

The Religious Message in Action— a Case Study

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Introduction

We understand a religious message to be the product of a religious movement. In studying such a message, it is very much to the purpose to place it in the context in which it operates. The cultural and social context of a religious message is some religious movement. Hence, the message should be examined against that framework. Each message has a certain structure, and its detection is of prime importance. Messages are not only part of the tradition, but themselves unique in their respective communicative situations. Thus, in our view, structural analysis does not have analytical use-value unless the message's symbols are set into their communicative context.

Our aim is dual: On the one hand, we intend to analyze and clarify the structure of a religious message of the Laestadian movement, how the message operates, also how the members of that movement respond to the codes of the message, and what kind of functions it fulfills; on the other, to develop and test an analytical model which would combine structural and interactional analysis.

Background: The Laestadian Movement

The Laestadian revivalist movement arose during the 1840s in the Finnish-populated region of northern Sweden, and from there it spread rapidly to North Finland. In Finland, the movement developed into a rival, that was on a par with other revivalist movements such as Finnish Pietism (*Herännäisyys*), which had originated earlier;¹ The activities of Lars Levi Laestadius, parish priest of the rural commune of Pajala in Sweden, laid the foun-

¹ Cf. Ruutu, 95 ff.

dation for the movement. He was concerned about the moral and spiritual poverty of the northern parts of his country and, for this reason, he inserted into his sermons the demand for an improvement of man's outer life. At the same time, in accordance with the Herrnhut tradition, his sermons contained allusions to Christ's mystical blood.

There is reason to remember that Laestadianism was born in the period of estate society. During the 19th century, four estates were represented in Sweden's and Finland's Diets, namely the nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie and wealthier peasantry. The Laestadian movement did not officially impugn the central institutions of estate society, the State and the Lutheran Church. Nevertheless, in the manner of other revivalist movements, the Laestadian movement did protest indirectly against both authorities. It developed religious doctrine which *de facto* emphasized the movement's own authority independent of Church or State. All revivalist movements denied the "objective" concept of office they presented their "subjective" article of belief that a prerequisite for becoming a Christian as well, as for becoming a priest, is a religious awakening personally experienced. However, of all the revivalist movements Laestadianism developed the most far-reaching tenets in this respect. After the death of Laestadius a tenet about the "Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" was fashioned, mainly through the initiative of the lay preacher, Juhani Raattamaa. According to it, the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven are in the keeping of the believers, i.e. the Laestadians, and this entitles them to bind others to their sins or to release them from their sins. This doctrine denies directly the religious authority of the Church and of its clergy.

As mentioned, Laestadianism arose in the Finnish-populated region of North Sweden. In its initial phase it had many of the characteristics of a spontaneous popular movement. At the turn of the century, that is, about 50 years later, controversies became so prevalent within the movement that it broke up.² The Laestadianism of northern Sweden diverged from the Laestadianism of North Finland. There, as well as in other parts of Finland, "Old Laestadianism" (*Vanhoillis-Lestadiolaisuus*) gained a commanding position. This persuasion emphasizes forcefully the power that believers have over the Keys in their parish. It does not, however, support centralized leadership as much as western Laestadianism, i.e. the "Great

² Cf. Haavio, 70 ff.

Firstling’’ (*Iso-Esikoisuus*) faction on the Swedish side of the border, does, nor does it impose as severe ascetic demands upon its members. In point of fact, the Laestadianism on the Swedish side is characterized by centralized leadership, very stark religious services, and strict norms regulating the secular activities of its members. Western Laestadianism also enjoys support in certain towns of South and Central Finland.

During the first decade of this century, the ‘‘New Awakening’’ (*Uusherätys*) faction drew apart from the main-stream Old Laestadianism of Finland. The New Awakening’s view regarding the parish is more open than that of the above-mentioned persuasions, and this faction also fosters the Christ mysticism of Laestadius.

Laestadianism has also later fissured, but the old groupings are still the most important. All factions operate on the basis of the natural growth of population. In other words, most Laestadians are at least second generation members. In Finland, the Old Laestadianism has the most supporters. Consequently, our study about Laestadian messages deals mainly with those of Old Laestadianism.³

Data-Gathering

In early 1974 we studied the published sermons held at large Laestadian summer gatherings in Finland. By means of structural analysis, we reduced the structures of the messages into their parts, consisting of key or signal words, intimations, references, or symbols, and examined the arising structural chains. However, such analysis alone did not prove sufficient to bring to light the essential meanings and functions of the sermons and their parts.

