

# On the Missiology of Fredrik Franson in the Context of his Eschatology, Missionary Methods and Transnational Networking

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**Abstract:** Fredrik Franson (1852-1908), a dual citizen of Sweden and the USA, was an international revival evangelist, mission founder and mobiliser of the Holiness Movement during the last quarter of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Within 22 years he strongly influenced the founding of thirteen faith missions, six church federations in Europe, North America and Armenia and several independent churches in the USA, New Zealand and Australia. This article focuses on the missiology of Franson, starting with a short overview on Franson's life and work, followed by a presentation of his eschatology, missionary methods and transnational networking.

**Keywords:** Fredrik Franson – Eschatology – Missionary Methods – Transnationalism – Faith Missions – Evangelical Alliance – Holiness Movement – Sunday School Union.

## **Introduction**

Fredrik Franson was a Swedish-American revival evangelist, mission mobiliser, mission founder and missionary strategist who visited more than fifty countries. He lived from 1852 to 1908, was born in Sweden, emigrated to the USA and operated from there.

The importance of Franson for mission history stems from the fact that in the span of only 22 years numerous churches, thirteen faith missions and six church federations emerged as a result of his ministry. His eschatology led to an urgency for Christian mission. Franson also developed new methods of missionary work: follow up meetings in Europe and evangelisation courses for all social classes as an instrument to recruit

new missionaries for Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Franson's life and work are reconsidered in the light of the prevailing transnational connections in politics, the economy and religion. Modern industrialisation was gathering momentum, railways and navigation by sea were expanding, and networks such as the Evangelical Alliance, the Holiness Movement and the Sunday School Union experienced considerable growth in which Franson participated.

This article is a summary about my dissertation *Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons (1852–1908): Eschatologie, Missionsmethodik und Transnationale Vernetzung*, accepted by the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium 2018.

The study will briefly state the key question, touch on the methods, but will mainly focus on the research results and finally draw some conclusions.

## Key question

The key question of the thesis is: How is it possible that a single international revival evangelist is able to establish within 22 years numerous churches, six church federations and thirteen faith missions?

## Methods

While mainly missiological, this study builds on a historical and interdisciplinary approach. The approach to mission historiography used aims to present and understand biographies and histories not only from a chronological, historical background, but rather from an inter-disciplinary perspective in the context of culture, anthropology, religion, travel-, social- and contemporary history.

It relies on the relatively new methods of historiography in mission history applied by Jongeneel,<sup>1</sup> Altena,<sup>2</sup> Schultze<sup>3</sup> and Moritzen<sup>4</sup> or in publications about transnational networking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Habermas<sup>5</sup> and Hölzl.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by this interdisciplinary approach of contemporary mission historiography, the missionary thinking and missionary practice of Franson are examined.

Thus, the archival documents and writings of Franson were analysed and evaluated in an interdisciplinary manner with a view on history, mission theology and transnational connections. Furthermore, secular sources were used to show that Franson's eschatology, his missionary concepts in Europe, North America, Africa, Latin America

1. Jan A. B. Jongeneel, *Philosophy, science, and theology of mission in the 19th and 20th centuries: a mis-siological encyclopedia, Part 1: The philosophy and science of mission* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1995).
2. Thorsten Altena, *Ein Häuflein Christen mitten in der Heidenwelt des dunklen Erdteils. Zum Selbst- und Fremdverständnis protestantischer Missionare im kolonialen Afrika 1884-1918*. Internationale Hochschul-schriften 395 (Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann 2003).
3. Andrea-Schultze, «Neuere, interdisziplinäre Ansätze in der Missionsgeschichtsschreibung» in: *Leitfaden Ökumenische Missionstheologie*, edited by Chr. Kaiser (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2003).
4. Niels-Peter Moritzen (ed.), *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg: ein Pionier evangelischer Mission; eine Anthologie aus seinen theologischen Schriften* (Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2006).
5. Rebekka Habermas, «Mission im 19. Jahrhundert: Globale Netze des Religiösen» in: *Historische Zeitschrift* (Göttingen: de Gruyter) 287, nr. 3 (2008), 629-679.
6. Rebekka Habermas und Richard Hölzl, *Mission global. Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 2014).

and Asia and religious and secular transnational connections provide an explanatory pattern for his life and work.

The dissertation investigates Franson's eschatology, missionary methods and trans-national networking in a missiological and not primarily historical perspective. Therefore, it is presented as a missiological contribution to mission history.

