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## Madness, Otherness and Transformation: Exploring Religion in Nordic Crime Films

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# Madness, Otherness and Transformation: Exploring Religion in Nordic Crime Films

## Abstract

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## Introduction

Crime fiction has long been a very popular genre, but it is a genre that has long also been ignored in academia (Tapper 2011). The lack of interest in exploring crime fiction has no doubt a lot to do with the popularity of the genre. As with many other forms of popular culture, crime fiction has been seen as nothing but entertainment. However, as the upsurge in popular culture research in general attests, something being popular and entertaining does not make it less worthy of attention (Lynch 2012). Popular culture is not an exact reflection of our world, but it does capture the attitudes, values and beliefs we hold to and help shape these in turn (Partridge 2004). This is true for crime fiction too.

Stories focusing on crime are popular in many countries. Though internationally American and British productions still dominate the market, during the last decade or so Scandinavian novels, TV-series and films dealing with crime have also come to reach a large international audience. The list of successful Nordic crime fiction writers can be made long: Arne Dahl, Karin Fossum, Börge Hellström, Anne Holt, Arnaldur Indriðason, Martti Yrjänä Joensuu, Stieg Larrson, Åsa Larsson, Leena Lehtolainen, Camilla Läckberg, Jo Nesbø, Håkan Nesser, Henning Mankell, Liza Marklund, Jan Mårtensson, Anders Roslund etc. A quick search on Scandinavian crime fiction highlights its popularity. On the New York Public Library website Jeremy Megraw (2013) offers new readers a brief history to the genre and names to look out for. Articles in among others *The Guardian* (Crace 2009), *The New Yorker* (Siegel 2014), and *The Washington Post* (Tucker 2010) do the same, highlighting written fiction, TV-series and films. The writers are all in agreement that Scandinavian crime fiction is worthy of attention.

That more attention needs to be given to crime fiction and Scandinavian crime fiction is also something more and more scholars are agreeing on (see Brodén 2008; Arvas and

Nestingén 2011a; Tapper 2011). During the last couple of years a number of studies dealing with crime fiction have appeared (see for example Johnson 2006; Nicol, McNulty and Pulham 2010; Andrew and Phelps 2013). Many scholars focusing on crime fiction argue that this genre and its many subgenres are particularly interesting when exploring questions of ideology and values (Nestingén 2008; Bergman and Kärrholm 2011; Tapper 2011). This is a view I share and my particular interest is in the role given religion in contemporary Scandinavian or Nordic crime films. Religion in crime fiction has been touched upon before (Spencer 1989; Kendrick 1994; Trenter and Matz 2005), but more perspectives need to be brought up. Being a scholar of religion and film it is particularly crime films that interest me and the filmic constructions of religion that I focus on. My goal with this article is to highlight some of the key ways religion is represented in contemporary Scandinavian crime films and discuss what these representations suggest about attitudes to religion in the Scandinavian context today.

I will focus on one film, a film I find captures many common ways of representing religion in Scandinavian crime fiction, but also highlights some less obvious, but equally noteworthy approaches. The film is the Finnish film *Harjunpää ja pahan pappi*, in English *Priest of Evil* (2010), directed by Olli Saarela. The film is loosely based on the novel with the same name, written by Martti Yrjänä Joensuu. In my analysis below I will give a more detailed introduction to the film and religion in the film, but before this a brief introduction to crime fiction and religion in crime fiction is needed.

### **Religion in the world of crime**

A theological interest in crime fiction is not new and neither particularly surprising. Crime fiction often deals with questions of right and wrong, good and evil, sin and punishment, subjects that also quite naturally inspire theological thinking. A noteworthy study is William

David Spencer's *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel* (1989) in which Spencer explores crime fiction in which clergy take up the role of detective. Looking at crime fiction from a theological perspective, according to Spencer, comes quite naturally since the root of the mystery genre, as Spencer sees it, can be traced to the mysterium of the Christian tradition:

If some Christians question whether a mystery story can be a Christian story, they do not know their own faith thoroughly enough. And every detective of the full implication of any mystery ends in the mysterium that comes from this great source, which is the well-spring of morality as well. (Spencer 1989, 1)

Similar ideas can be found in Stephen Kendrick's *Holy Clues: The Gospel According to Sherlock Holmes*, where Kendrick argues "that detective stories of all kinds may be seen as subtly humble religious parables" (1999, 4).