Then we decided to take up participant observation in order to examine the messages in their proper contexts.⁴ During spring and summer 1974, we, assisted by a few students, attended a number of Laestadian gatherings in southern Finland including several meetings of the Old Laestadians in Helsinki, one of their festivals in Hollola; gatherings of Great Firstling faction in Lahti and one meeting of the New Awakening faction at Kemijärvi. As a result, the ideational material of the messages, which was revealed through structural analysis, was found to make sense in the respective communicative context.

³ Cf. Suolinna, Kirsti, 1969, 61 ff; 1971, 89 ff; Raittila, 20 ff.

⁴ Cf. Peltö, 90 ff.

The Contents of the Religious Messages

At the gatherings of the Laestadians, only lay preachers, and/or those Lutheran pastors belonging to the movement, preach. They preach poetically, employing word pairs and advancing along the road of free associations. Characteristic of these sermons are archaic religious sayings blended with colloquial phrases and the expressions of local dialects.

A Laestadian sermon typically opens with words such as: "Dear sisters and brothers, at these great summer gatherings of God's people, much about the purity of the conscience and the forgiveness of sins has been preached to us weak travellers of the heavenly road." This opening sentence already includes the essential key words: "God's people", "forgiveness of sins" and the "weak travellers of the heavenly road".⁵

The key symbol of the Laestadian sermons is the traveller of the heavenly road, or its variant, the indigent wanderer. The preacher directs his remarks to a person who is poor, weak, obstinate, sinful, but nonetheless on the road to heaven. The key person of the message is a person without status, one who is in a period of transition and transformation. The purpose of the sermon is to put the listener in a statusless or ambivalent state requiring a change. The listener should view himself as a poor traveller on the road. It is probably not very easy for the listener to identify himself in the role of that traveller. It is to that extent without a point of attachment, without concreteness. The concept of a traveller does give, however, promise of a change, and those who seek to escape from a desperate or unbearable situation can apparently experience something hopeful in the image of the traveller. The preacher often helps the listener by referring to himself as one who is also a poor and weak traveller.

The listener is thus placed into a symbolic level into a migratory phase, i.e. into the midst of the scheme of a transition rite with its separation, migration and aggregation.⁶ It should be noted that the scheme of the rite of passage functions far on a symbolic level. The preacher sets this poor traveller in the middle of a symbolic battle field. He describes for the listener the field occupied by opposing forces. On the one hand, the powers of evil draw the traveller to themselves; on the other, those of goodness. The

⁵ Cf. Juntunen, 209.

⁶ Cf. Honko, 5 ff.

power field presented is dualistic, for it includes dual forces operating on different levels. The forces of good and evil have both a worldly and an otherworldly aspect. Evil is seen as the evil of the world or as the evil arising from the children of the world, but also as the evil caused by the "Enemy of the soul" (*Sielunvihollinen*, i.e. the Devil). The good of the other world is the good of God, and the good of this world is the good of God's people. For example in a sermon, the following may be said: "The world brings us such influences which lead us into sin",⁷ or the immanent battle field may find form in the statement: "In the life with God, the battle is hard and many times in that battle the purity of the conscience becomes sullied."⁸ Evil forces attempt to hinder the journey of the traveller, to make him obstinate, unwilling, weak and powerless. The people of God, however, can provide strength to the traveller, or as it may be termed, "cleanser" (*puhdistusaine*).

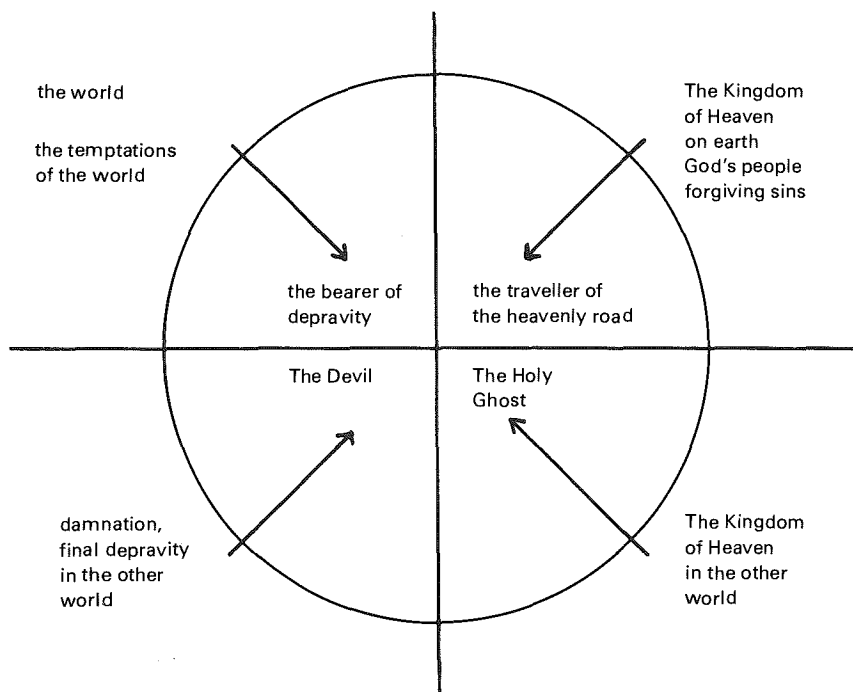
The climax of the sermon, if it contains one at all, is the part in which the weakness of the traveller is juxtaposed against the power and radiance of the Kingdom of God. God's people do battle. The kingdom created by it is the Seat—of Light of the Sun of Mercy, and of Love. The Kingdom of God is depicted with the most awesome attributes. The listener must at the same time note how weak, small, and powerless he is as opposed to God's radiance and power.

