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Research, Results, and Reading

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Anders Jarlert

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Saami Exemplary Narratives, Transnational Print Culture, and Religious Reading Experience by the Turn of the 18th Century

Daniel Lindmark

The conversion of the Saami youngster Anders

In February 1764, a 19-year-old Saami youngster was enrolled in the Saami School of Jokkmokk. His name was Anders, and for some years he had been working in the reindeer herding economy, but he had also served as a farmhand in the coastal parishes of Northern Sweden. Despite his age, Anders could not read, and therefore his mother had been requested to send him to school. As a student, Anders displayed normal aptitude and diligence, but he was lacking the right Christian disposition. It seemed impossible to touch him by ordinary means: teaching, religious services, and exhortations. Only after catching an epidemic fever that made him confined to his bed for a long time, Anders gave up his resistance.

One night Anders had a frightening vision, which made him more willing to accept the Christian faith. He was visited by a man in a Saami costume who laid claim to his soul. At a closer look Anders realized that it was the devil himself who had come to call for his rightful property. After having promised to return, the man disappeared head first through the floor. This terrifying incident transformed Anders into a very serious and diligent student, who praised God for having stopped him on his road to perdition.

The narrative about the “Conversion of a Saami youngster” can be analyzed from a variety of angles.¹ In this article, I will situate the story in its historical context and

1 In Daniel Lindmark, *En lappdrängs omvändelse: Svenskar i möte med samer och deras religion på 1600- och 1700-talen*, Umeå 2006, several perspectives have been employed. Various aspects are represented in the following English-language articles: Daniel Lindmark, ‘Vision, ecstasy, and prophecy: Approaches to popular religion in Early Modern Sweden’, *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 59, 2003, pp. 177–198; *idem*, ‘Pietism and Colonialism: Swedish schooling in 18th-century Sápmi’, *Acta Borealia: A Nordic Journal of Circumpolar Society* 23:2, 2006, pp. 116–129; *idem*, ‘Colonial encounter in Early Modern Sápmi’, in *Scandinavian colonialism*

focus on its literary pattern as part of the burgeoning genre of religious exemplary narratives. Special attention will be paid to questions concerning the authenticity, credibility, and exemplarity of religious narratives. The conversion narrative about the Saami youngster Anders and other stories written by the same author will be related to previous research on the production, distribution and reading of religious tracts. Reports to the Religious Tract Society in London on Swedes' reception and reading of tracts will be used as a source of reading experience. The article will end up in a plea for intensified research on the transnational history of religious tracts, including the history of reading experience.

Theophilus Gran's manuscript on the growth of Christianity

The aim of the Saami school system of 1723 was to Christianize the Saami people.² By the middle of the century, one boarding school was in operation in each of the parishes in the Saami region. The story about the Saami student Anders provides a unique interior of the Saami school system. It was authored in 1773 by Theophilus Gran, who had served as a schoolmaster in the Jokkmokk Saami School 1757–1768.

The narrative of the “Conversion of a Saami youngster” was part of a larger manuscript containing “Some collected signs and evidence of the growth of Christianity in Jokkmokk Parish of the Lule Laplands.”³ It was written for the tract and missionary society *Pro Fide et Christianismo*, which had been founded in 1771. When the manuscript was reviewed by Samuel Gagnerus, a society member and trusted reviewer, the first fourteen chapters were found to be both educating and edifying. The subsequent narratives, however, were regarded as problematic, not least as they presented religious

and the rise of modernity: Small time agents in a global arena, eds Magdalena Naum & Jonas M. Nordin, New York 2013, pp. 131–146; *idem*, ‘Colonial education and Saami resistance in Early Modern Sweden’, in *Connecting histories of education: Transnational and cross-cultural exchanges in (post)colonial education*, eds Barnita Bagchi, Eckhardt Fuchs & Kate Rousmaniere, New York 2014, pp. 140–155; *idem*, ‘Educational media in Sápmi: Religious instruction in a missionary context, 1619–1811’, *Bildungsgeschichte: International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 4:1, 2014, pp. 51–62.

