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Following the Views of Young Former Conservative Laestadian Women on Reproductive Freedom, Procreational Ethos, and Pronatalist Politics

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ABSTRACT

Religion strongly influences the rules and norms imposed on sexual relations, contraceptive use, and family planning. Religious convictions and communal obligations are also often involved in women's struggles with reproductive choices. The Conservative Laestadians in Finland are one example of a conservative procreational religious movement that requires abstinence from premarital sex and upholds a negative attitude towards the use of birth control. In this article, I follow young former Conservative Laestadian women's views on reproductive freedom, procreational ethos, and pronatalist politics. I propose that there is an ongoing upsurge among young former Conservative Laestadian women who resist the movement's procreational ethos. I also suggest that the Laestadian procreational ethos has affinities with the nationalist and pronatalist aims of promoting limitless human reproduction. The article's data is based on conversational interviews produced with young former Laestadian women in the spring of 2021. The women's views assist in understanding religious procreation politics in a light of reproductive justice and ecological sustenance.

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Introduction

Religion strongly influences the rules and norms imposed on sexual relations, contraceptive use, and family planning. Religious convictions and communal obligations are also often involved in women's struggles with reproductive choices (see, e.g., Rantala, 2020a, 2020b; Taragin-Zeller, 2018, 2019). Reproduction affects women's lives, aims, and dreams worldwide, regardless of their social, cultural, and economic status. Religious doctrines limit women's reproductive freedom and choice by imposing teachings about "acceptable" sexual relations and by encouraging the avoidance of contraceptive use and abortion. Globally, religious pronatalist politics have already shown various worrying tendencies. For instance, in the United States, the situation regarding reproductive freedom has developed rapidly recently, with bans on legal abortion. In East Asia, low fertility has become a justification for government policies to promote motherhood and offer financial support for assisted reproductive technologies, while in South Korea, abortion is legal only in instances of rape (Huang & Wu, 2018). Anthropologist Sarah Franklin (2022) recently noted fertility "has also become a major symbol of social change" since the fecundity discourse can be also found in the relationship between nationalist and reproductive politics. It is embodied, for example, in the coexistence of growing support for right-wing politics, discriminating and

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tightening abortion laws, and in the endorsement of heteronormative family formations and the value of motherhood, present equally in religious conservative movements and neoliberal national state politics. Thus, women's right to autonomy and privacy for making sexual and reproductive decisions is an issue of central importance that calls for exploring young former religious women's insights on reproductive freedom and the choices they make concerning their future.

The Conservative Laestadians in Finland are one example of a conservative procreational religious movement. The Conservative Laestadians are part of the Laestadian revival movement, which started in nineteenth-century Lapland and spread across the Fennoscandia. The Laestadian movement was founded upon the work of Swedish-Sami botanist and preacher Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), who lived in Swedish Lapland in the nineteenth century (Talonen, 2001b).¹ Laestadius's teachings gained popularity among the Swedish-Sami revivalists in Karesuando, Sweden, in 1846; within a few years, the revival movement had spread across the Nordic countries, gradually shifting the focal point of the revival activity to Finland (Lohi, 2007). Currently, there are an estimated 200,000 Laestadians worldwide, most of whom live in Finland—largely in Northern Ostrobothnia—but also in Sweden, Norway, and North America. In Norway and Sweden, the Firstborns form a primary group of the Laestadian tradition; there are also Firstborn congregations in the south of Finland, but also in America (Andreassen, 2011; Talonen, 2001a).² Since great schisms and expansions separated Laestadianism (see Talonen, 2001b), it has evolved from small spiritual communities into an extensive “educational Christianity” while maintaining a communal lifestyle (Suolinna & Sinikara, 1986, p. 156).

Laestadian conservative and patriarchal values are explicit in the appraisal of motherhood and highlight the mother's important role in educating Laestadian generations to come. The Laestadian communal faith and lifestyle are rare even within the Lutheran Church, which tends to highlight individual practices of faith (see, e.g., McGuire, 1997, 2008; Woodhead, Partridge, and Kawanami, 2016). However, Laestadianism offers a highly relevant context for discussing sexuality, gender, and reproductive justice, since the Laestadian pre-modern Christian views often contrast with the views of postmodern society (see Andreassen, 2011, p. 104).

