

# FINNISH FREETHOUGHT PRESS - The Early Years

This article is a highly abridged and condensed translation from three separate articles published originally in the Union of Freethinkers' magazine, *Vapaa Ajattelijä* (Free thinker) 1983:6,111-114,1983:7, 135-139,1983:8, 159-166, 1984:1, 7-11, and 1984:2, 31-37 in Finnish. Most of the information is collected from the three magazines themselves and the Union's archives which contain primary material from the 1930s on. In addition old newspapers, literature, unprinted studies, and material from the National Archives of Finland were used. Some specific details have been omitted as well as the references to different sources. Original articles can be obtained from the Union of Freethinkers or at the Library of Helsinki University. — the author

## The First Freethought Magazine in Finland: *Wapaita Aatteita* (1889-1890) (Free Thoughts)

*Wapaita Aatteita* is the first Finnish magazine which reasonably can be seen to be a part of the freethought tradition. With the growth of this entire tradition, prerequisite conditions to this magazine were created by a gradual breaking of the Old Lutheran uniform culture by the growth of religious liberalism from the 1850s forward. In the 1880s various kinds of forces were gnawing Lutheranism, for example, liberalism; naturalism; the alienation of Swedish-speaking cultured people from the church and Christianity; realistic literature; the free-church revival which attacked traditional Christianity, and the rising labor movement. The Old Lutheranism could not endure this all.

Minna Canth, a writer, and A. B. Mäkelä, a journalist, both from Kuopio, were the publishers of *Wapaita Aatteita*.

In no form can this magazine be considered radical or Atheistic, but it was a brave and unprejudiced attempt to promote freedom of thought given the atmosphere of its day.

The main goals of *Wapaita Aatteita* were: to spread results of the natural sciences; to emphasize empirical attitudes; and to criticize dogmatic Christianity, religious instruction, traditional Christianity, the state-church institution, and the clergy.

Dogmatic Christianity and its idealistic-romantic interpretation by Leo Tolstoy were often placed against each other in the magazine. Tolstoy was taken to be "perhaps the only serious preacher of Christianity in our time" and many articles by Tolstoy were published. This shows that the ethical criticism of Christianity was partly substituting former, more radical, intellectual criticism.

The *Wapaita Aatteita* did not question the historicity of Jesus but took him as a noble figure of history. Still it maintained that rising enlightenment and judgment would abolish all present churches and clerical parties just as Christianity in its time put an end to ancient religions.

By translating foreign articles into Finnish the magazine spread more radical views to

Finland from central Europe. It brought forth many writers and philosophers who had been persecuted by the European nobility and clergy like Beaumarchais, Buffon, d'Alembert, Diderot, Linguet, Marmontel, Mercier, and Voltaire.

Along with persons like Hypatia, Socrates and Galileo, even Jesus of Nazareth and Martin Luther were named as martyrs of freethought. This shows clearly that freethinking had not shaped itself into a solid tradition, but was partly overlapping with religious liberalism. Compared with the present naturalistic and atheistic interpretation of freethought it is worthy of notice that in some articles only the clergy was outspokenly criticized and Christianity itself was left in peace, sometimes even supported.

Contributors to *Wapaita Aatteita* were A. J. Mela, a teacher, and Dr. N. R. af Ursin. A. J. Mela was a zoologist and one of the first promoters of Darwinism in Finland in the 1860s. Af Ursin was a scholar and arouser of the labor movement in the 1880s. A considerable part of the published material was translated prose by, for example, Dostoevsky, Bellam and de Maupassant.

*Wapaita Aatteita* was only published about a year and a half. By the beginning of 1890 some articles were omitted because of the censor. Other reasons which contributed to the suppression of the magazine were that editing was more burdensome than expected, especially for Minna Canth (because A. B. Mäkelä tripped), and that disputes about the freedom of belief calmed down at the beginning of the 1890s. The rigidity of the censorship depended on the change in political atmosphere, namely the growing threat from the east (Russia) towards the Special political status of Finland (autonomy). A concrete sign of this was the Postmanifesto published by Alexander III in 1890. The radical decade of the 1880s was gone; the gathering of national forces began and lasted ten years.