- 2 Sections 2–4 epitomize corresponding sections in Daniel Lindmark, ‘De Fide Historica: Societas Suecana Pro Fide et Christianismo and the religious exemplary biography in Sweden, 1771–1780’, in *Confessional sanctity (c. 1500–c. 1800)*, eds Jürgen Beyer *et al.*, Mainz 2003, pp. 219–241. An abridged Swedish-language version of sections 5–8 can be found in Daniel Lindmark, ‘Magisk materialitet och transnationell läserfarenhet: Historiska perspektiv på skriftkulturens utveckling’, *Thule: Kungl. Skytteanska Samsfundets Årsbok* 30, 2017.
- 3 Theophilus Gran, ‘Några samlade tecken och bewis på Christendomens tilväxt uti Luleå Lappmarck och Jockmocks Församling’, in *Berättelser från Jokkmokk: En kommenterad utgåva av två 1700-talsmanuskript till belysning av lappmarkens kristianisering och Pro Fides äldsta historia*, ed. Daniel Lindmark, Stockholm 1999, pp. 39–114.

visions. There were grave reservations concerning Anders' conversion story, but also a chapter about the deathbed of pastor Hollsten's wife was considered highly precarious, especially since the dying woman claimed to have seen her bed full of little people with palm-leaves in their hands. Sceptics would disregard her experiences as visions or phantasies, maintained Gagnerus, and the narrative would create doubt rather than faith. Consequently, Gagnerus could not recommend the manuscript for publication.

The society found Gagnerus' arguments so convincing and the issue so important that it published a revised and enlarged version of his comments in a book with the title *People's last hours*.⁴ In the book Gagnerus rejected stories about criminals who repented and converted under the threat of the gallows. In Gagnerus' opinion, such forced conversions were hazardous as examples. Instead, the deathbed stories should depict the course and ending of pious and virtuous lives.

Gagnerus made a connection between several biographical genres. Grave poems, funeral sermons, eulogies, memorials and deathbed stories were literary forms united by an interest in the life course and death of authentic people, all serving the double function of glorifying the dead and presenting examples to the living. Both grave poems and funeral sermons were seen as hazardous panegyric genres, the latter in particular. When the discrepancy between the real life and the idealized biography of the deceased became obvious to the church attendant, the credibility of Christian faith was at stake.

The credibility of *The edifying deathbed*

Instead of publishing Theophilus Gran's manuscript, in 1775 the society printed one chapter as a separate tract in the series *God's praise out of the mouth of babes and sucklings*. The title was *The edifying deathbed and blissful death of the Saami girl Elsa Larsdotter*.⁵ However, since this child's narrative also had visionary contents, the tract opened with an explanatory preface longer than the narrative itself.

The preface was written by Olof Rönigk, a society member who in 1746 had edited the first Swedish edition of James Janeway's classic collection of children's stories, *A token for children*.⁶ In the preface he discussed whether the deathbed story of Elsa Larsdotter was trustworthy or not by assessing the credibility of both the author and the principal character.

4 Samuel Gagnerus, *Tänkar om människors sista stunder, och deras rätta art och pröfning, till vinnande af de bästa, de säkraste och mäst upbyggeliga efterdömen för en rättskaffens evangelisk tro med christelig wandel*, Stockholm 1775.

5 Theophilus Gran, *Guds Lof Af Barnas och Spena-Barnas mun, Fierde Stycket, Innehållande Lap-Flickan Elsa Lars Dotters Upbyggeliga dödssång och saliga död*, Stockholm 1775.

6 James Janeway, *Andelig exempel-bok för barn, thet är: En utförlig beskrifning, om åtskilliga unga barns omvändelse, heliga och exemplariska lefverne, samt frögdefulla död*, Stockholm 1746.

Rönigk found that the author, Theophilus Gran, consistently appeared in a trustworthy manner: he did not hide behind anonymity, nor did he conceal the name of the Saami girl. Furthermore, he mentioned several exact details to fix the event in time and space and named other witnesses to the occurrences described. Consequently, the story was not based upon hearsay. Instead Gran was drawing on his own personal experience.

Regarding the credibility of the leading character, Rönigk referred to six circumstances: Elsa had a bright intellect and a good memory; she was anxious about her salvation; she was a diligent student; she benefited from a faithful teacher's instruction; she turned to Bible reading for comfort; she proved to have a sensitive conscience. Apparently, Rönigk paid considerable attention to facts revealing Elsa's knowledge and spiritual maturity.

It is obvious, though, that Rönigk in his preface restricted himself to an internal assessment of the credibility of the author and the leading character. The events related in the story were never confronted with external facts. While displaying the intrinsic consistency of the story, Rönigk basically clarified the genre rules of the religious exemplary narrative. From this perspective, Theophilus Gran had simply conformed to a literary pattern that made his story seem trustworthy.

The birth of the Swedish religious exemplary narrative

The narrative structure of Elsa Larsdotter's deathbed story very closely follows the pattern of the pious children's stories in James Janeway's *A token for children*. In Janeway's classic reader, the children exhibit religious precocity. Their families and guardians are stunned by their fervent prayers exercised already at a young age. The children are eager Bible readers, astonishing their surroundings with their exceptional comprehension of religious matters. The Catechism in particular is embraced with affection and diligence. Obedient to their parents and masters, the children serve as examples to their comrades, not hesitating to warn and admonish them. The salvation of the soul for eternity is the highest priority of these pious children, who in their prayers and conversations constantly express their longing for the final unification with God. Turning all their attention to the rewards of eternity, the children on their deathbeds patiently endure the most painful diseases. Despite their sufferings, they refuse medical care and will not even accept the family's comforting. Instead, they themselves comfort their mourning relatives, happily awaiting the hour of release. At the appropriate point in time, death appears as a dear guest, bringing the attendants joy and gratitude.