The Conservative Laestadian movement in Finland is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and has circa 120,000 members.³ In Finland, the movement is known for large families and a negative attitude towards birth control. The Conservative Laestadians in Finland, similarly to other conservative religions, such as Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and Muslims, require abstinence from premarital sex and uphold a negative attitude towards the use of birth control (e.g., Krull, Pearce, & Jennings, 2021; Srikanthan & Reid, 2008). However, young women in conservative movements, such as the Conservative Laestadians, often criticize and object to these rules and norms. Today, approximately half of the Conservative Laestadians born into the movement disengage from it (see Valkila, 2013; see also Keskipohjanmaa, 2008). Young people's disengagement could be considered an indication of important political changes in the movement and in society, and an important topic for research.⁴

This article focuses on the views of five young former Conservative Laestadian women who had disengaged from the movement in Finland. I examine the young women's views on reproductive freedom and the procreational politics of the movement. The interest is especially in the young women's perceptions of the Laestadian procreational ethos and its possible connections to nationalist and global pronatalist interests regarding reproduction and women's reproductive freedom. I employ a notion of “procreational ethos”, which here describes the expectation that mothers still face today in the Conservative Laestadian communities in Finland regarding the use of birth control and family planning.

The procreational ethos of Western religious movements requires examination not only for its explicit gender inequality—especially concerning women's reproductive freedom and choice—but also for its endorsement of white middle-class heteronormative family values involving questions such as which bodies are eligible for reproduction and which are not, leading to unequal chances in life (Cromer, 2020; see also Murphy, 2017). Procreational politics, likewise pronatalism, requires

promoting the naturalization of the nuclear family unit and motherhood as a system for legitimizing constant reproduction and progress through alternative reproductive means. This would ensure the nation's survival and the reproduction of the desired offspring.

For the last two decades, procreational politics and reproductive freedom have been discussed within and beyond the Conservative Laestadian movement. In the media, the Laestadian procreational doctrine, with its negative attitude towards premarital sex and contraceptives, is often perceived as a human rights issue, as the promotion of reproduction could be understood as an obligation for young women to procreate (YLE, 2009, 2013). Several studies and novels focus on the Conservative Laestadian family and motherhood (e.g., Alasuutari, 1992; Kutuniva, 2003, 2003; Nissilä, 2013; Pylväinen, 2012; Rauhala, 2013; Siljander, 2019; Toivio, 2013), but none address the questions of reproductive freedom or the procreational politics of the Conservative Laestadian movement from the young women's experiential point of view.

Research milieu, materials, and methods

The Conservative Laestadian movement is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The Laestadians make up over two per cent of the population in Finland, and on average, half of those born into the Laestadian faith leave the movement. Often, their disengagement goes unregistered because of the shame intact (Valkila, 2013). The Laestadians⁵ operate officially through the Centre Organization for Conservative Laestadians in Finland (SRK) and via their main media, a newspaper called *Päivämies* (www.paivamies.fi).⁶ The SRK arranges a yearly congregational gathering, the *Suviseurat*. Local Association for Peace organizations take care of the day-to-day running of the Laestadian communities, sermons, and services in their own dedicated premises throughout the country.

The Laestadian procreational ethos centres on the continuous growth in the number of its members. To this end, motherhood has special significance to the Laestadian movement and the women in the movement: a young, unmarried Laestadian woman transitions from being a sister to being the mother of a large family (Alasuutari, 1992; Nissilä, 2013; Nykänen and Luoma-aho, 2013). Most Laestadians are born into the faith, since endogamy is common among Laestadians; converting into the doctrine is rare (Valkila, 2013). Young Laestadians often learn to consider the use of contraceptives as being against the Laestadian natural attitude towards childbearing, according to which all children are sent by God and are therefore to be gratefully received (Rantala, 2018; interview data, 2021; see the affinities with Orthodox Jews in Taragin-Zeller, 2018, 2019). Especially in Ostrobothnia in Finland, the area most populated by the Conservative Laestadians, the fertility rates and the number of children in Laestadian families are four times higher than the Finnish average in other parts of the country (Valkila, 2013).

Whereas for most people, family planning is about decisions on whether or when to have children, for Laestadians, family planning is in the hands of God, which often makes personal reproductive choices unnecessary. In other words, within the Laestadian procreational context, the term reproductive freedom could be understood as freedom from reproductive planning or family planning, as the choice is made to follow God's will. However, for some Laestadians, to follow God's will means to follow the procreational ethos of the movement—in other words, abstinence from the use of contraceptive methods—while for some Laestadians, it means making personal reproductive choices and using contraceptives openly or discreetly, depending on one's family and community. Overall, Laestadian reproductive freedom differs greatly from the common understanding of reproductive freedom as an individual's right to decide when, whether, and how many children one will have (Roberts, 2015; Ross & Solinger, 2017).