One does not need to agree with Spencer's or Kendrick's theological interpretations to see the interest in crime fiction for researchers of religion. Apart from the obvious theological themes often present in the stories, many tales also connect to religion in more direct ways. Spencer focuses on novels with clergy detectives, but other studies have highlighted the presence of religious characters in more ways than this. Religious characters can in fact quite often be found in the role of detective, victim or murderer, or all three, and religious settings too are quite common (Trenter and Matz 2005). Regarding religion in crime fiction, G. K. Chesterton's stories about Father Brown are probably among the best known. Recently BCC has made a TV-series inspired by Chesterton's stories titled simply *Father Brown* (2013-2015), but Father Brown is just one example among many.

In the mini TV-series *Death in Holy Orders* (2003), a story based on P.D. James' novel with the same name, the setting is a religious seminar. A more recent example of a crime TV-

series in which religious themes are common is *True Detective* (2014). In the series a murder with religious, ritualistic undertones is investigated. Some crime films dealing with religious themes that can be mentioned are *The Name of the Rose* (1986), based on Umberto Eco's novel, a story in which the setting and most of the characters are religious, *Se7en* (1995), a film in which the murders are inspired by the seven deadly sins, and *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002), in which religion seems to save some, but where God and salvation on average feel far away. However, in contemporary studies of crime fiction, religion is seldom highlighted and when it is highlighted the focus is usually on a limited number of works. Fairly often, and not very surprisingly considering their popularity, it is the works of Dan Brown that are discussed (Bowers 2008; Ascari 2013). Peter Hasenberg (1997) briefly explores religion in crime films such as *The Godfather*-films (1972, 1974, 1990), *Cape Fear* (1991) and *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) and John Lyden (2003) discusses the religious dimensions of the first two *Godfather*-films, but many more works are, I argue, worthy of attention, including many Scandinavian productions.

What kinds of crime films are then of particular interest here? Genres are nothing set (Altman 1999) and different opinions of what should be termed crime fiction exist. I view crime fiction as a general genre with several sub-genres. Crime fiction is sometimes used synonymously with detective stories, in other words stories where a crime has been committed and the mystery of whodunit needs to be solved. The detective can be a policeman, but this is not necessary. Crime fiction also includes police procedurals and is then focused on police work. Thrillers are also often examples of crime fiction. Crime fiction can of course also include stories in which criminality is the main focus, not the solving of crimes (for more on how to define crime fiction see for example Landrum 1999 and Bergman and Kärholm 2011).

When discussing ideology and religion, many types of crime fiction can be considered interesting, but not all forms of crime fiction are considered to be a commentary on society in the same sense. In their overview of the crime genre, Bergman and Kärholm (2011) highlight

the way society comes across in crime fiction. In classical works such as Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's detective novels, society as such is usually portrayed as stable. The crime that is committed interrupts this stability, but once the mystery is solved the balance is returned. Since the Second World War, though, other forms of crime stories have appeared, stories with a more critical edge, highlighting problems in society, such as a faulty legal system, corruption and social injustice. When discussing ideology and crime fiction, it is particularly these stories that have interested researchers (Tapper 2011). When exploring religion and ideology it is these stories too that I find noteworthy.

Scandinavian crime writers build on the many subgenres available internationally, but naturally also relate the stories to the Scandinavian context (Tapper 2011). One thus finds Scandinavian crime stories that fit more obviously into the detective mysteries made famous by Agatha Christie. However, many of the contemporary stories that are now reaching large international audiences have an obvious critical edge, highlighting the possible dark side of the Nordic welfare systems. A large part of these stories fit into the police procedural category. As Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen argue, there seems to be a natural link between the police procedural and social criticism in Scandinavia:

The fit between the police procedural and the socio-political arrangements in Sweden, as well as in the other Scandinavian countries, has contributed to making the socially critical police procedural the definitive form of the crime novel in Scandinavian countries since the 1960s, and hence the foundation of the Scandinavian crime-fiction tradition (Arvas and Nestingen 2011b, 3).

It is particularly stories of this kind that have fascinated me, but independent of subgenre, religion does often take certain recurring forms in Scandinavian crime fiction.

That religion very often is shaped in certain ways in crime stories is as such not very surprising. According to Stig Hjarvard (2012), religion in crime fiction is usually represented as problematic and tied to crime and murder. This is in line with the logics of the genre that requires the elements presented to create tension for the story to evolve. The shaping of religion in a work of fiction along the lines of genre requirements ties into the discussion of a mediatization of religion and society more generally. In other words the fact that religion and other aspects of society today to a large extent can be argued to be shaped according to media logics and the needs of the media (Hjarvard 2013). The theory of a mediatization of religion and society has many connotations, but in this case it highlights the need to always reflect on how a media product, such as a film, presents religion in line with the requirements of the narrative. This is not to say that the representations do not at the same time highlight certain attitudes to religion, but these must be related to the requirements of the genre.