Theophilus Gran emphasised Elsa Larsdotter's bright intellect and good memory. By singing and reading at home, her older sister had set an example and made Elsa yearn for school in order to improve her Christian knowledge. Accepted as a pupil,

Elsa turned out to be a virtuous and pious child and a very diligent student, reading almost constantly. Well prepared from home, her Christian knowledge improved steadily, especially in the Catechism. Confined to bed by tuberculosis, her fervent prayers intensified, and Elsa happily awaited her final redemption through death. Still a child, she was admitted to the Holy Communion by her pastor, who justified his decision by referring to her remarkable knowledge as well as spiritual maturity and experience. Elsa was more concerned about her relatives than her own sufferings, and urged her pastor to tell her family not to mourn over her death. After having prepared her departure from this life by singing and praying, she comforted the attendants, bade farewell and fell calmly asleep in death.

Consequently, the deathbed story of Elsa Larsdotter was clearly patterned on the pious children's story, but also the rest of Gran's manuscript contains several stories that exhibit characteristic features of the Puritan and Pietist exemplary narrative. The scholar can easily find examples of several sub-genres, such as conversion stories, children's stories, deathbed stories as well as edifying conversations.

In previous research, the manuscript has been disregarded as being too biased to serve as an historical account. The tendency makes the manuscript quite unique in comparison with other contemporary accounts of the state of religion among the Saami.⁷ According to Gran, the parishioners of Jokkmokk were both pious and virtuous. The Saami were praised for their thorough Christian knowledge, their faithful church attendance, their strict Sabbath observance, their high moral standards, their sensitive conscience, and so forth. Every characteristic was followed by examples serving as evidence. Regardless of length, the examples followed the same pattern: The acts of authentic persons, identified by name, age, sex, ethnicity and place of residence, were described and their utterances were quoted with claimed literal accuracy. Participating in the conversations, Gran played the role of an astonished listener to the wise, pious and zealous attitudes of his parishioners. Gran concluded by remarking on the genuine character of the Christianity of the Saami.

Even though Theophilus Gran's manuscript resulted in one printed tract only, it was part of the foundation of a tract production featuring exemplary Christian lives from Sweden. From its very beginning in 1771, the society *Pro Fide et Christianismo* had called for "domestic" and "extraordinary" examples of Christian lives, and Gran's manuscript responded to this call. However, *Pro Fide et Christianismo* never engaged in mass production of religious tracts. The Evangelical Society, which was founded

7 At the same time, Gran presented a positive view of the Christianity among the Saami also in other types of writing, thus, the tendency of his stories was not entirely a matter of genre rules. Still, he depicted the situation in brighter colours than did other observers. See for instance his report from his Dean's Visitation to Jokkmokk Parish in 1776. *Jokkmock 1749–1775: Ämbetsberättelser, visitationsprotokoll och andra berättelser med anknytning till skolmästaren och kyrkoherden Jonas Hollsten*, ed. Sölve Anderzén, Umeå 1998, pp. 169–175, esp. § 3.

in 1808 by men of Moravian inclinations, was the first tract society in Sweden that produced religious tracts en masse, with financial support from British counterparts.

In 1811, the Evangelical Society issued three tracts printed in the Saami language, including a translation of the Elsa Larsdotter deathbed story, though without the preface.⁸ In 1815, the tract appeared in a Finnish translation, and the Evangelical Society also issued several editions in the original Swedish language. Between 1811 and 1820 five editions are known. The last known edition appeared in 1904.⁹ There is very scarce information about circulation figures, but we know for a fact that the tract was used in Saami missions.¹⁰

The religious tract as a new transnational mass medium

By the turn of the 18th century, religious organisations identified the tract as the new mass medium. Soon enough the tract turned into a transnational mass medium supported by interconnected organisations.