The data was produced through conversational online interviews with 23 women, all of whom identified themselves as women. The women were between 24 and 49 years of age, and from various educational and social backgrounds and locations in Finland. Four of the young women whose views I examine in this article had or had studied for university degrees or were university students,

and one was studying for a polytechnic degree. The anonymized online interview data consists of 38 hours of recordings, comprising approximately 900 pages of transcriptions. Since the young women were part of a marginal religious group, anonymization of the data was important. Thus, in this article, I use pseudonyms to avoid possible identification that might cause problems for the women, the women's families and their community.

The data is part of a three-year research project where I explore the bodily self-determination of former Conservative Laestadian women using feminist open-ended (Rantala, 2018, 2019) and arts-based methods (e.g., Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Knight, 2021) within a posthuman theoretical framework focused on human reproduction and ethics of care (e.g., Haraway, 1988, 1997; Tronto, 1993). My interest in studying the former Conservative Laestadian women's views on reductive freedom and procreational ethos derives from my own family background in the Conservative Laestadian movement and my previous research on the future aspirations of women and mothers belonging to the Conservative Laestadian movement (see Rantala, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). My family background in the movement has enabled me to engage with the women and produce data, previously through autobiographical writings and memory work, and more recently via conversational online interviews with former members of the movement (interview data, 2021).

Most of the young women in the interview discussions identified themselves as feminists, and shared their concern for women's limited reproductive freedom within Laestadianism and beyond. They were critical of the question of procreation and the impact of their own choices on the future of our planet and its ecological sustenance. However, Laestadianism does not offer much ground for feminism, as the Laestadian ethos finds its fulfilment and realization in Laestadian motherhood and procreation (Rantala, 2019, 2020a). The Laestadian procreational ethos is not particularly supportive of women and women's opportunities, even though motherhood is at the core of securing the continuity of the movement and educating children into the culture of the community. In this light, the young Laestadian women's disengagement from the movement seems to form its own feminist project, which brings forth the transformative voices of the younger generation of former Laestadian women (see also Pelkonen, 2013).

In the following sections, I examine the views of five young former Laestadian women, all in their twenties or early thirties. I begin with the young women's resistance to Laestadian natural attitude and obligation to procreate, and then move on to address the reproductive freedom and "respect for life" discourse within Laestadianism. I close with a discussion of the nationalist and pronatalist political connotations of declining birth rates, and the racial and religious inclinations of reproductive politics in Western societies.

Natural attitude and obligation to procreate

The natural attitude towards childbearing forms the core of the Laestadian procreational ethos (Rantala, 2018). The Laestadian idea of 'natural attitude' derives from the book of Genesis in the Bible, in which God gives humans the task to populate the earth: "to be fruitful and multiply".⁷ Generally, Laestadians are expected to avoid contraceptive methods since, according to the Laestadian official view, they interfere with the duty to follow God's will in producing offspring. This "natural attitude" found in the Laestadian procreational ethos was also explicit in the interviewed women's views when discussing childbearing:

Researcher: You talked earlier about the naturalness [of motherhood].

Jenni: A woman's body is ready [to be impregnated] every month . . . since I have never been pregnant or given birth, I feel that I cannot really comment on that, but I just see it as natural . . . however, it isn't good for the body not to have time to recover between [pregnancy and] labour, this is why I don't consider it natural to give birth every year . . .

Since Jenni sees gravidity as a natural state for a woman's body, for which it prepares every month, her view seems to share the idea of naturalness of motherhood within Laestadian official ethos.

However, for her the idea of naturalness mainly denotes the expected biological readiness of women's bodies to be impregnated every month, not the Laestadian ethos of "natural attitude" or "natural order" located in the biological necessity of reproduction, since she still perceives successive pregnancies and child labour as unnatural and too stressful for a woman's body.⁸ As many Laestadian women still often go through sequential pregnancies and labour by following the pre-ordered aims of the religious doctrine, it could be argued that the Laestadian female body is colonized by the movement's procreational aims (Nissilä, 2013). Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that the Laestadian women would not have control over their own body as far as their reproductive and sexual rights are concerned—since as Finnish citizens they are free to make their own reproductive choices—but rather to suggest that what the Laestadian women are often expected to desire the most is to follow the Laestadian religious ethos (their faith) rather than their own will (memory work data, 2013; interview data, 2021).

In the Laestadian procreational ethos, the emphasis on motherhood forms the "sacred core" that enables the salvation of both the mother and her community through the mother's consecutive pregnancies and childbirths:

Annu: I have a sort of trauma connected to this procreation issue . . . I am the fifth child, and having four children was still normal where we used to live, but nobody had five children. I am the first Laestadian child, and the others are these [ordinary] children, and me and my younger siblings were born because we are Laestadians and since all the children are received . . . therefore, I thought for a long time that the only reason that I exist is that my mother can go to Heaven [have an eternal life].