## Research results

Chapter one focuses on the significance of the topic and the state of research into faith missions in general and the publications about Franson's life and work in particular.<sup>7</sup> Various chronological biographies about Franson have already been written, one of them scholarly.

However, no research has been done yet into Franson's missiology in the context of his eschatology, his innovative missionary methods, and his transnational networking as an explanatory framework for his worldwide ministry.

## Franson's life and work

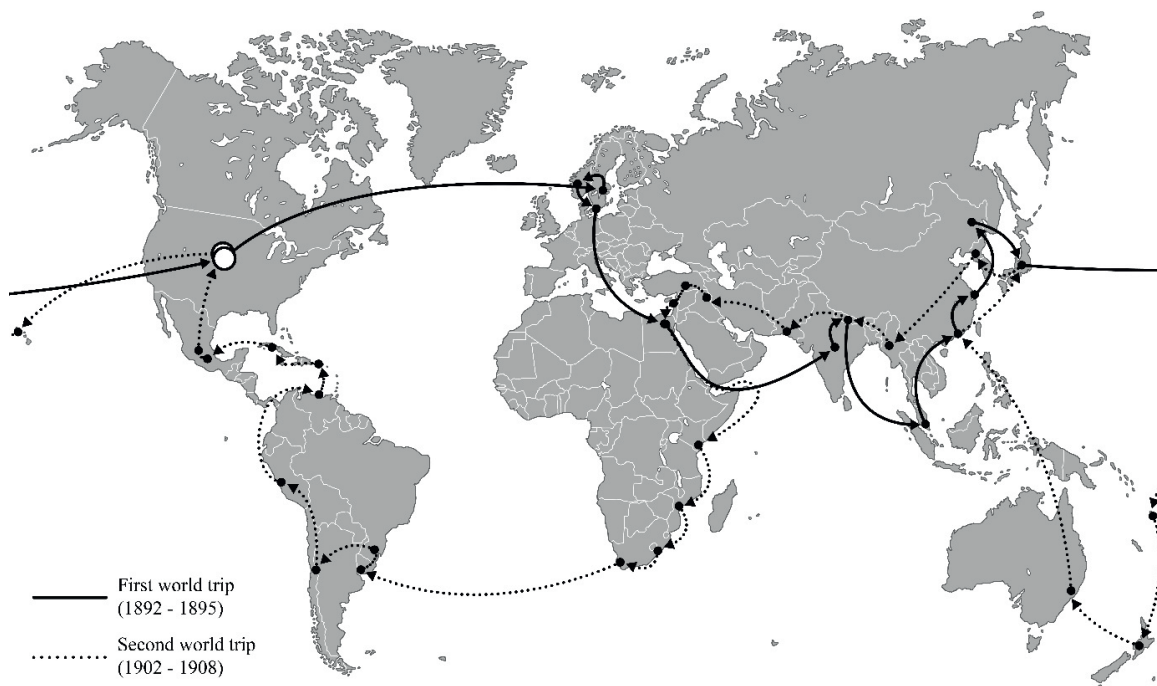
The second Chapter gives an overview of Franson's life and work on all continents.<sup>8</sup> He grew up as the son of a miner in modest rural conditions of Central Sweden. His family participated in Rosenian Pietism. Due to the economic crisis in Scandinavia the family emigrated from Sweden to the USA when Franson was seventeen. The rural life in Nebraska was marked by material deprivation and sickness. The simple lifestyle prepared Franson for a life that was shaped by confidence in God's providence. His livelihood as an international evangelist was sponsored from several sources, but mainly by his sending church, Moody's *Chicago Avenue Church*.

Franson's ministry was shaped by a deep spirituality, a strong will, an enormous flexibility and innovation. In spiritual terms he was influenced by Rosenian Pietism in Sweden. In Nebraska USA he joined a Baptist Church. As co-worker and «Swedish disciple of Moody» he finally became a convinced Congregationalist.

Franson's language skills predestined him for an intercultural evangelistic ministry that led him to more than 50 countries. His distinct organisational skills enabled him to organize and establish directly or indirectly thirteen mission societies, six church federations and numerous local churches and missionary associations. The new organizations received a decentralized country-specific governance structure.

7. Reifler, *Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons: Eschatologie, Missionsmethodik und Transnationale Vernetzung*, (unpublished PhD Dissertation, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium, 2018), 15-27.