In 1799, the Religious Tract Society was founded in London as an inter-confessional Evangelical enterprise.¹¹ In *Address to Christians on the distribution of religious tracts*, the society presented its views of the advantages of using tracts in Christian missions:

This is the age of ingenuity. [...] Whatever may be said as to past negligence, let it now appear that we are busied in discovering every way of access for divine truth into the human heart; and that we are resolved to employ every mean we can think of as conducive to that end.¹²

Of course, the distribution of religious tracts was regarded as a means of eminent and extensive benefit to immediately be employed. In addition to preaching, the written

8 Tuuli Forsgren, *Samisk kyrko- och undervisningslitteratur i Sverige 1619–1850*, Umeå 1988, pp. 52–54.

9 The 1904 edition is not registered in the national Swedish library system Libris (<http://libris.kb.se/>), but it is referred to in Olle Josephson, *Vad läsarna läste: 18-talets religiösa traktater*, Lund 2001, https://www.studentlitteratur.se/files/sites/svensksakprosa/Josephson_rappio.pdf (a printed version was issued in 1997), p. 27, as the 14th and last edition printed in Örn-sköldsvik. According to Josephson, the Elsa Larsdotter deathbed story appeared as a serial story in the magazine *Stockholms dageligt godt* (nos 114–117), a magazine issued in 1775–1776. See also John Holmgren, *Norrlandsläseriet: Studier till dess förhistoria och historia fram till år 1830*, Stockholm 1948, p. 147; Torvald Ribbner, *De svenska traktatsällskapen 1808–1856: Verksamhet och litteratur*, Lund 1957, p. 48.

10 The three tracts that the Evangelical Society published in 1811 were printed in 15,000 copies, most of which were freely distributed among the Saami population. Edvard Rodhe, 'De svenska bibelsällskapens uppkomst', *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 9, 1908, p. 20.

11 *Proceedings of the first twenty years of the Religious Tract Society; being a compendium of its reports, and extracts from the appendices*, London 1820.

12 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 6.

word had always been God's way of promulgating his grace. Handing out tracts was an easy and cheap way of doing good. Instead of being taught from above, which created resentment, the reader of a tract would rather teach himself. The tract was more extensive in its use, as it could be re-perused in a way incomparable to oral teaching.

The Religious Tract Society also set up a number of characteristics of good tracts.¹³ The desired qualities included *pure truth*, i.e. central Evangelical teaching without any sectarian soul-mongering, and *perspicuity*, which meant that a tract should be so plain that it could be easily understood. The tract should also be *striking* and *entertaining* in order to catch and keep the interest of the reader. "When *narrative* can be made the medium of conveying truth, it is eagerly to be embraced."¹⁴ Dialogue was another recommended way of presenting the message. Furthermore, the tract should be *full of ideas*, providing "an *abundant meal* of the bread of life."¹⁵ At the same time, the tracts should be "adapted to various situations and conditions."¹⁶ However, the golden rule was that every tract should contain "some account of the way of a sinner's salvation". Even though the tracts could address various themes, "there should be interwoven the method of a sinner's recovery, from guilt and misery, by the atonement and grace of the Redeemer."¹⁷

In the proceedings of the society, lots of letters can be found, from British and foreign colporteurs of tracts. The letters bear witness to close transnational contacts between individuals and societies, including financial support and translations of tracts. The Religious Tract Society initiated sister societies in many parts of the world, and through financial support it could exercise strong influence on the contents of the tracts published in other languages and geographical areas.¹⁸ In the Annual Report of 1808, the Religious Tract Society informed about its missionary John Paterson, who had stopped in Denmark on his way to India, and then travelled to Sweden instead, where he initiated the foundation of the Evangelical Society "for the purpose of printing and distributing Religious Tracts in Swedish, Finnish, and, if possible, in the Laponese languages", as he reported to London.¹⁹ In connection to this information the Annual Report makes the following statement:

13 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, pp. 14–17.

14 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 16.

15 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, pp. 16–17.

16 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 17.

17 *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 15.

18 See for instance John T.P. Lai, 'Institutional patronage: The Religious Tract Society and the translation of Christian tracts in nineteenth-century China', *The Translator* 13:1, 2007, pp. 39–61.

19 Letter from John Paterson to the Religious Tract Society, dated Stockholm, 3 March, 1808, in *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 114. For more details, see Edvard Rodhe, 'De svenska bibelsällskapens uppkomst', *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 7, 1906, pp. 135–170.

The Committee propose to continue their attention to the formation of Tract Societies in Foreign Parts, and to promote, as far as circumstances will admit, such Institutions in the principal cities on the Continent of Europe. They perceive, with great satisfaction, that their Brethren in North America increasingly feel the importance of Religious Tract Societies.²⁰

Consequently, the Religious Tract Society served as a driving force and a clearing house for the transnational movement of production and distribution of religious tracts. The tract societies represent an interesting example of border-crossing transfer and cooperation that should be made subject to more research from transnational and transcultural perspectives.