Annu's experience shifts the discussion on Laestadian procreational politics beyond individual reproductive rights and salvation to the community and its power. The procreational ethos seems to operate through the individual desire to belong and be recognized as a valuable member of the religious community. Therefore, the question of family planning or reproductive choice is not necessarily relevant for many Laestadians; their family planning is in God's hands, and is not an individual choice. For Laestadians, placing their family planning in the hands of God means trusting that they will be guided, and not making reproductive decisions themselves. In concrete terms, being guided means that the power of individual reproductive decisions is given to the community (Kallunki, 2013; Rantala, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). For some Laestadian couples this actualizes as a willingness to turn to the male laymen preachers in their congregation for guidance concerning the matters of family planning, sexual relations and contraceptive use (memory work data, 2013; interview data, 2021). Within the guidance led by male laymen preachers there is a pressure oriented towards women to avoid the use of contraceptives since the women's value as members of the community is measured by the number of children they have (memory work data, 2013; interview data, 2021; see also Nissilä, 2013). Furthermore, to be a full members of the movement, women also need to prove their virtuousness by avoiding premarital relations and by marrying young. In other words, the mother's virtuousness is the criterion for her salvation and for securing her place in the movement and the afterlife. However, a mother's salvation being dependent on the number of children she can give birth to also makes childbearing a matter of religious power politics; the women's desire to belong seems to position them as responsible for the continuity and extension of the Laestadian movement through uninterrupted reproduction.

The function of salvation, as depicted in the previous reflection, represents the Laestadian aim and the aims of other conservative religious traditions oriented towards infinite growth and wealth (see Haraway, 1997). These religious organizations establish their existence and power through the apocalyptic religious ethos of salvation and fulfilment on the one hand, and a negative attitude towards contraceptive use and abortion combined with the encouragement to procreate on the other. The ethos of salvation and fulfilment functions through the narratives of the "chosen people" who hold the keys to God's kingdom in their sacred community and through apocalyptic narratives of progress and temporality that share affinities with neoliberal politics (see Haraway, 1997; Kallunki, 2013; Toivio, 2013). Laestadians take care of the continuation of the movement through

reproduction, since they do not convert new members to the movement. One of the interviewees, Helmi, gives further insights into the Laestadian procreational narrated figurations and connects these to what she, like the other former Laestadians, calls the “obligation to procreate”:

Helmi: There is a rather peculiar perspective to childbearing in Laestadianism as often Laestadians seem to have children without really wanting them, but because it is not okay to stop breeding . . . If you look at it from the Laestadian perspective that nobody else is going to Heaven . . . I think this [obligation to procreate] should be a sin instead of that some tired Laestadian mother doesn't want to have more children . . . I never really understood it.

For Laestadians, the sin is in the use of contraceptive methods, which limit the uninterrupted flow of offspring. The natural flow forms the core of the religious ethos of salvation and eternal life, in which the number of children you have equals your level of virtue in the community and how this leads, according to Helmi's observations, to consecutive unwanted pregnancies and labour. Her view suggests that many children are born into Laestadian families due to the mother's desire to be seen as pious and worthy in the community and secure her own salvation. The Laestadian religious procreational ethos operates through women's piousness and communal duty, thus orientating how women perceive themselves, their duty as members, and their worth in the movement. For the Laestadian movement, this adopted procreational ethos is essential, since the existence of the movement depends on uninterrupted reproduction occurring through women's transgenerational reproductive practices and on the women's fertility and willingness to become young mothers ready to bear sequential pregnancies and childbirths.

The Laestadian canon promises women a valuable position in the community as mothers. It promises inclusion, and being part of and connected to a loving community. However, this promise includes some challenges. The Laestadian requirement of uninterrupted flow of offspring, in the form of consecutive pregnancies and labour, can be disastrous because it creates unrealistic expectations for women of belonging through being “productive”. This divides the women based on their in/fertility and their bodies' strength. The Laestadian promise connotes a “cruel optimism”, defined as “. . . a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realizations is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic . . . Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (Berlant, 2011, p. 94). This optimism for a Laestadian woman concerns not only surviving, but also successfully thriving, as a mother through successive pregnancies, childbirths, and a large family. Within the religious reproductive (con)figurations, motherhood demands an unnatural kind of resilience, strength, and flexibility to be able to bounce back from one hardship after another (Bracke, 2016). This neoliberal mode functions on vulnerability and, in contrast to resistance, works to promote the women's desire to become mothers through the promises of legitimate membership and the optimism of salvation through maternal relationality.

