and revolve around the regulation of sexuality and reproduction. The position of those who have left the movement is of importance too; the chance to discuss possibly difficult experiences related to religious exit and perhaps finding new ways to identify with the movement as an integral part of one's background.

Studying Conservative Laestadianism through its representations is, however, not without problems. Popular culture inevitably oversimplifies religious communities and might emphasise negative stereotypes – Conservative Laestadians too are often presented as a religious 'other', by contrast with the secular majority (Sjö and Häger 2015: 40–1). The cultural products studied here draw attention to, even stress, the potential sensitivities, problems and blind spots in the religious community, such as the position of women or sexual minorities. Furthermore, few individual characters in fiction or reality television can neither embody all the variety of the lived experience of Conservative Laestadianism, nor be representative of all the experiences of the people negotiating their relationship with the movement, either within or at the borders of the community. However, the cultural products studied here bring out a lot of diversity in the ways Conservative Laestadianism is portrayed to be lived and

experienced in the everyday, and emphasise mundane struggles and happiness that are very relatable, regardless of religious differences. The stories or the characters cannot be narrowed down to black and white stereotypes; on the contrary, they are multilayered representations that cannot be easily categorised.

While the dynamics of care, longing, and control encapsulate the ways in which Conservative Laestadianism is mediated in the representations of the movement, further questions might be asked concerning what the particular potential of popular culture in communicating religion is. What happens when people encounter Conservative Laestadianism through its representations? I propose that popular culture calls for a dialogue between Conservative Laestadianism and society at large. Encounters with representations of Conservative Laestadianism could be approached as situated, corporeal, multi-sensory, and affective political events. They draw attention to the potential issues within the religious community, but also to the need to recognise and confront sameness despite, and in, difference.

The societal significance and political potential of cultural products originates from the idea that the effects of representations reverberate further than just individual stories and encounters. Popular culture is not only entertainment to be consumed; cultural products are involved in producing the world we live in. Care, longing, and control are specific to representations of Conservative Laestadianism, but at the same time, they are identifiable aspects that are used to make sense of various experiences of belonging, identity, and solidarity. While this study has focused on the dynamics of representation of one particular religious community, Conservative Laestadianism, similar discussions could

be extended to other struggles of belonging, tensions of inclusion and exclusion, and cohabitation of different religious and cultural traditions within the societies that they inhabit. ■



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