8. Reifler, «Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons», 28-87.



Franson's trips around the world.

Franson's mission agencies and church federations cultivated, at least until his death, an eschatological-evangelistic view of Scripture that was motivated by belief in the imminent return of Christ and aimed at the immediate evangelisation of the world.

### **Franson's missiology in light of his eschatology**

The third chapter analyses Franson's missionary thinking in the context of his eschatology.<sup>9</sup> His thinking about mission was formed by the Gospel. The crucified and risen Jesus Christ and the already established kingdom of God were the binding centre of his faith. At the same time Christians are filled with the blessed hope of the second coming of Jesus Christ which leads to the final victory and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God. That is why people are to be invited to conversion in evangelistic campaigns. Churches are to be mobilized to witness Christ to their own context and in missionary service on all continents.

Franson's futurist premillennial eschatology urged him to evangelism and the realization of follow up meetings, as well as the courses in evangelism and Bible courses in order to send as quickly as possible new missionaries into the whole world. The mission agencies and church federations which Franson organised served as instruments for this vision.

Shortly after the founding of the German China-Alliance-Mission Franson justified the creation of new faith mission with the words:

9. Reifler, «Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons», 88-139.

Awareness of Christ's imminent return is what drives God's children to such extraordinary plans and efforts. It is believed more and more that we are living not only in the last days but in the last hours of the last days. Prophetic numbers, in various perceptions, are expiring in these last years, and the duty to present the Gospel to all nations first impresses itself urgently upon God's children (Translation Reifler).<sup>10</sup>

Five years later Franson postulated the expectation of the imminent return of Christ in an article published in the official mission magazine of the German China-Alliance-Mission:

This century is rapidly coming to an end and thus also the end of the present age in the minds of many believers. Although I do not count myself as one of those who try to define the time and date at which the Lord returns, but am rather one of those who are always on the watch without knowing when the Head of the House is coming. I do see, in the many clear signs which point to the end of this age, that the end is really near (Translation Reifler).<sup>11</sup>

Franson's eschatology was influenced by Rosenian Pietism, North American historical and classical dispensationalism, the Niagara Bible Conferences, the Prophetic Conferences and the strong conviction that the return of Jesus Christ could happen at any moment and was near at hand. The conquest of the Earth through Christ and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ were the final aims of his futurist premillennial eschatology.

The key texts of Franson's eschatology<sup>12</sup> show that the interpretation of prophetic texts of the Bible under the aspect of salvation history led to the imminent expectation of Christ's return. This futurist eschatological view was decisive for Franson and contributed to the sense of urgency in his missionary work. Such a sense of urgency was later also adopted by the Lausanne movement and is of lasting importance for the faith missions of today.

10. Fredrik Franson, «Teure Brüder und Schwestern», *Emdener Gemeinschaftsblatt zur Beförderung des auf Gottes Wort gegründeten Christenthums* 7-9, (February or March 1890), 3.

11. Fredrik Franson, *China-Bote* 4 (1895): 3. See also Christian Meyer, *F. Franson's Reise um die Welt 1892-1895* (Barmen: DCAM, 1896), 12.

12. Fredrik Franson, «Antikrist», *Chicago-Bladet* (3 and 10 June 1881); Fredrik Franson, «Teure Brüder und Schwestern», *Emdener Gemeinschaftsblatt* 7-9 (1890-1892): 3; Fredrik Franson, «Hüter ist die Nacht schier hin?», «*China-Bote* 4 (1895): 3. The article was published one year later by Christian Meyer, *F. Franson's Reise um die Welt 1892-1895* (Barmen: DCAM, 1896), 12; Fredrik Franson, *Himlauret eller det profetiska ordet* (Stockholm: Sanningsvittnet, 1897); Fredrik Franson, *Die Himmelsuhr oder Das prophetische Wort mit Einleitung, 3 Übersichtstabellen und einem Diagramm* (Barmen: DCAM, 1898); Fredrik Franson, *Himmeluhret: eller det profetiske ord* (Laurvig: Andersen, 1898).

## Franson's missionary methods

The fourth chapter examines missionary methods for the Western world and the culturally and religiously different areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>13</sup>

It becomes evident that mass evangelism and follow up meetings served as elementary-sation of beliefs for new converts and the courses in evangelism led to the planting of new churches, six church federations and thirteen missionary agencies based in western countries as instruments of recruitment for world mission.