Resilience plays a prominent role in forming the Laestadian mother subject, who, following religious doctrine, is believed to be free and following God's will. Resilience and resistance have much in common, but here they promote very different ethics; where resistance promotes change and fighting injustice, resilience promotes adjusting to the community's requirements (see also Bracke, 2016.) Resistance in adjusting to community rules appears to be one way for women to escape the religious doctrine and the promises these figurations involve. Survival requires being able to adjust to the prevailing conditions and make changes to those conditions. Not being able to adjust or make changes to the rules in one's community often leads to a desire to disengage from the movement.

Respect for life and reproductive freedom in Laestadianism

The young former Laestadian women refer to the procreational ethos of the Conservative Laestadian movement as an obligation to procreate. The term “obligation” connected to

childbearing is only used by former members of the movement or non-Laestadians. Instead, Laestadians have a “natural attitude” towards childbearing, according to which childbearing is a part of the Heavenly Father’s family planning, neither a human affair nor a choice involving birth control and contraceptive use. Eerika’s observations seem not to share the Laestadian attitude towards childbearing because of the other subsequent expectations:

Eerika: When I was young, I did not want any children. The reason was in the Laestadian doctrine, which imposes on you the thinking that if you want children, you must get married. In the Laestadian ‘framework’, you are not allowed to use contraceptives, and therefore you lose the opportunity to make decisions concerning your own body . . . I didn’t want ten children . . . this [framework] is, of course, the ban of birth control in Laestadianism, which especially the liberal Laestadians try to defy by using contraceptives . . . but the official stance is that you must welcome all the children since it is God’s will.

This implied expectation for young Laestadians to marry young and start a family in avoidance of premarital sex and contraceptive use, to which Eerika refers, partly explains why many members, especially young women, disengage from the movement. Although movement’s banning the use of birth control has been discussed within media for the last ten or fifteen years, today, the officials still do not employ the expression,⁹ and neither do the Laestadians themselves, due to its negative connotation. Instead, the officials use the slogan “respect life” to refer to the task people were given in the Bible to fill the earth.¹⁰ This limitless procreation, which Eerika indicates, is the official stance of the Laestadian movement.

The slogan “respect life” echoes the rephrasing that ultra-Christian pro-life and anti-abortion campaigners have used to oppose laws on reproductive choice and freedom in the US.¹¹ Currently, Agenda Europe, the European network of ultra-Christian, anti-abortion, and far-right organizations, is seeking to influence abortion policy in Europe, replicating the anti-choice movement in the US.¹² It could be argued that the fact that Laestadian officials use the same phrase as some pro-life organizations and right-wing religious campaigners is not an innocent coincidence but a deliberate statement endorsing an authoritarian attitude towards reproductive choice and freedom within Laestadianism. In this, the Laestadians seem to support other religious coalitions in similar pronatalist efforts along with other patriarchal laws, such as denying women’s right to priesthood, which significantly limit the freedom and rights of women within the movement. Meanwhile, an increasing number of young Laestadians find it hard to live up to the movement’s ideals in their daily life and therefore decide to leave.

During the past decade, the Laestadian-imposed rule concerning the avoidance of birth control has led it to be viewed as a human rights issue¹³ and placed Laestadian women at the centre of Finnish media discussions.¹⁴ Imposing such strict rules and expectations on members could be considered a contentious undertaking in today’s Finnish society, where reproductive choice and access to reproductive services are constitutional rights (Homanen, 2017). Women’s reproductive rights and freedom are questions of equality and human rights since women’s right to make reproductive choices concerns not only their life and future as women but also society and the next generations of women as a whole. Reproductive justice generally stands for all women having full control over all aspects of their sexual and reproductive lives, including a woman’s right to decide when and whether to have children (Roberts, 2015). The terms “reproductive rights” and “reproductive justice” are often used interchangeably, but they are rooted in different approaches, policies, and constituencies. The term “reproductive rights” refers to efforts to ensure that people have the legal and political ability to make their own sexual and reproductive choices, while “reproductive justice” refers to our human right to control our bodies, our lives, our sexualities, our gender, our work, and our reproduction.

Ross and Solinger (2017, p. 12) remind us that “we cannot understand these experiences of fertility and reproduction and maternity separate from our understanding of the community—the social context—in which they occur”. Similarly, according to Ross and Solinger (2017, p. 16), “the reproductive justice history does not foreground the concept of individual choice”. A legal right to

reproductive services does not mean those services are accessible, equitably distributed, and non-coercive; sometimes, restrictive community laws, such as religious beliefs, can prevent individuals from accessing abortion, birth control, and other reproductive care (Ross & Solinger, 2017). On the contrary, individual choices are only as capacious and empowering as the resources one's community can offer.