## "Disclosure of Clerical and Political Lies" *Vapaa Ajatus* (1910-1917) (FreeThought)

The birth of *Vapaa Ajatus* was a logical result of all those efforts towards freedom which took place at the beginning of the new century. I refer only to the struggle against Russianizing, the radical stand of the Socialists and Social Democrats after 1903, the general strike, and the suffrage reform. From the point of view of Freethinkers, important things were the magazine *Euterpe* (1901-1905) which was a very anti-Christian and anti-clerical magazine and the birth of Studentföreningen Prometheus (Student Association Prometheus) in the fall of 1905. Most of the efforts toward freedom of belief during the first decade of the century concentrated around this association. Also, in the labor press, anti-clerical and anti-Christian writings gained plenty of space. Anti-Christian booklets by A. A. Issaieff, Paul Lafargue, August Bebel, and Robert G. Ingersoll were eagerly translated and spread. The standpoint of *Vapaa Ajatus* was very radical. It represented just the typical, old European freethought line which put the main emphasis on heavy criticism of religions, churches, and the clergy. The two principal goals were to separate the church from the state and to eliminate religious teaching in the public schools. Compared to the present stand of the freethought movement, you can still find the old tradition on the bottom but a considerable change towards positive outlook has already taken place. Although accusations of socialism and, later» communism have always shadowed freethought activities nearly everywhere, the Journal did not deal with politics at all. It held that it was difficult to get politicians to support freethinking because of party interests. Though the socialist and bourgeois point of view could be seen in *Vapaa Ajatus*, sympathies towards socialism increased during the 1910s when the middle-class approached the church. Of course, the state of war in 1914 had an influence on the insignificance of political stands.

*Vapaa Ajatus* had several editors, but the main figure from the beginning of 1911 was Sven Elof Kristiansen. He had been a journalist in the United States in 1903. S. E. Kristianson is absolutely one of the most

significant, although forgotten, Finnish Free-thinkers. Born in 1880 or 1882, he was a very qualified and productive journalist. He was a socialist, and statements on his life after the Civil War (1918) are contradictory. Another reason for his present obscurity, besides his socialism, is that he did not have the kind of political, literary, or scientific merits of Frans Viktor Heikel, Minna Canth, Edward Westermarck or Rolf Lagerborg. Without exaggeration, however, we can say that S. E. Kristiansen was the motive, power and soul of *Vapaa Ajatus*.

*Vapaa Ajatus* was a rather high level publication for a purely freethought magazine. It was carefully edited and among the contributors were some surprisingly competent and active writers. We can only mention the pen name Monisti (Monist) behind which was Emil Frithiof Rautell (later Rautela) and the pen name Humanisti (Humanist) behind which was hidden a revolutionary Johann Kock. Later Rautela was going to gain an important role in the Finnish freethought movement, but Kock had died April 13, 1915, in Fitchburg.

This magazine rested totally upon its publishers and had no organization, party, fund, or other financial base. *Vapaa Ajatus* appeared from the beginning of 1910 until the end of 1917, usually twice a month. A short interruption took place during 1914 because of the state of war. In Finland, *Vapaa Ajatus* was a rather unknown magazine. In a Christian country it was difficult to spread a freethought publication and on top of everything the magazine's distribution was inhibited by a large chain of stores. On the basis of collected information I have estimated that *Vapaa Ajatus* had about 2,000 subscribers, the average edition being about 3,000 copies and the average number of readers between 4,000 and 6,000. The magazine ceased to appear because of large increases in the price of paper, subscription money not accounted, a slight falling of the subscription base, and also probably because of the social effects of the outbreak of the Civil War in January of 1918.