The cosmology, contained in the message, may be depicted graphically as follows:

The intention is to bring the listener, thus placed in the midst of opposing forces, to the Kingdom of God. It should be noted that the message functions on a high, abstract level. This is a question of symbolical manipulation or influencing. Nevertheless—and this is important, psychological and social forces are coupled with the message. In Laestadianism, the Kingdom of God is not only a symbolic quantity, rather, the symbolic and concrete levels intersect each other. The Kingdom of God is explicitly at the same time the kingdom of the other world and the kingdom on earth. It may be easily observed how the preacher effortlessly speaks of the Kingdom of God in two senses. He uses phrases in which he refers to the coming form of existence in the other world, but he can just as quickly shift to speaking about

⁷ Juntunen, 209.

⁸ *Ib.*



the same kingdom as the congregation of believers. He may say for example:

“Thus, the Bible proves throughout that there is no other than the one road to heaven. There is only one God’s Kingdom of Mercy on this earth.”⁹

“Jesus says thus that, ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and with it everything else shall be given.’ This we, God’s children, consider even now the most important thing, that we can inhabit the Kingdom of God, that the Kingdom of God can be our Mother and that the Kingdom of God can take care of us, advise us, and teach us.”¹⁰

“We are reminded already of that Great Sacrament for which the people of God will once gather. If we gather for this sacrament even today, crying in our degradation, dragging along our blackness, weeping and moaning, then when we go to that Great Sacrament, which will once be held in Heaven, our foot will be light.”¹¹

⁹ Heikkinen, 225.

¹⁰ Karhumaa, 171.

¹¹ Juntunen, 214.

On the whole the Laestadian sermon follows a clear pattern. For instance, in it the Kingdom of God on earth is created over and over again. The sermon contains much that is found in musical improvisation: All its elements are known, but by combining them in different ways, something unique is created each time. Laestadian sermons are hardly analytical. Key words and sayings follow one another repeatedly.

The Message in a Situation of Interaction

Laestadian sermons are supposed to be delivered by spontaneous inspiration.¹² This requirement is based upon the argument that a preacher is a tool of God who must here and now interpret a message received from God. Of social-psychological interest is the fact that the preacher is thus quite dependent on the situation which prevails at the meeting. He is, in other words, much more at the mercy of the situation than is a minister who gives a prepared sermon in church. The Laestadian preachers acquire, however, a certain technique which differs from that used with written sermons.

The requirement of spontaneity is meant to create communication between the preacher and the congregation. The aim is to transfer the listener to the Kingdom of God on earth. This may occur concretely in that communication happening between the preacher and the congregation. The congregation may react to the message of the preacher by rising and begging him for assurances of forgiveness, i.e. for blessings. The congregation may express during the sermon either anguish upon realizing its sinfulness or the joy following forgiveness. The communication between the preacher and the congregation necessitates that a Laestadian sermon contains many references or allusions meant for the in-group. The preacher refers only briefly to familiar passages in the Bible, or to places, persons, or events familiar to the people belonging to the movement. It can be difficult for outsiders to understand the allusions in question. For the in-group, however, the references receive a special meaning. They become signal words which tell those of the in-group that this is their own preacher and their own sermon. Signal words and signal sayings give the members of the in-group security, and repeated often enough, they trigger off stored-up emotions. Consequently, a Laestadian sermon should always include

¹² Cf. Suojanen, Päivikki, 146 ff. Päivikki Suojanen has analysed the sermon situation of the old revival movement *Rukoilevaisuus*.

phrases pertaining to the Kingdom of God, God's people, the traveller of the heavenly way, and the reconciliatory Blood of Jesus Christ. It includes many emotional key words relating to the purity of taintedness of the heart, to sin, Radiance, Love, the Sun of Mercy (*Armoaurinko*), Light, etc.