Helmi observes how the official Laestadian attitude towards the use of birth control affects the members of the community and how they deal with it:

Helmi: . . . there is the pressure [to have successive pregnancies] within the community; however, many people regulate the number of children by using various contraceptive methods but yet they are careful not to raise suspicions . . . but still, as I understand . . . the number of children in the Laestadian families have diminished especially in the south [of Finland] . . .

In the interview, Helmi sees that contraceptive use is rising among Laestadians. In her view, this is about progress that is already resulting in smaller families within Laestadianism in Finland. Despite the Laestadian movement's official negative attitude towards contraceptive use, many Laestadians secretly use contraceptive methods. This is probably due to a variation within interpretations regarding contraception in the movement: some members perceive the procreational ethos as a law to be obeyed literally, while others perceive it as guidance within which there is room for a choice to decide how to approach it (see Rantala, 2018). The difference between approaches to the procreational ethos and its interpretations is explicit in how the members perceive procreation and their reproductive rights and freedom. The views of the women in my study show that either individual experience of freedom experienced in the decision-making concerning reproductive choices or the community's approach to the question of contraceptive use seems to affect the members' willingness to remain in the movement; but also that in the case of disengagement, these experiences and attitudes continue to affect the former members' ability to cope and come to terms with the teachings of the movement (interview data, 2021; memory work data, 2013).

Declining national birth rate and its political connotations

Eerika: The Finns are strongly encouraged to reproduce . . . the term 'synnytystalkoot' is used in the media and in the national political discourse to improve the low birth rates in Finland.¹⁵

National concern for the declining birth rate, regularly discussed by the Finnish government and national newspapers, has grown into a plea for Finnish citizens (read: heterosexual couples) to have more babies (Honkasalo, 2018). This so-called 'synnytystalkoot',¹⁶ the attempt of the previous national government to increase the number of Finnish citizens, was discussed in the interviews together with the national media discourse concerning the official encouragement for Finns to procreate:

Inka: My personal orientation is towards human rights and equality issues, and from this perspective, I have pondered especially why we need specifically Finnish babies in this world.

Eerika: When you think about the Finnish politics on family reunification, the message is very clear that what kind of people we want here that for instance refugee families are not wanted but then again white hetero Finnish families are encouraged [to procreate] . . . so there is like this hierarchy according to which some families are more eligible than others [for reproduction].

Inka and Eerika strongly disagree with the prevailing national ethos that Finns should be encouraged to reproduce while at the same time wanting to limit immigration. Eerika perceives the question of reproduction as an issue of human rights and reproductive justice: Who is allowed to be born and on what basis? Thus, the plea for Finnish citizens could be seen as part of a "new era of pronatalism intent" (Murphy, 2017, p. 139), which seeks to address declining populations of particular ethnic/racial compositions, such as the proclaimed demographic emergencies of not

enough of the right kind of people (Clarke, 2018).¹⁷ The gaze of nationalist desire is oriented towards the power of the same, echoing the populist ethos, which considers people in religious minorities as others, and as a threat to our already “achieved equality” (Lähdesmäki & Saresma, 2014, p. 299). As former Laestadian women, Inka’s and Eerika’s insights can also be read as coming from the margins of power, as the young women are critical of their former community’s procreational and exclusive ethos emphasizing the emergency of Laestadian procreation but also of the Finnish pronatalist politics which similarly focus on the selective reproduction of the nation, encouraging mostly white Finnish hetero couples to reproduce.

The Laestadian procreational ethos, with its slogan “respect life”, has pronatalist connotations. Furthermore, the Laestadian procreational ethos, in its negative attitude towards the use of contraceptive methods, has affinities with the extreme pro-life and anti-abortion campaigns of conservative Christians in the US (Cromer, 2020). These campaigns have successfully overruled the established laws permitting reproductive rights and freedom for all US women.¹⁸ Similarly, in Laestadianism, not only is procreation promoted, but also the fertility treatments used among Laestadians are accepted, even though or exactly because infertility is not seen as God’s will:

Annu: It is kind of contradictory that reproduction is God’s will, and then infertility is not. For me, there is a clash that if you are not allowed to use contraceptives and decide how many children you would like to have, but it is totally okay if you become a parent through IVF treatment . . . personally, I do not have anything against that, but since having a child and a family are so important within the movement, then why is an intervening reproductional process with this [IVF] not a big deal?