The magazine's life was everything but easy. Christians and the censor chased *Vapaa Ajatus* severely and without interruption. This was always the case in all freethought publishing activities. The magazine's editor and the manager of its printing house were summoned to court in the spring of 1910. Authorities attacked Free-thinkers from all directions. The strategy of the authorities was to suppress the magazine right at the start. This strategy, however, was grounded because the higher courts of justice were not ready to act in this way. That is why the authorities began to accuse *Vapaa Ajatus* of blasphemy. Support was received from bishop's councils,

representatives of the freethinkers<sup>5</sup> number one enemy, which handed in statements about whether *Vapaa Ajatus* was blasphemous or not. Editor S. E. Kristiansen was summoned several times to court and was sentenced to prison for forty-five days and fined. Many editors of labor papers were also sentenced to prison and fined during the 1910s for blasphemy. *Vapaa Ajatus* was full of news of such cases.

But this harassment had no impact on the radical stand of the magazine. It continued to criticize authorities and the church and to hold the opinion that all this was Russian intimidation too. ('Russianizing' was going on again; Finland was not yet an independent state, but a grand duchy of Russia until December 1917.)

Although *Vapaa Ajatus* was primarily a freethought magazine, it published various

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articles on the natural sciences and the science of religion. Foreign material was translated from magazines like *The Freethinker*, *The Truth Seeker*, *La Libre Pensée*, and *Das Monistische Jahrhundert*. The magazine often cited Freethinkers such as G. W. Foote, Ludwig Büchner, Robert G. Ingersoll, Wilhelm Ostwald, August Strindberg, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Maksim Gorki, Friedrich Nietzsche, Victor Hugo, and Francisco Ferrer y Guardia.

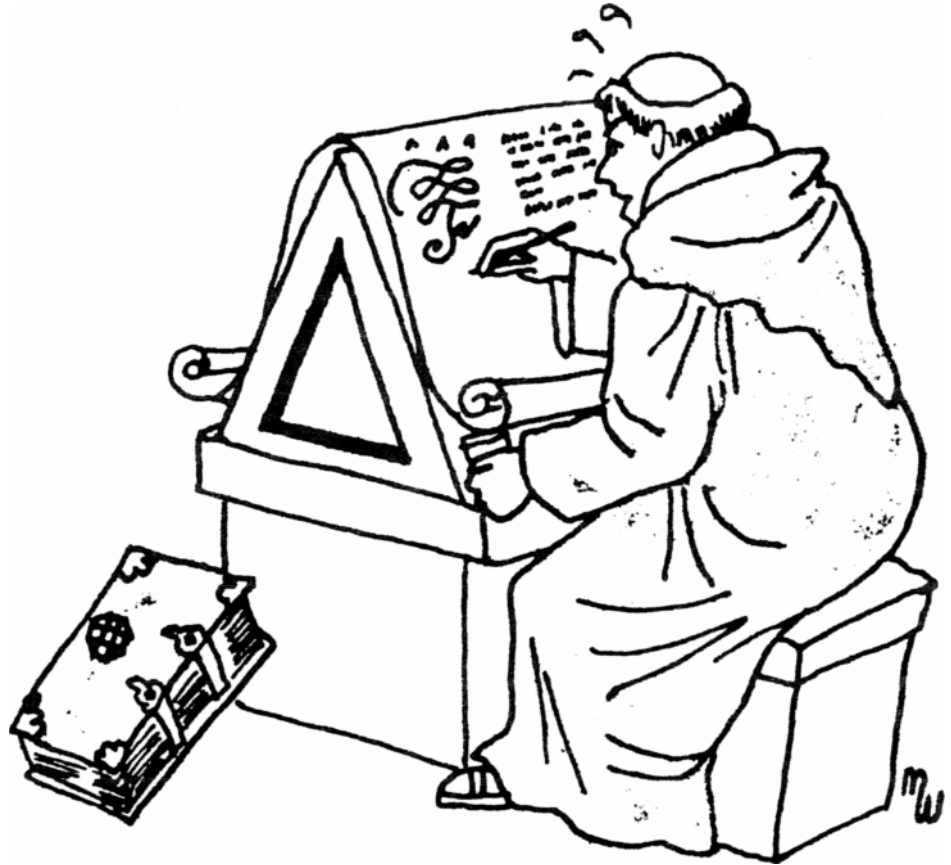
A civil war broke out in Finland in January, 1918, and the ideas advocated by *Vapaa Ajatus* were not tolerated after the defeat of the Reds during the 1920s.

