Christian Theosophy and the Influence of Böhme in Finland

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Radical Pietism

The influence of the thoughts and religious philosophy of Jakob Böhme on Finnish ground can be determined from the late seventeenth century onward, from which time Boehmenism came to play a significant role within the Pietistic milieu in the country. In the early eighteenth century its anchorage was mainly among returned Carolingian militaries and middle-class citizens in the city of Turku (Sw. Åbo). Later on, Boehmenist influences can be detected predominantly in the area of Ostrobothnia in the central parts of Finland among peasants and artisans.

In the standard (mid-nineteenth century) collection of sources on early religious movements in Finland, the publisher Matthias Akiander dedicates no less than two-thirds of his Preface to presenting the tenets of Jakob Böhme. This is, according to Akiander, for the reason that ‘the school of Böhme with its corollaries deserves special attention in our country, because its doctrines first gained ground here, has been preserved for the longest time and of all the sects has most infiltrated the religious ideas of other doctrinal parties’. (Akiander 1857, 1: vi).

A widespread reading and influence of Böhme can be documented also elsewhere. According to Emanuel Linderholm (Linderholm 1911: 38ff), Boehmenist theosophy was, in at least some regions, actually to pose a real threat to orthodox Lutheranism at the end of the seventeenth century. At this time, Boehmenist thinking was disseminated through the works of Fr. Brecpling and J.G. Gichtel and the latter’s editing of the writings of Böhme in 1682. From 1690 onward, the importance of Boehmenism on the contemporary religious landscape reached new heights due to the works of the English Behmenists John Pordage, Thomas Bromley, and Jane Leade. These influences can from an early stage onwards also be recognised in Finland.

The earliest documented interest in Boehmenist literature was among the first radical Pietists, Lars (Laurentius) Ulstadius (d. 1732) and Peter Schäfer (1663–1729). Although they were not Boehmenists in the strict sense of the
word, they stand out, however, as forerunners of the particular milieu that later was to promote a spread of Boehmenism. In a new edition of J.N. Edenius' church history *Epitome Historiae ecclesiasticae novi Testamenti* (1708), the bishop in Turku Johan Gezelius jr. (1647–1718) appended an account of radical Pietism in terms of two distinct movements, one that used Schwenkfeldian, Weigelian, and Labadistic doctrines, the other consisting of the followers of Böhme. Both Ulstadius and Schäfer belonged mainly to this first category and Gezelius probably, in updating the work with the new heresies, had these two individuals in mind. With Ulstadius we witness one of the earliest appearances of radical Pietism within Lutheranism. After reading Schwenckfeld and Weigel among others, he had resigned from his duty as a minister in his hometown Oulu (Sw. Uleåborg) and travelled to Turku in 1683, where he caused a great stir by interrupting a sermon in the Turku Cathedral 1688; an incident for which he was sentenced to death in 1692, though the sentence was overturned into life imprisonment. Due to the efforts by the church authorities to put an end to the spread of dissenting ideas, Schäfer, as well, was soon afterwards forced under heavy pressure to recant his conviction.

With the passing of time, however, the harsh treatment by the orthodox clergy had the effect of raising Ulstadius and Schäfer to the status of martyrs for later generations of dissenters. Judging his situation in Finland to be impossible, Schäfer left the country and spent more than ten years of restless living abroad. During his peregrinations he met Philipp Jakob Spener, the father of Pietism, in Berlin and worked as a teacher at August Hermann Francke's parish in Halle. From Halle he moved on to Quedlinburg in 1699 to visit Gottfried Arnold. Arnold was at the time deeply immersed in studying Böhme and particularly his doctrine of the Heavenly Sophia, which resulted in the publication of his work *Geheimnis der göttlichen Sophia* the following year. More importantly, Schäfer told Arnold of the persecution that he and Ulstadius had suffered in Finland, which prompted Arnold to include a description of these events in his *Unparteische Ketzer- und Kirchenhistorien* published in 1699–1700. In Holland, Schäfer established contacts with mystics and theosophists such as Gichtel, who mentions him in his *Theosophia practica* (1732). Schäfer’s stay in Holland and notably his acquaintance with Quakers encouraged him to travel to Pennsylvania, where he met William Penn, with whom he continued to correspond after his return to Finland.

Returning to Finland in 1701, and deeply regretting his former repeal of conviction, he subsequently stepped forward as an apocalyptic preacher from the year 1707 onward, recapitulating the criticism Ulstadius had directed at the clergy twenty years earlier. Schäfer similarly received a death sentence, which was altered to life imprisonment in 1709. He was locked up in Turku Castle, from where he was transferred to the Castle of Gävle in 1714.