Annu points out a significant phenomenon within the Laestadian movement. Contraceptive use is not allowed as it interferes with God’s will and the natural order of things. In contrast, fertility treatments are not considered to intervene with God’s will or the natural order. According to Annu and others, both fertility treatments and adoptions are accepted within the movement, a fact that could be linked to the possible progress in both the number of members leaving the movement and contraceptive use being on the rise among Laestadians due to the current transformation within the movement. Similarly, in Israel, there is already a tradition of more than three decades where families within Orthodox Judaism, which is known for its procreational aims, seek help from national fertility clinics. These clinics also offer services for Jewish families outside Israel, which could be considered to demonstrate both political and national interest in recruiting new members into the Jewish community and nation-state (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016). These procreational aims, which seem to have national, racial, and religious inclinations, reflect the current selective reproductive decision-making taking place among various religious movements in Europe and among white Christians in the US (see Cromer, 2020).

Within the patriarchal-nationalist and pronatalist politics of conservative religions, women become reproducers of the religious ethos and movement (Katz Rothman, 2007). Likewise, Laestadian women are unwilling bearers of the religious procreational ethos and “excessive reproduction”, successive pregnancies, and childbirths, as documented in the accounts of both Laestadian and former Laestadian women (Rantala, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; interview data, 2021). Nation and nation-state are central categories dictating relations and order of things in the world (Lähdesmäki & Saresma, 2014). However, envisioning Conservative Laestadianism and the nation-state together, we can spot similarities in the worldviews that they promote. Nevertheless, nation and nation-state, like a religious movement, are categories such as being Laestadian or a Finn which endeavour to erase cultural differences but are also daily constituted and contested in those differences.

The current transformational politics within Conservative Laestadianism questions the subjugated role of women and their limited and regulated status in the movement. The politics have a built-in feminist agenda, which embraces women’s individuality, emancipation, and freedom, and for which motherhood represents subjugation. The transformation has managed to endorse women’s rights in the movement. Nevertheless, it has also fortified the upsurge of the movement’s

opposite prevailing conservative ethos, which endorses the importance of motherhood and housewifery, as well as men's exclusive right to lead the community. This conservative "turn" seems to be a backlash against current transformational politics. While the "modern wing" of the movement seems to move towards more open and inclusive politics, the "conservative wing" seems to move towards even more conformist ways and values, such as highlighting the separate duties of men and women in the communities. (Rantala, 2018; interview data, 2021.) Therefore, the young former Laestadian women's disengagement and criticism on questions of reproductive freedom and the procreational ethos of the movement should be understood as part of this feminist project, the resistance to the conservative values of the movement and the fight for recognition of women's potential within the movement. These former Laestadian women live within double standards and marginalization; they are on the margins of power in society as former religious women for their past belonging, and in their former community as women with the special mission of maintaining the movement through reproduction. In this feminist project, the women's situated visions work as a critical lens, the lens of former colonized reproductive bodies, to view the world within.

Concluding insights

Reproduction, pronatalism, and population control are always a question of politics and the nationalist aims of the powerful. Similarly, these are always part of patriarchal ideology, which extends deeper than male dominance (Katz Rothman, 2007). Patriarchal-nationalist politics can be found entwined in the hope of continuity in the pronatalist ethos, which imposes the reproduction of the community on women (see Albanese, 2007). Like the Laestadian procreational ethos, nationalist prenatal politics emphasize patriarchal family values while supporting nationalist and neoliberal values in promoting reproduction (see Cromer, 2020; Farris, 2017).

For many Conservative Laestadians, reproductive choices and family planning are in the hands of God. Choosing whether or when to have children is seen as sinful and against the natural attitude towards childbearing, according to which all children God sends are to be gratefully received. Within Laestadianism, women's compliance to the reproductive aims of the movement is a contributory act serving the community and manifests in multiple ways. For example, the number of children one has reflects one's willingness to be a pious member in the eyes of the community. This obedience to God's will includes avoiding the use of birth control. However, imposing such strict rules on members is a contentious undertaking in today's Finnish society, in which there is a constitutional right to reproductive choice and access to reproductive services. Therefore, in the case of the former Laestadian women interviewed for the article, it is not a question of not having reproductive rights, since the women have the legal right and access to family planning and contraceptives as Finnish citizens. Rather, having belonged to a conservative procreational religious movement often affects their choices in reproductive matters and the reasons for using or avoiding contraceptive methods. Thus, for these young former Laestadian women, becoming a mother is now more about a choice than about belonging, even though their past belonging is echoed in their views on reproductive justice, rights, and freedom and still affects their choices beyond the movement.

By taking up family planning and using contraceptives, but also by leaving the movement, the young women explicitly resist the procreational aims of the movement and its unreasonable expectations for young women (interview data, 2021). Therefore, the women's open contestation of pronatalist politics in the movement and society should be seen as an active resistance, since the problem is not in the women's personal incapacity to endure their struggles with the unequal treatment they receive as women or the hardship of consecutive pregnancies and childbirths, but in the lack of possibilities and choice for women within patriarchal systems like conservative religious movements. Furthermore, the young women's resistance to the procreational ethos could be seen as fighting against "cruel optimism", the struggle for survival in the hope of salvation that women are given in the movement.