Tract societies and the authenticity of the tracts

The Religious Tract Society in London as well as the American Tract Society, which was founded in 1825 in New York, were highly concerned about the veracity of the contents of the tracts. The tract societies held very negative views towards fictional literature.²¹ Fiction was considered as bad literature, both in terms of promoting inferior moral standards and fostering cursory reading habits. While the tract societies utilized the modern printing technology to mass-produce tracts for a growing market, and even employed the narrative patterns of the contemporary sentimental literature of Romanticism, the preferred reading style was traditional: slow, intensive, contemplative, and repetitive.²² As a matter of fact, the tracts were not the ideal reading material, but rather the Bible and other full-length books written by authoritative theologians. The tracts were intended to serve as a means of conversion, soon enough being replaced with more substantial reading contents.

Since the tracts displayed many similarities with contemporary popular fiction, the tract societies were eager to maintain their unique features: the authenticity of the characters and the veracity of the occurrences. The tracts were constantly accused of being fictional, and the tract societies fiercely defended the factual nature of the narratives. In their defence, they developed various strategies, including the withdrawal from the market of tracts of doubtful authenticity.²³ Another strategy was to demon-

²⁰ *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 105.

²¹ David Paul Nord, 'Religious reading and readers in Antebellum America', *Journal of the Early Republic* 15:2, 1995, pp. 241–272, esp. pp. 248–253. This view was held by most evangelicals. See Mary Kelley, "Pen and Ink Communion": Evangelical reading and writing in Antebellum America', *The New England Quarterly* 84:4, 2011, pp. 555–587, esp. pp. 574–575.

²² Nord supra n. 21, pp. 254–256; Cynthia S. Hamilton, 'Spreading the word: The American Tract Society, *The Dairyman's Daughter*, and mass publishing', *Book History* 14, 2011, pp. 25–57, esp. p. 37. This "traditional literacy" view was widely spread among evangelicals. See Kelley supra n. 21, pp. 571–574.

²³ See Hamilton supra n. 22, p. 40.

strate the positive influence that the tracts exerted in terms of religious awakening. Some of the rhetorical strategies bear close resemblance with the argumentation put forward by Olof Rönigk in the preface to *The edifying deathbed and blissful death of the Saami girl Elsa Larsdotter* of 1775.

The most popular tract in England as well as the United States was *The dairyman's daughter*.²⁴ Authored by Leigh Richmond in 1809 and first appearing as a serial narrative in 1810–1811, it was issued in several versions and editions by the Religious Tract Society and the American Tract Society throughout the 19th century.²⁵ Just like the Elsa Larsdotter narrative, the successful tract on *The dairyman's daughter* was about a young woman's edifying deathbed and blissful death related by her pastor, who often visited her and engaged in spiritual conversations.

The authenticity of *The dairyman's daughter* was questioned, and since it was a popular and efficacious tract, its veracity was consistently defended. Just like Olof Rönigk did in his preface to *The edifying deathbed*, the American Tract Society developed arguments for the authenticity of the leading character and the reliability of the author. But while Rönigk restricted himself to an evaluation of information available in the text, the American Tract Society provided extra information: letters from the dairyman's daughter herself, Elizabeth Wallbridge, written statements by her relatives and neighbours, biographical data about the author, etc. The popularity of the tract even caused something akin to literary tourism to the parish of Arreton, Isle of Wight, where Wallbridge had led her life. The plain wooden chair in which she had been sitting during her conversations with her pastor, was sent to the American Tract Society as an authenticated relic.²⁶

Viewed in perspective of the great importance that the American Tract Society attached to the authenticity of its tracts in the 19th century, Pro Fide et Christianismo's handling of Theophilus Gran's manuscript appears even more interesting. When in December 1775 Samuel Gagnerus delivered his review of Gran's manuscript to the board of the society, he found it hard to convince a skeptical reader of the authenticity of religious visions: "Our time is not satisfied by a single testimony from an author of narratives. It takes more to make a complete historical truth. Everything must be proved to the full, confirmed to the full, and documented to the full."²⁷ Obviously, in light of the growing significance of a clear distinction between fact and fiction in re-

24 [Leigh Richmond], *The dairyman's daughter; An authentic and interesting narrative in five parts communicated by a clergyman of the Church of England*, London. The first chapbook versions of the story were published in 1814, in USA by the New England Tract Society.

25 On versions and editions, especially in the United States, see Hamilton supra n. 22.

26 Hamilton supra n. 22, pp. 43–44.

27 Minutes, 29 December, 1775. Archives of Pro Fide et Christianismo, 1:1. National Library of Sweden, Stockholm.

ligious print culture, the utter caution with which Pro Fide et Christianismo handled Gran's manuscript was well motivated.