How, then, is religion commonly represented in contemporary Scandinavian crime films and what do the representations suggest about attitudes to religion in the Nordic countries today?

### **Religion as problem and possibility in *Priest of Evil***

*Priest of Evil* is directed by Olli Saarela, a Finnish director known for focusing on religious themes in his films (von Bagh 2000; Vähäsarja 2006). That religion consequently becomes a much more all-pervading theme in the film than in the novel is not surprising. Several of Saarela's films furthermore focus on dramatic events or crime. This is the case with *Priest of Evil* too, in which the main character, the policeman Harjunpää, has been turned into a real wreck, compared to the rather down to earth character in the book. In the following I discuss



some noteworthy ways in which religion appears in the film and compare the film to other Scandinavian crime films.

### *Religious title*

That *Priest of Evil* is a film with a focus on religion is suggested already in the title. Both the book and the film follow the rather common feature in crime fiction to use a language relating to religion in the title and in this way capture the imagination of the reader/viewer. Other Scandinavian crime stories with similar titles are for example *The Preacher* (2007), a TV-movie based on Camilla Läckberg's novel with the same title, *In the Name of God* (2007), an episode in the TV-series about the police detective Martin Beck, *Fallen Angels* (2008), a film based on a novel by Gunnar Staalesen and *Tragedy on a County Churchyard* (2013), a TV-movie based on a novel by Maria Lang. Compared to these titles though, one could argue that *Priest of Evil* sounds somewhat more ominous and not surprisingly religion is in the film represented quite threateningly.

### *Religion as madness*

The main crime story in *Priest of Evil* revolves around the unclear deaths of a couple of men at a metro stop in Helsinki. At first the police are not sure whether the men have committed suicide, by jumping in front of a train, or whether they have been murdered, by being pushed in front of the train. It turns out that the police are dealing with a murderer. The murderer is witnessed pushing a man onto the tracks just as a metro train approaches. However, the murderer is hiding his face and is therefore not identified. Talking to the relatives of the murdered men it turns out that they have all been approached by a strange man. The man has

told them that they have to save themselves. It also turns out that the murdered men have something in common; they are all known to have abused their family members.

While it is not clear to the police who the murderer is, the character is fairly early on introduced to the audience. The murderer's name is Johannes and he is a young, well-trained man, with a sordid past. Via flashbacks and what Johannes tells other characters about his life, the audience finds out that Johannes' father was a preacher. He was also a very violent man and according to Johannes a hypocrite. Also according to Johannes, his father killed Johannes' mother. Johannes tried to escape the father, but was not successful. Johannes tried to kill himself but was, by his own testimony, saved by God. Johannes interpreted the event as a sign of God needing Johannes. In the now of the film, Johannes has come to the conclusion that it is his job to kill men like his father. He sees himself as a form of savior and has even had the word "salvation" tattooed on his stomach. At the same time, though, Johannes has become much like his father and is just as abusive to women.

Johannes is a fairly typical religiously inspired murderer. He is a character whose faith has turned into madness. He is convinced that he is serving the greater good and has God on his side, which in the story is represented as a sign of insanity. Similar characters can be found in previously mentioned *Preacher*, in *Sunstorm* (2007), a film based on a novel by Åsa Larsson and in *Before the frost* (2007), an episode of the TV-series about the police detective Kurt Wallander. The characters are very obviously played for effect. The audience is never really allowed to get a thorough understanding for the character's actions, and in fact it is often suggested that the actions are simply insane. The stories also at times highlight and criticize religious power structures or other structures that have helped to cover up or hide the crimes. What is interesting with *Priest of Evil* though, is that in this film the theme of salvation, which is usually in films represented as something good, is turned on its head and becomes something threatening and dangerous (Sjö 2013a).

*Bad religious other*

Though Johannes in the most obvious problematic religious character in *Priest of Evil*, he is not the only one. When investigating the first unclear death, the dead man's wife is introduced. The wife is a Finnish woman who is said to have "changed prophet," in other words she has converted to Islam. In scenes with her she is always shown wearing a head-scarf, a fairly common way in films to highlight that a woman is a Muslim. In the interview with the woman it becomes clear that the woman has been beaten by her husband, an immigrant from northern Africa. His behavior is by the woman explained with his use of drugs, but a possible connection to the violence in Darfur is also hinted at. In time, it transpires that the man has been murdered because he has been seen abusing his wife. After this, we learn nothing more about him, but the notion that Muslim men are violent is underscored. This notion is fairly commonly presented in western films and in Scandinavian crime films too. In the Danish crime drama *Go with Peace, Jamil* (2008), all the main characters are Muslims (Sjö 2013b). In some Swedish crime films, such as *Beck: Kartellen* (2001), criminal gangs with connections to former Yugoslavia and some possibly Muslim characters can be found. More generally though it is the, in some way, religiously other that often comes across as problematic in crime fiction, not just Muslim characters. In for example *Bad Boys* (2003), the characters belong to a revival movement that is often represented as different and Other in Scandinavian films (Sjö and Häger forthcoming).