Problems can, however, also, accrue from the use of key or signal words. The members of the in-group may weary of the oft-repeated sayings, or they may become dulled so that the words lose their meaning or content. The supporters may expect from the sermon more and more signal words to trigger their emotions. However, the more a sermon contains key words, the more difficult it is for outsiders to understand it. Evidently, the preachers are aware of this problem and, therefore, try to balance their message in such a way that the expectations of the in-group are fulfilled to some extent, while new listeners can also be reached.

An Attempt at Combined Structural and Interactional Analysis

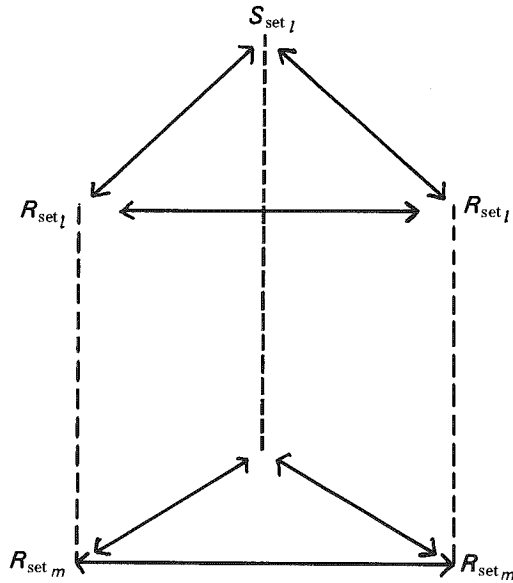
At a Laestadian gathering, communication¹³ occurs between the sender (*S*) of the message and a member of receivers (*R* 1 . . . *n*). Both *S* and *R* have "set-factors".¹⁴ A set is composed of those latent (*l*) and manifest (*m*) internalized response systems which the religious movement has "enculturated", i.e. assimilated, and "socialized", i.e. inculcated in its members. It should, however, be noted that recognizing may occur at both *m* and *l* levels. Consequently, we can construct the following hypothetical graphic model. There is reason to distinguish at least two levels. Characteristic of the one is manifestness (*m/l*), that of the other latentness (*l/m*). Thus, *m* and *l* are dominant and recessive on different levels. This does not rule out the possibility that both could operate concurrently. The relationship in that action must, however, be left for the time being.

When the message's structure is studied in relation to the communication situation, the question of interaction is involved. In the Christian religion, "sin" acts as the symbol of lack or deficiency. A religious message recognizes lack as a structural chain and seeks to liquidate or remove this lack (*L* and *LL*).¹⁵ This being the case, both the sender and the receiver of the

¹³ Cf. Pentikäinen, 134 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. von Fieandt, 17 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Dundes, 208 ff. Read Gothóni, 36 ff; 118, on the concept structure and its use-value.



message exhibit a lack (S^L and R^L). This fact manifests itself especially in the message where it appears under the heading, “the effects of sin” “the Enemy of the soul” (i.e. the Devil), and “the Devil’s tactics”. S interprets that L is comprised of sin (L). It is as though L were seeking a body into which to settle. This mode of explanation is internalized and generally accepted in the movement. In this connection, interpretative patterns are created, preserved, and renewed. This in turn gives the members the readiness to respond.

After introducing the deficiencies, S also explains their cause and how they may be removed. The lacks are caused by the effects of sin or by the Devil, and they may be removed with the help of the powers of the other world, and with the Gospel of Mercy (LL). To preserve cohesiveness among its members, the movement also defines itself vis à vis the outside world. This means that the Devil is attempting to force his way into the gatherings of the believers in order to obstruct the love God’s children have for each other. This is well suited to increasing the cohesion of the movement. At the same time, the temptations of the world, such as television and contraceptives, increase the homogeneity of this flock.

The structural chain, $L-LL$, and the symbols coupled to it are highly stereotyped explanatory models which are senseless and unsatisfactory to

the reason (ratio). The theological pattern of explanation moves on an exceedingly abstract level, but the preacher ties to it sayings familiar to the agrarian community, for instance, "When the roads are in good shape, it's good to drive a manure load".¹⁶ This jump from the abstract to the concrete is characteristic of Laestadianism. Nevertheless, if the frequency of attendance at meetings is used as a criterion, this system does function. Hence, the action must occur mostly on a level other than the cognitive.

The institution of the meetings has in this connection a central role. It operates not only as a religious forum, but also as a place for social contact. Here stored-up, affective emotions find an outlet either in connection with the sermon, which is partly ritualistic, or else, in the form of a confession when a need is felt for "cleaner".