Tract societies and reading experience

The letters sent to the tract societies contain much evidence of reading experience.²⁸ In the research field of print culture, reading experience is a theme that only recently has attracted a growing interest, manifested for instance in the English Reading Experience Database (RED).²⁹ Yet, historians of reading still claim that there is quite a limited knowledge of the common readers' response to the tracts that were distributed.³⁰ A systematic use of extant correspondence in the archives and publications of the tract societies can bring new light to the history of religious reading, including the biographical exemplary narrative. Furthermore, the reader response can also serve as a source of popular religious practice.³¹

In John Paterson's letter from Sweden to the Religious Tract Society, dated November 20, 1807, there is interesting evidence of both transnational cooperation and reading experience:

There is a very great desire for religious books here, and especially small religious Tracts. In my journies in this country, since I left Denmark, I have had some pleasing proofs of this. Some time ago, a pious clergyman near this place published a Tract at our expense in the Swedish language.³² I had a number of these with me, which I gave away as opportunity served. On returning to the same place in a few days after, I was welcomed as the stranger gentleman

28 Colporteur reports are quite rare to be found in manuscript, but many were published in religious newspapers and annual reports. See for instance Nord supra n. 21, pp. 244–245. Tract societies also encouraged readers to send them accounts of their reading experience. Such testimonials of the efficacy of the tracts were published in order to provide evidence of the authenticity of the literary genre. See Kyle B. Roberts, 'Locating popular religion in the evangelical tract: The roots and routes of *The Dairyman's Daughter*', *Early American Studies* 4:1, 2006, pp. 233–270, esp. p. 261; Hamilton supra n. 22.

29 <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>.

30 See for instance Helen Rogers, "Oh, what beautiful books!" Captivated reading in an Early Victorian prison, *Victorian Studies* 55:1, 2012, pp. 57–84, esp. pp. 57–58. Studies on reader response often make use of diaries, which mainly reflect the reading habits of the more literate classes. See for instance Shelby M. Balik, "'Scattered as Christians are in this part of our country': Layfolk's reading, writing, and religious community in New England's northern frontier, 1780–1830", *The New England Quarterly* 83:4, 2010, pp. 607–640. Colporteur reports often give accounts of common people's encounter with books, but for obvious reasons they are usually restricted to the immediate reception. Nord supra n. 21.

31 "Evangelical tracts provide one of the most promising sources for exploring popular religion", Roberts supra n. 28, p. 236.

32 This "pious clergyman" was Dean Lorentz Christopher Retzius (1745–1818), vicar of Tådene Parish, Skara Diocese. Rodhe supra n. 19, pp. 154–156, 160.

who had given them the books. They thanked me most heartily for them, and told me that many had read them; in some instances the priests had also borrowed them; and in short, a single Tract had excited almost universal attention over a parish. In some places where I fell in with a number together, they took them most thankfully, and were so eager after them, that I could not supply their demands, so that some were in danger of being torn to pieces. They immediately commenced reading them; and after reading a few pages, they came running to me, and with tears in their eyes took me by the hand, and thanked me for such a book. Although we caused 4 or 5000 to be printed, they are all gone, and the demand for more is very great. Indeed, I am convinced that immense good may be done in this country in this way. Nothing is wanting but money; and I hope to be able to raise a considerable sum for this purpose among our friends in this country; but it is to our friends in England that we chiefly look for assistance.³³

Since Paterson's accounts of his activities took the form of letters to the organization he was serving, it is not surprising to find detailed information about translation, funding, printing and distribution of tracts. The concluding remarks of the quoted passage are clearly aimed at keeping the Religious Tract Society supportive of the Swedish project. Also, the readers' response to the tracts is recorded for the purpose of keeping the spirits high. Positive accounts of readers' reception of books may be selective and exaggerated, but they can still provide the historian with useful information. Colporteur reports to the American Tract Society contain similar descriptions, and since they occur alongside with more discouraging accounts, there is no reason to question their veracity.³⁴ Paterson's report may not tell the entire truth, but we have reason to believe that he had encounters with Swedes who were eager to receive his books. Usually, the colporteur did not stay in a place long enough to register the effects of reading, but in Paterson's case his return to the place where he had distributed tracts gave him a first-hand insight into the readers' response to the contents. Obviously, the tract had been well received, and many readers were reported to be moved by its contents. Actually, Paterson's account corresponds in detail with the positive response reported by American colporteurs: (1) the eagerness to receive the tract; (2) the tumultuous distribution when in public; (3) the immediate reading after receiving a tract; (4) the emotional engagement manifested in tears; (5) the gratitude shown.³⁵ While the American colporteurs seldom stayed long enough to witness the outcome of the reading, by returning to the same place Paterson was able to register the efficacy of the tract. This single tract had reportedly made an impact on the entire population of the parish. When returning Paterson was also told that the vicar had borrowed a tract. Even if this might have been an exceptional case of borrowing, the lending of books

33 Letter from John Paterson to the Religious Tract Society, dated Gothenburg, November 20, 1807, in *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 113.