### Between Lapua Movement and Winter War: *Ajatuksen Vapaus* (1937-39) (Freedom of Thought)

The organizing of a Freethought movement began again in the late 1920s. Before the (fascist) Lapua movement, at least one freethought association in Kuopio was registered. During the year 1930 several associations were still registered, but in May 1930 authorities stopped the organizing. Behind all of this was the execution of the new laws concerning so-called "communistic activities." The new laws dealt with freedom of forming associations, freedom of press, and criminal law. Authorities prohibited the organizing because they were afraid of Communists making good use of the movement. This was not a totally wrong line of thought. The central labor organization (S.A.J.) was suppressed in 1930 and political activity tended of course to turn itself somewhere else. (The Communist party and press were, of course, forbidden at that time.)

On the other hand, time was favorable to the church. Conservatives tried to change the constitution to restore the pre-1919 status of the Lutheran church, but the parliament rejected this proposal because it was in contradiction with the law of freedom of belief (1922). Only after dissolution of the Lapua movement did a new rise of freethought movement become possible.

The birth of *Ajatuksen Vapaus* is closely connected with the formation of new freethought associations in Helsinki, Turku and Tampere in 1936. The correspondence of active Freethinkers during this period was the influence which S.E. Kristianson's *Vapaa Ajatus* still retained. Freethinkers started to have meetings in order to change opinions. This had a positive influence on the venture. Then Tampereen Seudun Siviilirekisteriyhdistys (The Civil Register Association of Tampere Region — Freethought associations went by the name of Civil Register Associations until the 1940s) decided to start publishing a freethought magazine, *Ajatuksen Vapaus*, September 7, 1937. Freethinkers acted with caution. A member of the Tampere city government was elected editor although he was a pseudo editor. The magazine was not distributed in those towns where an associa-



" I 'M GOING TO ENJOY THE HEREAFTER — I DON T INTEND TO SPEND IT COPVING THIS TRASH !"

tion was not established. *Ajatuksen Vapaus* was a kind of pioneer of the centralization of freethought associations.

The Union was founded November 21, 1937. Actually, publishing the magazine went over to the Union at the beginning of 1938.

The main principles of the magazine were nearly the same as previous journals, arising from scientific materialism and developmental optimism. Although the separation of the state and church was the great, long-range aim, *Ajatuksen Vapaus* had several minor goals. Among these were the founding of communal cemeteries, the abolition of the church's status as a population register authority, and improvement in school affairs of atheist children. The main demand was for ethical instruction for non-religious pupils independent of religions and the church. Suomen Siviilirekisteriyhdistysten Keskusliitto (Central Union of the Civil Register Associations in Finland) comprised sixteen associations. The readership of *Ajatuksen Vapaus* was mainly formed by members of these associations. Besides purely organizational information, writings and articles by Rafael Karsten, Rolf Lagerborg, Pentti Haanpää, Arvo Turtiainen, and, naturally, Ernst Lampen-Iso-Keisari were published; Upton Sinclair and Albert Einstein represented foreign writers. It can be seen that Free

thinkers gave their support to the regulation of birth, abolitionism, feminist movement and efforts concerning humanization of criminal law. They also defended refugees when a shipload of Jews was sent back to Germany to die there. This was heavily criticized. It has been regarded that most of the influences came from papers like *The Truth Seeker* and *The Freethinker* and so were non-Marxian.