Despite their disengagement from the Laestadian movement, the former Laestadian women still often operate under the influence of the movement's religious ethos even though they have a legal right to access birth control and family planning in Finnish society. Consequently, they form their views based partly on their past religious belonging, but also as part of their existing status as citizens of Finnish society. In this case, reproductive freedom is a question of a choice rooted and embedded within the religious ethos, communities, and cultural locations of Conservative Laestadianism, which is continuously transformed by changes in the Laestadian communities, movement, and society. The Conservative Laestadian movement and other procreational religions share a great interest in national reproductive politics and ways of expanding their power in questions of who is allowed to procreate and on what basis. Since the procreational ethos still predominates the worldwide discussion on reproduction, the future of reproduction is, therefore, at least partly in the hands of the religious movements, their conservative male leaders, and their visions. Thus, as the resistance is reflected in the views of the young former Laestadian women, feminist projects are needed to help oppose the oppressive patriarchal and conservative reproductive politics within religious movements and societies worldwide.

Notes

1. Laestadius preached moral awakening through a strong personal belief, which he called “Christianity of the heart”; that is, a personal spiritual experience placed in the heart of the believer (Laestadius, 1968, p. 25, 35; see also Joensuu, 2016). He strongly disagreed with contemporary philosophy for its appraisal of rational thinking and free will, and the idea of a naturally pure and moral human heart as a basis for moral purity. For Laestadius, one achieved “pure” faith through the continuous repentance of sins, which had the power to renew the human heart. According to Laestadius, to maintain one's moral purity was to live according to the Christian faith, and to avoid worldly sins such as alcohol and adultery (Laestadius, 1970[1906]; Laestadius, 1968, p. 35; 2010, 10–11; Pyysiäinen, 2004, p. 183). In his writings, he depicts his own spiritual struggles with obtaining “righteous” and moral behaviour, and how he despised the prevailing sexual morals at the time. (Laestadius, 1970, pp. 14–16).
2. In Norway and Sweden, the Firstborn group is referred to as the West Laestadians, and in America as the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church (see Kristiansen, 2005).
3. There are no exact statistics on the number of Laestadians, since not all members are registered. The only record of the members is held by the local Peace Associations.
4. Similarly, there are no statistics on the number of members who have left the movement. However, director Joni Valkila (2013), from Support for Victims of Religions, has estimated that half of the Conservative Laestadians born into the movement abandon it.
5. In this article, I will use the term “Laestadian/ism” or “Laestadian women” when referring to the Conservative Laestadian movement and its female members.
6. Päivämies also operates through Facebook and Instagram @paivamies.
7. Genesis 1:22.
8. Lewis (2019) has noted that, from the moment of fertilization to pregnancy, a woman's body is a battlefield of hormones, therefore each pregnancy could be considered a risk for the mother's health.
9. Ehkäisykielto in Finnish.
10. The official statement of the Conservative Laestadian movement concerning the banning of birth control https://www.kotimaa.fi/artikkeli/vanhoillislestadiolainen-keskustelu-on-vapautunut-sanottiin-kirkkopaivilla-nuori-polvi-ai-kanna-hoitokokousten-varjoa/?fbclid=IwAR1CNF6IBV_TcF86UxGNJKU0F7U2oc5FEH9G15R5erT8MhczGEPT1W80k_Y.
11. For example: <https://www.usccb.org/respectlife>.
12. The network of organizations seeking to influence abortion policy across Europe: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/the-network-of-organizations-seeking-to-influence-abortion-policy-across-europe?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.
13. Ihmisoikeusliitto, 2009, https://ihmisoikeusliitto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/IOL_Taustamuistio_vanha_lestadiolaisten_ehkaisykiellosta_2009.pdf (accessed 20 January 2022).
14. E.g., YLE *Voimalla* 2 March 2009; *Inhimillinen tekijä* 13 September 2013.
15. However, according to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and the Population Research Institute of the Family Federation of Finland (Väestöliitto), Finland's birth rates are currently rising, possibly

not just due to the Covid pandemic, but also to changes in values and attitudes. See <https://yle.fi/news/3-12311529>.

16. See, e.g., Helsingin Sanomat, 2017; Helsinki Times, 2017.
17. See Birenbaum-Carmeli (2016) for the last decades' procreational politics in Israel.
18. US supreme court overturns abortion rights, upending Roe v Wade see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-abortion-summary-supreme-court?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

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