

The Finnish Society for the Study of Religion 50 Years: Development and Challenges 'The Small and Daring Society'

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In the first issue of *Temenos* in 1965 Professor Lauri Honko (1932–2002) writes: 'it may seem foolhardy that the youngest comparative religion society in the Northern countries should undertake to fill this gap' – that is, to publish a Nordic journal in comparative religion. It was not only the publishing of *Temenos* that was initiated from Finland, but also quite a few other new things. This is why I have chosen to call my presentation 'The Small and Daring Society'. In what follows here let us take a look at how it all started, and at the main features of development over the past 50 years – and also at what are the challenges that the current situation presents the Society with.

At an international level, the IAHR – the International Association for the History of Religions – was founded in 1950. It is comprised of national organisations within the field of comparative religion. In the early 1960s, Professor Geo Widengren in Uppsala was chair of this association. In 1959, the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History in Åbo had decided to establish a professorship in the history of religion at Åbo Akademi University – the first of its kind in Finland. The first holder of this professorial chair, Helmer Ringgren, took up his position at Åbo Akademi in the autumn of 1962, the same year I started my studies. As early as the 31st of March 1963, he wrote a letter to Lauri Honko asking whether a national society for research into the history of religion could be established in Finland. He expressly said that the IAHR wished for such a society to be founded. Several Eastern European countries had applied for membership, and there was apprehension that this would have a negative impact on the scientific standard of the Association. Finland, however, was regarded as a country with good scientific standards.

It can be said in hindsight that Ringgren turned to the right person. Lauri Honko immediately acted on the suggestion, and wrote in a letter to Ringgren that Martti Haavio had agreed to participate in the founding of

such a society. At this time, Martti Haavio was a member of the Academy of Finland, a very respected position in the Finnish scientific community. He had also been Professor of Finnish and Comparative Folkloristics at the University of Helsinki. Now the establishment of the society advanced rapidly. Professors and Docents were invited to a founding meeting, which was held in Turku on 1 November 1963. Sixteen persons attended and all agreed to found a society. Martti Haavio was chosen as its first chairman. Erik Allardt, Professor of Sociology at Helsinki University became vice chair, and Lauri Honko secretary.

To begin with, the society was called in English 'The Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion'. About 15 years ago, the English name was changed into 'The Finnish Society for the Study of Religion'. It has always been difficult to exactly translate the Finnish term 'uskontotiede' and the Swedish 'religionsvetenskap'.

At the first annual meeting on 12th March 1964, Haavio gave an opening speech in which he emphasized that research into religion had been carried out in Finland for a long time, but within other disciplines. He goes as far back as to Mikael Agricola, who in the 16th century made notes on the old Finnish religion. It is interesting to note that a lot of research which was carried out in Finland during the 19th and 20th centuries used comparative religion as its approach. We only need to think of names such as Uno Holmberg-Harva, Kaarle Krohn, Edvard Westermarck, Rafael Karsten, Gunnar Landtman and Hilma Granqvist, in order to understand the significance of international contributions made by Finnish scholars. Now, however, the time had come to establish a society for research into religion. It is worth noting that there were no actual permanent professorships in comparative religion at this point in time – except for the one at Åbo Akademi, which I have already mentioned. Lauri Honko had recently been appointed to the double chair in folkloristics and comparative religion at the University of Turku, and somewhat later the Faculty of Theology at Helsinki acquired a professorship in the subject. Much later also the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki established a professorship in comparative religion.

Another reason which Lauri Honko put forward for founding the Society was that there was a need to expand the perspective in the teaching of religion in schools. His view was that the curriculum should include much more teaching on the world religions. There was quite an intensive debate on the teaching of religion in the 1960s. The curriculum was gradually revised, and in this process the subject of comparative religion played a major role. The subject later became a compulsory part of the training for future teach-

ers of religion. Personally, I have always regarded this educational task as very important, and hope that comparative religion as a university subject and the Society will continue to advance the issue.