In view of the educational mandate of the church Franson focused on evangelism and Bible courses to deepen faith content and to recruit as quickly as possible new missionary candidates from a social class which before would hardly have received access to world mission, as they did not qualify to study theology at university or seminary level.

Mainly in the non-western world Franson also promoted a variety of diaconal services to demonstrate the love and care of God holistically in medical missions, orphanages, schools and addiction treatment among opium smokers. In order to realize such missionary methods Franson made unreserved use of the potential of women for preaching, pastoral care, leadership, music and social diaconal activities.

Franson's missionary methods emanated from his practice in intercultural evangelistic campaigns and study tours in more than 50 countries. Careful observation, comparison and analysis of different concepts of missionary methods led him to present the results in a booklet entitled *Five different missionary methods for non-Christian societies*, published in Swedish by Ephraim Sandblom a couple of months after Franson's death.<sup>14</sup>

Franson's missionary concepts formed the theological backbone of his understanding of missions, which can be characterized as a holistic missiological conception of global evangelism. Mass evangelism and follow up meetings led new converts to baptism and integration into a local church. In evangelistic courses, bible courses and preparation courses they received training for missionary service in the whole world, which finally led to the foundation of new faith missions and church federations.

Some aspects of Franson's missionary methods were not accepted by everyone and some were heavily criticized, especially the use of healing campaigns in Denmark and follow up meetings in Germany, the use of new gospel songs, the equality of women in preaching, leadership and teaching, as well as the quick recruitment and sending of missionaries without formal theological education.

13. Reifler, «Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons», 140-178.

14. Efraim Sandblom (ed.), *Missionär F. Fransons Testamente eller fem olika missionsmetoder* (Jönköping: Skandinaviska Alliansmissionens Förlag, 1909).

## **Franson's Christian networking**

The fifth Chapter of this study surveys the formative religious and secular networks at the time of Franson.<sup>15</sup> It becomes evident that Franson's transnational connections with the Evangelical Alliance, the faith missions of his time, the Holiness Movement and the world-wide Sunday School Union served as a platform to mobilise, send and work in partnership with the missionaries who were newly recruited by him.

Franson benefited also from the political stability in a majority of countries due to the Pax Britannica, which substantially promoted general economic progress, the development of cities, the integration of nations and ideas, the free market, the construction of canals (especially the Suez Canal), the intercontinental sea traffic (steam ships instead of sailing ships) and the expansion of the railway system on all continents.

Franson profited from the shortened ways of communications which were optimized by the intercontinental post steamships. Missionary reports and prayer letters from East Asia, Africa and Latin America reached Europe, the USA and thus the sending churches within a few weeks.

The Christian missionary societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century profited considerably from the imperialism, colonization, industrialisation, economic progress and transformation of the world. This applies also to the mission agencies and church federations founded by Franson.

## **Franson's legacy**

The sixth Chapter examines merits and limitations of Franson in the context of modern mission history.<sup>16</sup> Most of the mission agencies founded by Franson still exist today, but some have merged or were incorporated in closely connected church federations, but the original purpose and the aim remained the same.

15. Reifler, «Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons», 179-221.

16. Reifler, «Zur Missiologie Fredrik Fransons», 22.

<b>Founding</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Origin and Progress</b>
1884	<i>Det Norske Misjonsforbundet</i> (Norway)	Emerged from the Lammers Free Churches in Norway (1856)
1884	<i>The Evangelical Free Church of North America</i> (USA)	
1887	<i>Helgelseförbundet</i> (Sweden)	1997 fusion with <i>Evangeliska Frikyrkan</i>
1887	<i>Den Norske Kinamisjon*</i> (Norway)	Today <i>Evangelisk Orientmisjon</i> and part of <i>OMF International</i> (Norway)
1888	<i>Det Danske Missionsforbund</i> (Denmark)	
1888	<i>Fria Missionsförbundet i Finland</i> (Finland)	Since 1923 <i>Suomen Vapaakirkko</i> (Finland)
1889	<i>Den Frie Østafrikanske Mission</i> (Norway)	Since 1899 part of <i>Det Norske Misjonsforbundet</i> (Norway)
1889	<i>Deutsche China-Allianz Mission*</i> (Germany)	Since 1892 <i>Allianz-Mission</i> (Germany)
1889	<i>Schweizer Allianz Mission*</i> (Switzerland)	Since 2017 <i>SAM global</i> (Switzerland)
1890	<i>The Scandinavian Alliance Mission of North America</i> (USA)	Today <i>The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM)</i> (USA)
1895	<i>Finska Alliansmissionen</i> (Finland)	since 1923 <i>Suomen Vapaakirkko</i>
1897	<i>Svenska Mongolmissionen</i> (Sweden)	Since 1951 <i>Svenska Mongol- och Japanmissionen</i> , since 1982 part of <i>Evangeliska Östasienmissionen</i> , today <i>OMF International</i> (Sweden)
1899	<i>Vandsburger Diakonieverband*</i> (Germany)	From which emerged the <i>Deutscher Gemeinschafts- und Diakonieverband</i> and the <i>Marburger Mission</i> (Germany)
1900	<i>Kvinnlige Missionsförbundet</i> (Finland)	
1900	<i>Svenska Alliansmissionen</i> (Sweden)	
1901	<i>Det Norske Misjonsallianse*</i> (Norway)	
1902	<i>Scandinavian Seamen's Mission</i> (Australia)	
1903	<i>Scandinavian Seamen's Mission</i> (China)	
1906	<i>Armenian Spiritual Brotherhood</i> (Armenia)	<i>Armenian Brotherhood Bible Churches</i> (Armenia)