Thus, there are two levels in the interactional situation: collectiveness and the individual orientation. The sender of the message, under the collective control, removes the deficiencies of the individual. These lacks are concretely the deficiencies of the individual. On the symbolic level, they are all understood to be the result of sin. The community of believers feels at least now and then that it is without lacks (p^{LL}), and through this, the deficiencies of the individuals belonging to the community disappear. In the graph, we have presented the matter so that the Kingdom of God as at the point of intersection between the symbolic and concrete levels. At the meetings of the Laestadian movement, the Kingdom of God is continually reborn. The rites of the meetings bring forth the Kingdom of God on earth. The listener can transfer into this kingdom. He is, however, not given any concrete status, but remains in a statusless condition as a child of God and as an indigent traveller. To be sure, the kingdom to which he belongs is more powerful than any other. The Laestadian message operates in the creation of a community transcending status. In our view, the nature of the message can only be understood from this perspective.

	$p^{LL} + S^{LL} + R^{LL}$	
symbolic level	$\frac{S^{L-S} \quad R^{L-S} \quad p^{LL}}{p^{LL}}$	The Kingdom of Heaven
concrete level of reality	$S^L \quad R^L \quad p^{LL}$	God's people

¹⁶ Juntunen, 211.

Conclusions

A Laestadian message follows a clear scheme. The message aims at certain set-factors in individuals. On the basis of the available data, it is difficult to say anything very precise about the action of the setfactors. Nevertheless, as a result of the socialization efforts, they do function in quite a fixed manner. In connection with his socialization, the individual is given an interpretative model which contains both the central concept of sin and its meaning. Socialization, i.e. the inculcation of listeners, occurs at meetings, that is, in the interactional situations of the gatherings, where the aim is to trigger response-reactions on the affective level. Affective, i.e. emotional, expressions generally receive a positive response within the movement. The Laestadian movement namely interpret the individual's affective expressions to be a sign that he has understood his sinful state. The individual learns through this to recognize his problems within a learned pattern of explanation. The problems can be recognized only latently, subconsciously, because the reactions and response-reactions operate on the affective level. Thus, this revivalist movement provides a reaction pattern which makes it unnecessary for the individual to recognize or become conscious of his problems on the cognitive level. At the same time, the movement ties the individual to itself with strong emotional bonds. The message of the movement is especially a message in action.

Against this background, the symbols of the Laestadian movement's messages obtain their meaning. The word, "cleanser", becomes real for the individual because he repeatedly recognizes the presence of sin in himself. The Laestadian movement does not solve an individual's problems through a single experience of awakening, rather, it places him in need of perpetual cleansing.

Above, we have tried to outline how a message functions on the individual level. A message has, however, meaning also on the communal level. The close social relationships between the supporters may be maintained even when the individuals move to another environment, e.g. from the countryside to the city. The status of the believer, created in the countryside, receives a very special meaning in the social arena of a city. The supra-status community of believers in a city provides the first-generation city dwellers badly needed security. Thus, the Laestadian movement acts as a channel for people moving to an urban environment. For the people who

have experienced such a change of habitat, the meaning of the word "traveller" becomes real and concrete.

The analytical model used here is an attempt to combine structural analysis and interactional analysis. In an interactional situation, set-factors operate in the individual. The future study of their composition is of prime importance. Set-factors are formed in an individual, on the one hand, according to the traditions which he has learned, and, on the other, through personal experiences. The religious message aims more or less consciously at these set-factors. When it "strikes home", the message is received and the movement can create conditions furthering its permanence. If the message of a religious movement does not reach its listener, it is probable that the movement will fissure into different groupings. The form of manifestation of the message's structure is the outcome of such interaction.

Our analytical model contains the premise that the structure of a religious message is *L* and *LL*. As we see it, the structure of message of every religious movement can be reduced to such a chain. Each message is conveyed in a situation of interaction. In different religious movements the structure, in question, receives, through an interaction process, its own form of manifestation, that is, its own code. These code systems vary from one movement and one community to another. They are also a condition for further interaction. The codes can be found through the study of the interaction process, and conversely, the way the movement operates can be learned through its codes. In the Laestadian movement we found the central code to be the role of the "traveller" who transcends status. We saw that it corresponds to the needs of a person in a state of transition. In this code, the needs of the collective and those of the individual meet.

The use-value of our analytical model is, of course, inadequate until it has been developed further and tested with other religious communities. Especially interesting are the many new religious groups which today, as innovations, are gaining a foothold in the cities of Finland. We believe that this analytical model will eventually be suitable for studying them as well as other religious groups and movements.

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