*Naïve religiosity*

Though some religious characters are very clearly represented as a problem in *Priest of Evil*, there are also religious characters with less negative characteristics. The most obvious of these

is Elisa, the wife of the main character, Timo Harjunpää. Elisa works in a Christian bookshop and often talks of her faith. She tries to get her daughter Pauliina to take questions of faith seriously, and at the celebration of Pauliina's confirmation, she gives the girl a necklace with a cross. To some extent, though, Elisa is presented as hiding behind her faith. The family is dealing with a terrible tragedy, the murder, a couple of years earlier, of Elisa's and Timo's older daughter Emmi. This tragedy has left particularly Timo in ruins and Elisa is partly blaming Timo for Emmi's death. Timo was supposed to pick Emmi up the night she was killed, but he was late.

Elisa also partly comes across as naïve. After Elisa and Timo have separated, Elisa is approached by Johannes. She does not know who Johannes is and when he tells her that his injuries--he has many bruises on his face--are due to a car accident in which he lost his girlfriend, she believes him. In reality the bruises have been caused by Timo, who has chased Johannes once and almost caught him. Johannes asks Elisa to come with him to a theological seminar, and after some hesitation she joins him. After the seminar Johannes convinces Elisa to come to his home to look at his photographs. She is again hesitant, but finally agrees. Some of the pictures, it turns out, are of Elisa and her family and who Johannes is now dawns on Elisa. Elisa tries to get away but is unsuccessful and is raped and beaten by Johannes.

Representing religious people as somewhat naïve is not unusual in crime stories. Though it is sometimes the case that religious communities are portrayed as hiding a person they know is a killer or a criminal, it is also often the case that some religious characters are not able to see who the murderer or criminal really is. This is often explained by their faith, which sometimes does not allow them to see evil or question the deeds of those they believe are also religious. Though one can argue that Elisa could not know that Johannes was a murderer, her choice to go with him is still represented as partly dumb. Knowing about her loss, Johannes manages to get Elisa to do what he wants and her faith does not seem to be able to save her.

*Struggling with good and evil*

Though Elisa is clearly the most religious character in the Harjupää household, it is Timo that seems to struggle the most with questions of faith. In the film, the audience is shown flashbacks to the time before Emmi's murder. In these scenes Timo comes across as happy and balanced. In the now of the film he is a rundown man with dark shadows under his eyes, problems with alcohol and problems with his roles as policeman, husband and father. What drives Timo is a wish for revenge. He does not feel that the man that murdered Emmi got what he deserved. Since he was only a teenager, he got away with just two years in prison. Timo remembers the man smiling when the verdict was read. Timo now counts the days until the man is released from prison. When the man is out of prison, Timo kidnaps him and brings him to the place where Emmi was murdered. Here he threatens to kill the man and tells him that the law was once his bible but now the gun fills this role. Harjupää is stopped by a colleague who has figured out what he is up to. After breaking down and crying he finally seems to be able to move on.

Struggling with questions of good and evil and right and wrong is, as mentioned, a fairly common theme in crime fiction. It is furthermore not uncommon that both police and criminals deal with these questions. It is also fairly common to find both policemen and criminals struggling with tragic events in their pasts. This is the case in *Priest of Evil*. The film is therefore an example of what Charles Derry calls psychotraumatic thrillers (Derry 1988). These stories focus on the internal lives of characters. The stories are at times accused of being naïve psychologically, a criticism Derry finds faults with, since one really cannot expect to be able to delve very deeply into a character during the span of one film. Regarding religious characters such as Johannes though, one can argue that these are generally dealt with quite simplistically.

However, the questions regarding good and evil and right and wrong that the stories inspire are still noteworthy and for Harjunpää the struggle leads to a transformation that helps him go on with his life.

