

Åhrén, Emil J. (1865–1936)

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Yvonne Johansson Öster, M.Phil. (University of Lund, Sweden), M.A. in religion (Andrews University), is a retired college teacher and pastor. Her numerous articles on Adventist history include a biography of pioneer missionary Hanna Bergström (Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2013) and an anthology of Swedish missionaries (Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2019). Johansson Öster also contributed an article about the Adventist church in the *Encyclopedia of Swedish Free Churches* (Sveriges Frikyrkosamråd och Bokförlaget Atlantis AB, 2014). Currently, she is writing a complete history of the Swedish Adventist church.

Emil J. Åhrén was a preacher, editor, and author. He was born in Vittensten, Vermland province, Sweden. At age 15, Emil received Jon G. Matteson's pamphlets from his brother, Olof Johnson, who had been led to the Adventist faith in Oslo by Matteson. Emil accepted the Adventist faith around 1880 and was baptized in 1882 by J. P. Rosquist, the first Adventist preacher in Sweden. Emil left for America in 1882 and attended mission school in Chicago, Illinois, under Matteson's leadership. Later, Emil went to Battle Creek, Michigan, and began working in the Swedish department of the Review and Herald publishing house. He did colporteur work as the first Swede to sell Swedish subscription books in order to study at Battle Creek College.¹ After completing his studies, he entered the ministry to serve the Swedish Adventist churches in the United States. Emil J. Åhrén was ordained to the ministry in 1886.

In 1890, Pastor Emil J. Åhrén went back to Sweden but returned to America two years later. With a growing conviction that he should work for the people of his homeland, he sailed back to Sweden in 1894. Pastor Åhrén was an editor for *Tidens Tecken* ("Signs of the Times") and *Missionären* ("The Missionary"), which replaced *Sanningens Härold* ("Herald of the Truth") as a church magazine. For a few years, he also edited for a children's periodical, *Ljus i hemmet* ("Light in the Home").² Pastor Åhrén was the first Swedish editor and remained so for 38 years. He was also the chairman of *Sällskapet Sanningens Härold*, the church's legal organization, from 1919 to 1927.

Pastor Emil Åhrén had an open mind and humble personality. He was keenly interested in world events and in making contact with other Christians. His wide knowledge of history, literature, and theology is reflected in his editorials and in the booklets published in the "Oriental Question" in 1897 and 1912, where he foresaw the outbreak of World War I. In 1916, his booklet "The Great World Catastrophe" linked war events to prophecies of eternal peace in biblical and historical perspectives. At the end of the Great War, another booklet was published: "The Last War and the Eternal Peace: The Great Questions of Our Time." These booklets were widely spread and read, as was his book, "The Great Problems of the World," published in 1920. In the preamble, he says:

The world is full of problems that are awaiting solutions. With "the big problems of the world," we understand such questions are of special importance in our time and are valid to all of mankind. Many of these are as old as

the world itself. Others have arisen in later eras or suddenly popped up before our eyes out of the misery and squalor of our time.³

Pastor Åhrén had the ability to feel the pulse of the very strong currents of time and connected it with the eschatology of the Adventist faith. His creative thinking and writing made Adventist beliefs known in a way that could be received by many various societal groups. He corresponded with the archbishop of the Lutheran State Church and with a respected professor of religion, asking permission to quote them in his writings, which they responded to in a positive way, lauding his works.⁴ He also cultivated contacts with artists, and some of them made illustrations for church papers, although they never became members, but Pastor Åhrén had a good eye for art and put great trust in his artist friends.⁵

He devoted a large portion of his book on world problems to describe the inequality of living conditions, chiding the rich of this world. To preach social issues or strongly question capitalism and imperialism were not common subjects in Adventist pulpits at the time. Pastor Åhrén preached about these subjects in a balanced way, pointing out that wealth could mean good to the cause of God and poverty could harden hearts in bitterness over an unfair lot in life.⁶

Pastor Åhrén was a committed pacifist. When the question of bearing arms as a patriotic contribution arose during World War I in the European General Conference, he was unwaveringly against any use of arms or violence. In the wake of this war, when this question caused splits especially in the German membership, he again showed his loyalty to core Adventist beliefs and did not give his voice or pen to any support of the so-called reformed Adventists; he saw this as a local, national question that had nothing to do with Sweden.⁷

After returning from America, he married Erika Amalia Östman in 1895. She was a secretary at the conference office. They had one son, Emrik, who would become a renowned architect in Stockholm. Erika died in 1907. It was not until 1917 that Emil Åhrén remarried to Tekla Rosenholm, also a secretary at the conference office. They had one son, Olle, named after Emil's oldest brother, Olof Johnson, the first leader of the Swedish conference. Another of Emil's brothers, Andrew Stone, was a longtime Adventist minister in the U.S.A. to Swedish SDA churches.⁸

Emil Åhrén was not only widely respected in Sweden but well known in all Scandinavia and much beloved for his quiet and humble personality.⁹

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. *Missionären*, November 1936, 177.
2. G. Wiklander, *I herrns tjänst* (Stockholm: Adventistsamfundet, 2000), 122.
3. Emil Åhrén, *De stora världsproblemen* (Stockholm: Skandinaviska Förlagsexpeditionen, 1918), 383.
4. Wiklander, 122.
5. Illustrations from his various publications.
6. Åhrén, 213-269.
7. Emil Åhrén, "Är inte Babylon," *Missionären*, February 15, 1922, 34-35; "Våra principer och reformationsrörelsen," *Missionären*, March 15, 1922, 47.
8. Wiklander, 107.
9. C. O. Carlstjerna, Emil Åhrén's obituary, *Missionären*, November 1936, 1.

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