Faith missions and free church federations founded directly or strongly influenced by Franson\*



The continental European missionary agencies and church federations founded by Franson, have grown numerically and in their geographic expansion until the present day. A similar development can be seen in *The Evangelical Free Churches of North America* and with the associated missionary society *The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM)*. The missionary societies and church federations founded and strongly influenced by Franson in the USA, Scandinavia and Germany are today part of the *International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches*.

As far as the eschatology is concerned in the declarations of faith today in the missionary agencies and church federations established and influenced by Franson, the study shows, that only the *Armenian Brotherhood Bible Church* as a minority Church in exile continues to believe in classical dispensationalism. On the other hand, the church federations in a monocultural context developed along with their ecclesiological milieu, towards a consensus-oriented evangelical eschatology. This leads to a threefold typology of eschatology in the churches and missionary agencies founded by Franson: historical premillennialism, dispensationalism and consensus-oriented eschatology marked by the Principle of Sola Scriptura, the Apostolic Confession of Faith, the Creed of the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Covenant.

It is evident that Franson's concepts of missionary methods at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was strongly influenced by the expectation of an imminent return of Jesus Christ. This led to the quick recruitment of a new social class of missionaries without studies in theology lasting over several years. This hasty missionary practice on the part of Franson's missionary agencies, which was openly criticised by Warneck, was gradually changed through their own observation and insight. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the entities founded by Franson successively gave birth to theological seminaries which have in the meantime become renowned and are still active today.

A comparison between Franson and other founders of missionary societies of his time shows that he was one of the most important mission mobilisers of the Holiness Movement. At the same time, he benefited from the exchange of ideas and connections with his contemporary «colleagues» James Hudson Taylor, Henry Grattan Guinness, Albert Benjamin Simpson, Charles Thomas Studd and Karl Kumm, some of whom complemented and surpassed him in other aspects.

Franson never founded a theological seminary or missionary training institute. Most likely he did not have disciples. He never led a local church, a church federation or missionary society. The specific merit of Franson lies in his worldwide evangelistic ministry in more than 50 countries, and in founding of new faith missions and church federations. Franson was a mission mobilizer, mission founder, disseminator, mission strategist, persuader, mentor and networker within the Holiness Movement of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Franson's ability to work in cooperation with the Evangelical Alliance and his Congregationalism gave the «Alliance-Missions» which he founded their firm ecclesiological identity and empowered them at the same time to work interdenomination-

ally both in their home context and in the expansion of the Christian mission in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Due to his travel reports, mission articles and publications in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Franson became the publicist of the growing «Alliance-Missions» on all continents.

## **Conclusion**

Franson's use of eschatology, his missionary methods studied and applied, his religious networking and his making use of secular transnational infrastructure present an explanatory pattern why he was able to found within 22 years numerous churches, 13 mission agencies and six free church federations.

Franson's intensive consideration of eschatology, his missionary methods and his transnational networking are his lasting merit for the missionary thinking of today, because without a biblically oriented expectation of the future the danger exists that enthusiasm for missionary activity begins to wane. Innovative concepts of missionary methods, characterized by a Christological proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord as seen in Franson's ministry influence the practices of missions constructively und remain attractive for today's missionary candidates.