34 See Nord supra n. 21.

35 See Nord supra n. 21.

was a widespread strategy to meet the demand for literature when books were scarce.³⁶

Paterson's long-standing companion Ebenezer Henderson also reported to the Religious Tract Society from their visit to Sweden in 1808. He gave an account of their journey to Finland, which was still the eastern half of the Kingdom of Sweden. According to Henderson, it was "truly gratifying to perceive the avidity with which [the tracts] were received, and the attention with which they were read."³⁷ When arriving in the province of Hälsingland, Sweden, after traveling through the province of Dalecarlia, Henderson and Paterson had visited a clergyman supportive of their cause who had told them about a man from Dalecarlia seeking employment. This man "could repeat 'The One Thing Needful' by heart, and was seemingly impressed with its contents. He had seen a copy of that Tract, which we had given to some person in the village where he lived; and previous to his leaving home, he had committed it to memory."³⁸ If borrowing tracts was one strategy of coping with scarcity, another one was to memorize its wordings. Learning a tract by heart tells a great deal about the appreciation of its contents.

When visiting Sweden in 1814 after being stationed in Russia for some years, Paterson waited on the Bishop of Härnösand Diocese, where a Bible society was about to be founded. Paterson reported to the British and Foreign Bible Society about his meeting with Bishop Erik Abraham Almquist:

In travelling through his diocese, I had observed that those who had Bibles, set so high a value on them, that they kept them constantly locked up, and seldom read them themselves, and never allowed their children or servants to touch them. This led me to suggest the propriety of putting the New Testament into the hands of all youths, to be read by them when around the fire-side. The idea pleased the Bishop, and he immediately resolved to have it executed.³⁹

This account provides evidence of an interesting attitude to spiritual literature. Not only the contents of the book were held in reverence, but also the entire book as a physical artefact was given a sacrosanct status.⁴⁰ According to Paterson, this example of "magical materiality" created a regrettable obstacle to people's access to the contents

³⁶ Balik supra n. 30, pp. 622–628, provides various examples of sharing of religious literature.

³⁷ Between 6,000 and 7,000 tracts had been distributed, out of which 700 were printed in Finnish. Consequently, most of the tracts were distributed to the Swedish-speaking population in Finland. Letter from Ebenezer Henderson to the Religious Tract Society, dated Gothenburg, November 4, 1808, in *Proceedings* supra n. 11, pp. 126–127.

³⁸ Letter from Ebenezer Henderson to the Religious Tract Society, dated Gothenburg, November 4, 1808, in *Proceedings* supra n. 11, p. 127. The tract in question was no. 2 of the Evangelical Society's series of tracts, with the Swedish title *Det ena nödwändiga*, Stockholm, 1808.

³⁹ John Paterson & Ebenezer Henderson, *Extracts of letters [...] during their respective tours through the East Sea provinces of Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Jutland, Holstein, Swedish Pomerania, &c. to promote the object of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, London 1817, p. 29.

⁴⁰ See Nord supra n. 21, p. 260 for an example of making books into "totems".

of the Holy Scripture, but he was happy to have convinced Bishop Almquist about spreading the New Testament to the youth of Härnösand Diocese.⁴¹

The power of exemplarity

In the last example of Swedes' reading experience, as mirrored in the printed reports to the Religious Tract Society, I would like to return to the issue of exemplarity. The evidence of the exemplary power of tracts emanates "From a Minister at a Naval Station" in England.⁴² One day the minister was visited by a man whose outward form reminded him of James Covey, a sailor whose conversion story was published in a widespread tract entitled *An account of the bravery and happy death of James Covey, a British seaman*.⁴³

I was one morning called from my study to a person who wished to see me; when I entered the room, his appearance reminded me of Covey, being a sailor with a wooden leg, who, with tears in his eyes, said, "Here's another Covey come to see you, Sir." I replied, I am glad to see you, Covey; sit down. He then informed me that he was a Swede, had been some years in the British service, had lost his limb in the action of the first of June, under Lord Howe, and was now cook of one of his Majesty's ships in ordinary; it was with reluctance he came into this port, from some report he had heard unfavourable to the place. He had been for some years married to an English woman, who, when on shore, having seen for sale a Tract with a picture of a Sailor in the act of having his legs cut off, was induced to purchase it, supposing that it might contain something that would please her husband. It was the Tract of Covey the Sailor, which he read with uncommon interest, as he had known him, and had heard of him as having been a brave seaman.