The establishment of the Society for the Study of Comparative Religion made it possible for Finland to apply for membership in the IAHR. As we have seen, this was one of the explicit aims of the Society. At the eleventh IAHR congress in Claremont, USA, the Finnish Society was accepted as member of the association, an event which Honko regarded as very significant. This was one of the reasons why the Society had been created in the first place.

Now Lauri Honko swiftly set about organising the establishment of a Nordic journal. He corresponded widely with key figures in the Nordic region, and gradually acquired guarantees of financial support from all the Nordic countries. Iceland was, however, not a member country at that time. It thus became possible to publish the first issue of *Temenos* in 1965. The foolhardy project of the newly established Finnish Society had been successfully completed. Naturally, Honko was editor-in-chief. In order to secure funding and articles for the succeeding numbers, Honko had to conduct quite an extensive correspondence. It wasn't always that easy to get money and articles from the Nordic countries.

It may be mentioned that *Temenos'* first article was written by Professor Carl-Martin Edsman from Uppsala. It bears the title 'Histoire et religion' and was written in French. In the early years of the journal, articles written in other languages than English, such as French and German, were not unusual. Today, English has practically pushed aside all the other major European languages, which is a pity.

In the first issue, Honko also comments on the name of the journal. *Temenos* is Greek and may refer to a secluded grove or something similar, but also to a sacred place, like a temple. I find it somewhat interesting that the journal was given a name which so clearly associates it with classical humanist learning. It is difficult today to know exactly who suggested that name. It was most likely mainly Honko, perhaps seconded by Ringgren. For several years, *Temenos* was published once a year. However, in the early 21st century, publication was increased to two issues every year. Possibly the journal will at some point be published only in electronic form. Funding for a printed Nordic journal has become increasingly complicated over the years.

The number of members in the new Society amounted to 47 at the end of 1964. In 1973, which was an important year in the history of the Society, the number of members is reported as being 110. It should be noted that to

become a member, someone needs to be proposed by an existing member and then accepted by the annual meeting. Over the decades, several persons have joined the Society, but many of them have been inactive and ceased to pay their membership fee. At the end of 2010, the number of members was 83, of which 45 are full members and 12 are students. 26 persons are permanent members. The system of permanent membership proved to be a less successful feature. The single sum paid for permanent membership was quickly consumed by inflation and other rising costs. Therefore it was abolished about ten years ago. Nevertheless, the permanent membership status remains for those who had previously acquired it. At the same time, membership for students was introduced, which had not existed to begin with. The Society had previously been regarded as a learned society, similar to scientific associations.

I said that 1973 was an important year in the history of the Society. That year, the large Study Conference of the IAHR was held in Turku, with Lauri Honko as the head of the organising committee. The theme was 'Methodology of the Science of Religion'. The conference gathered several of the most renowned researchers into religion at the time, such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa, Th. P. van Baaren, Åke Hultkrantz, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Michael Pye, Melford E. Spiro, Ugo Bianchi, Kurt Rudolph and many others. The conference report was published some years later. The conference has been seen as something of a milestone in research within comparative religion, at least in a Nordic context. Personally, I remember the conference very well. It was impressive to see and hear so many of the famous researchers of the time. Honko himself felt that the conference was very important and compared its significance to the establishing of Temenos. In August this year, a 50-year anniversary conference was organised at the University of Turku.

Another, somewhat later, Finnish initiative was Norel. Norel is a Nordic cooperation which takes the form of a committee on research into comparative religion. The chairs and secretaries of the societies for the study of religion in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden make up the committee. It was established in the mid-1980s. Tore Ahlbäck, who at that point was secretary of the Finnish Society, played an important role in this matter. The idea was that the committee was to facilitate the coordination and publication of articles in Temenos. The journal also had a review section, with Tore Ahlbäck as its editor. Getting books for reviewing and reviewers for the books required an extensive network of contacts. During my period as Chair of the Society in the beginning of the 21st century, Norel was still fairly active, but has now probably declined.