Although *Ajatuksen Vapaus*, like its predecessors, did not deal with politics, its main supporters were the organized labor movement and the liberal bourgeoisie. This was an old combination proved to be good in many struggles. There was certainly one absolute line in politics. The political line of the Lapua movement (fascist) and later on I.K.L. (Patriotic National Movement — very fascist also) could not be approved. I.K.L. fanatically attacked Freethinkers and regarded them all as Communists. Most prominent advocates of I.K.L. were Lutheran priests playing politics and preaching with vehemence against Freethinkers in parliament. The Lapua movement and I.K.L. took also in their use means like murders, kidnappings, and even plots against the government.

The editor of *Ajatuksen Vapaus* was Armo Immanuel Vuotila of Tampere. He was an eager and active Atheist. Only three numbers of the Journal appeared during 1937, nine in 1938 and seven in 1939. The typography and the layout of *Ajatuksen Vapaus* were rather modest.

Authorities attacked the magazine again, aiming to suppress it all together. Probably this was the case only in Tampere City and a conservative paper, *Aamulehti* The Tampere Association was accused for two reasons: 1) persons who did not enjoy civil rights (meaning Communists) were elected to the board of the association; and 2) publications of the association were blasphemous. The charges in the first point were finally rejected for prosecution but the association was dissolved on November 16, 1939 because of point two. History repeated itself. Because Tampere was the centre of the atheist movement, this act was a decisive blow to the entire movement. Of course, *Ajatuksen Vapaus* was suppressed. The new organization of the freethought movement during the latter part of the 1930s was strictly opposed by Fascists who all over the country co-operated with Christians. Conservatives supported Fascists and the Social Democrats were trying delicately to support Freethinkers. All the struggle was partly polemics between political parties

and more political tone than necessary was given to the work of the movement. Freethinkers pointed out that their aim was only to improve the social status of those who had separated themselves from the church and defended civil liberties. Original letters by Armo Vuotila show that freethinkers acted according to the law in every detail and had no intention of going beyond this. On the other hand, among Fascists and Christians there had already dissolved an organization called *Sinimusta-järjestö* (Blue-Black organization) because it acted against the law. On the whole the situation for a Freethought magazine was not different from that of the 1910s.

On the basis of collected information it is known that printing of different issues of *Ajatuksen Vapaus* varied between 1,700 to 3,000 copies. The magazine gained about 900 to 1,050 subscribers and perhaps 2,000 to 3,000 readers. Most of the distribution work was done by the associations which were located mainly in greater towns. Most of the money came from subscriptions and some part from the selling of single copies. Costs consisted mainly of printing costs. As its predecessors *Wapaita Aatteita* (1889-90) and *Vapaa Ajatus* (1910-17) had, *Ajatuksen Vapaus* promoted the ideals which had originated from the 19th century. This work has at the same time been a struggle for rudimentary civil liberties like freedom of

belief and press. The whole era until 1945 was a period when the freethought movement was prohibited, persecuted, and its activities interrupted. During the former part of the 1930s, Finland was politically national and fascistic, religiously Christian-totalitarian.

Compared with its predecessors, *Ajatuksen Vapaus* had the advantage of being based on an organized movement and associations. This created continuity and stability. Ideas promoted by *Ajatuksen Vapaus* did not die with the suppression of the magazine. By 1940 a new magazine, *Vapaa Ajattelijä* (1940-41, 1945- ) (Free Thinker, the present organ of the Union of Freethinkers), started to appear.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kimmo Sundström studied sociology and philosophy at the University of Helsinki.**

**He was the editor of *Vapaa Ajattelijä* 1981-1983.**

**In 1984 he became general manager of *Kustannus Oy Vapaa Ajattelijä Ab* owned by the Union of Freethinkers and its member associations.**

**Since 1983 he has managed the Book Dealer House VOLTAIRE Books. He is a regular contributing author to *Vapaa Ajattelijä***

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