After some months trial of the sentiments, disposition, and character of this Swedish Sailor, he was admitted to the Lord's table. His wife, who, at the time she purchased the Tract, was a total stranger to every thing serious, by reading the Tract, conversing with her husband, and hearing the word, is become a decidedly pious woman, and has for some time been admitted also a member of the church. It is now more than two years since the conversion of this sailor and his wife; but, though the minister and members of the church are well satisfied with their conduct, yet knowing their Bibles and their own hearts, they rejoice with trembling. In conversation with me a few days since, he observed – "I am a wonder of mercy! How astonishing it appears to me that I should come from my poor country, serve in the British

41 The "magical materiality" of books represents an interesting intersectional field of research between book history and religious studies. See for instance Kristina Myrvold, 'Pocketbiblar som räddade soldaters liv i skyttegravar', http://religionsvetenskapligakommentarer.blogspot.se/2014/08/pocketbiblar-som-raddade-soldaters-liv_27.html (2014).

42 'From a minister at a naval station', in *Proceedings* supra n. 11, pp. 166–167.

43 Concerning the many tracts featuring seamen, see Mark S. Schantz, 'Evangelical reform, and the market revolution in Antebellum America', *Journal of the Early Republic* 17:3, 1997, pp. 425–466, esp. pp. 446–453.

navy, there lose my leg, come against my will to this port I so much disliked; that my wife, by seeing the picture of Covey, should have been induced to buy the Tract by which I have had my sins so clearly pointed out, and that I and my wife should both be made to love and serve my gracious Saviour. I now earnestly pray for the salvation of sinners for that of sailors, but especially for my poor countrymen the Swedes.”

This extraordinary story is of course inserted in the proceedings of the Religious Tract Society to serve as proof of the tracts’ power to initiate awakening and conversion. In this respect, the report represents a conversion story in itself. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that the report contains a reference to the authenticity of James Covey and his life story, by maintaining that Covey had been known to the Swedish sailor as a brave seaman. The outward resemblance between James Covey and the Swedish sailor might have sparked off the religious change, but from the reporting minister’s point of view, the long-term influence on the inward development that the tract exerted appears to have been more important. The tract served as a means of awakening, but the conversion was a longer process that involved the minister and his congregation. Only after two years, the minister found it safe to tell the story about the two “Coveys”. Furthermore, the report ends with a testimony that the Swedish sailor had given a couple of days before the delivery of the report, in which he underlines the spiritual aspects of his encounter with the tract. Through the tract his sins had been pointed out and he was brought to love his gracious Saviour.

Notwithstanding the report’s character of conversion narrative, the account of the Swedish sailor’s conversion demonstrates the exemplary power of the biographical religious narratives. The Swedish sailor practically identified with the literary character of James Covey. The tract was so well-known that the reporting minister immediately was reminded of its principal character when meeting the Swedish sailor, who in turn could trust the minister to be so familiar with the story that he opened the conversation with a direct reference to the tract: “Here’s another Covey come to see you, Sir.” Of course, there was a striking resemblance between the life stories of the two “Coveys”, including their mutilation, which seems to have been the motivation for the wife of the Swedish sailor to buy the tract and the initial ground for her husband’s identification with its leading character, but the most important part of the exemplary function of the James Covey tract relates to the inward process.

Concluding remarks

The exemplary narratives written by Theophilus Gran in 1773 represented the beginnings of the Swedish production of religious tracts featuring Swedish individuals. Even though the stories were based upon authentic persons’ lives and actual facts, their nar-

rative structure adjusted to Puritan and Pietist exemplary narratives, including James Janeway's children's stories in *A token for children*. The thorough examination of Gran's manuscript that the tract and missionary society Pro Fide et Christianismo conducted, especially concerning its authenticity and credibility and the subsequent exemplarity, focused on issues that would be of the utmost importance for tract societies in the 19th century, including Religious Tract Society in London and the American Tract Society in New York. Being skeptical towards fictional literature, the tract societies consistently defended the authenticity and veracity of their tracts, not least the most popular ones, such as *The dairyman's daughter*.

The mass production and distribution of religious tracts in Sweden started with the foundation of the Evangelical Society in 1808. Initiated and supported by the Religious Tract Society, the Evangelical Society included several translations of English tracts in its series. The border-crossing transfer and cooperation between the Religious Tract Society and its sister organizations in other parts of the world should be made subject to more systematic research from transnational and transcultural perspectives.

Reports sent to tract societies by commissioners and colporteurs provide evidence not only of transnational networks, but also of reading experience. This is true for John Paterson's and Ebenezer Henderson's accounts of their work in early 19th-century Sweden, where examples can be found of various approaches to books and reading, all of which can be identified in reports from other regions of the world. A tentative conclusion might be that evangelical reading experience in the first half of the 19th century was a transnational phenomenon just like the tracts that were read. However, more systematic and refined research is needed to cover all the details and variations of religious reading experience, including the identification with exemplary lives featured in tracts, such as the life story of sailor James Covey, with which a Swedish sailor identified.