Another important aspect of the activities of the Society for the Study of Religion is the 'Tvärminne seminars'. These are two-day meetings, usually at the Helsinki University zoological station in Tvärminne near Hanko. These seminars have always had specific themes and guest speakers. They are mainly intended for postgraduate students, and have been arranged in cooperation with the Donner Institute, which has contributed part of the funding. These seminars continue to the present day. For many years I participated regularly in these seminars, and was often also responsible for arranging the programme. They have meant a great deal to me at a scholarly level. They have provided the opportunity to discuss important themes within a relatively small circle of researchers.

A Religious Studies Day was also initiated many years ago. These are one-day seminars, often with guest speakers, where important themes are discussed. The location of the seminars alternates between Helsinki and Turku.

Some years ago, an award was introduced for an excellent Master's thesis in the field of comparative religion. Departments suggest candidates for the award, and the Board of the Society makes a decision. The award – a sum of money – is usually given at the annual meeting.

An overview of the first decades of activities within the Society for the Study of Religion shows that it has been an intensive time, and that new and well-functioning forms have been implemented. The input and leadership of Lauri Honko was essential. There is therefore ample reason to say that the Society, despite its smallness, has been active and daring.

Now I wish to move to some personal memories.

In 1971, I switched from my postgraduate studies in church history to focussing entirely on studying comparative religion. At that point, Harald Biezais from Uppsala had become our professor in Åbo. Originally he came from Latvia, where he had completed his first doctorate. His second doctorate, in the history of religion, was from Uppsala. He was experienced as a very fresh and dedicated professor. He attracted several postgraduate students during his initial years in Åbo. Two of these were Tore Ahlbäck and Ulrika Wolf-Knuts. The three of us were proposed as new members in the Society for the Study of Religion and were accepted on the 11th of November 1971. Since I saw this as a society where I would want to be member for several years, I paid the fee for permanent membership. This was a wise decision, which has paid off and which I haven't regretted.

My first review in *Temenos* was published in number 9:1973. It was a review of the two most prominent works within research in glossolalia at

the time: books by Felicitas D. Goodman and W. J. Samarin. At that point of time, glossolalia was my primary research interest. I also wrote other reviews, for example of an extensive methodological book which took a hermeneutical approach. My first actual lecture within the Society took place on the 26th of March 1975. I then spoke on glossolalia among Finland-Swedish Pentecostals. The paper was published in English in 1977 in number 11 of *Temenos*. Its main content consisted of my Licentiate thesis of 1973, on the linguistic aspects of the speaking in tongues.

In 1988 I taught a one-week course in the psychology of religion in German in Marburg. This coincided with a small conference organised by Michael Pye. Its theme was the disciplines neighbouring comparative religion, mainly theology, and my account of the seminar was published in number 24: 1988.

In the Society, I was auditor for many years. Later I was elected member of the Board. I have vivid memories of our meetings at the University of Turku Department of Comparative Religion in Fennicum. Honko was chair, Juha Pentikäinen was vice chair, Aili Nenola(-Kallio) was secretary, later also Tore Ahlbäck. We mainly used Swedish in our discussions – an interesting feature in the Society at that time! For five years at the beginning of the 21st century I was then Chair of the Society.

It is obvious from a survey of the past 50 years that the activities of the Society have been lively and meaningful. The Society has remained relatively small as to its number of members, which perhaps is an advantage. Finances have always been something of a problem, but when the Society has decided to organise a larger event, it has always managed to raise funding for it. For a long time there has been cooperation with the Donner Institute in arranging larger conferences, and I hope this will continue.

The task of the Society is, as before, the safeguarding of independent scientific research on religion. This is a challenge which remains unchanged and central in today's pluralistic and globalised world. Also the educational tasks must be taken seriously. Correct and unprejudiced research and teaching in the world religions and other religious phenomena is the best prerequisite for facilitating understanding between various groups.