### *Complex religious spaces*

In crime films that focus on religion, religious spaces are also common. Religious spaces are here often played for effect. A murder in a church can be argued to become extra gruesome since the place is otherwise often connected to different emotions. This is the case in *Sunstorm*, where scenes of a joyous religious meeting in a church are contrasted with images of a mutilated body found there soon after. It is also fairly common that religious settings are located far from what could be argued to be the center of society. In short, religious groups are very often found in the countryside or in small towns far from capital cities. This is again the case in for example *Sunstorm*, but also in *Bad boys* and *Vares: The Path of the Righteous Men* (2012). What we have here is what has sometimes been referred to as internal orientalism or internal othering (Eriksson 2010), that is to say the othering of those from what can be considered the margins of society, both metaphorically and spatially. To some extent though, *Priest of Evil* breaks this mold.

*Priest of Evil* is set in Helsinki and sweeping shots of the city from above often highlight the churches. A couple of scenes take place in and around a church. The scenes depict Pauliina's confirmation. For the most part the confirmation is represented as a joyous occasion. The whole family is present, the room is full of light, and outside the sun is shining. However, this being a thriller, the threat is not far away. Already in the church, Timo has some problems. For him the light in the church seems too bright. He keeps squinting and a slightly unstable camera makes his predicament obvious. Outside in the courtyard, the family is unknowingly being

observed by Johannes. These scenes thus place religion square in the cultural center; however, here too threatening aspects are connected to the religious spaces.

The church is furthermore not the only religious space in the film. Three others are also presented. One is the house where the seminar Johannes and Elisa attends is held. This house does not seem to be an official religious space, but the theme of the discussion is clearly theological. There is nothing threatening about the space as such, but the fact that Johannes is there with Timo's wife and Johannes' intentions are unclear, bring tension to the scene. The house is furthermore situated at the outskirts of the city. This too is the case with the second religious space worthy of mentioning. This space is Johannes house. This is again not an official religious space, but Johannes' house is filled with crosses which fairly naturally connects the space with religion. However, the space is also very dark and full of shadows, which makes it feel threatening. The final religious space is to be found in one of the metro tunnels. Timo comes across this space when he pursues Johannes. Already at the metro stop, a religious symbol is introduced. Timo sees a white dove fly up. The dove's flight is filmed in slow motion, highlighting its symbolic function. In the metro tunnel, someone, presumably Johannes, has on the wall of the tunnel written "save yourself" in what seems to be blood. Under the words a cross made of two iron rods is to be seen and on the ground there are two dead and bloody white doves.

Though *Priest of Evil* takes place in Helsinki, the representation of these alternative religious spaces in this film too situates religion, or at least a problematically constructed religion, on the outskirts of society. However, by being so close to the center, the religion can be argued to come across as more threatening than the religion set in a remote place. There is though a final encounter in a religious space that again makes the image of religion more complex. This is the final scene in the film. Timo has managed to save his wife and capture the murderer. It is worth pointing out that the murderer has not been killed. Instead the audience

can assume that he will now pay for his crimes in accordance with the laws of the country. In the final scene Timo, Elisa, Pauliina and Pauliina's boyfriend are all gathered at Emmi's grave. The family now seems to be reunited. The scene is tranquil and the space comes across as warm, despite it being a graveyard. The film ends with the following words from a well-known prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the one from the other.*

In these final frames then religion is again given center stage and the possibility to be guided by God is suggested.

### **The complexity of religion in Scandinavian crime films**

How does religion come across in *Priest of Evil* and in Scandinavian crime films more generally? Very obviously films such as *Priest of Evil* suggest that getting too involved in religion is not a good thing. While taking part in certain religious rituals, such as confirmations, is represented in a fairly neutral way, taking religion very seriously never seems to lead to any good. Not surprisingly, with a few exceptions, detectives in Scandinavian crime films do not seem to be that interested in religious questions. One can argue that religion does not really fit with a job focused on finding evidence and proof, but the fact that it is the dark side of religion that the police often come into contact with also make a cautious stand on religion understandable.

The recurring use of religious themes and imagery in Scandinavian crime fiction, however, highlights that particularly Christian religious symbols, rituals, spaces and texts are a natural part of life in Scandinavia. In *Priest of Evil*, the prayer presented at the end of the film,



opens up for a possibly religious reading of the film. In other Nordic crime films, religious texts are also used to solve the crimes. In for example *Jar City* (2006), it is a bible verse on a cross at a grave, that helps the detective unravel the mystery at hand. By linking questions of right and wrong to a religious sphere, the stories also suggest that religion still can be of help when exploring these issues, though getting too involved in questions of faith is not recommended.

The way the films often connect religion, and particularly a religion constructed as problematic, to the spatial margins of society on the other hand suggests that religion is generally something considered as not entirely acceptable. Religion is something that those who do not fit in turn to. It is also something that it would seem those who are not in a position of power can be lured by, according to these stories. Religion thus comes across as something in a sense natural, but also something partly dangerous, particularly for those constructed as in some sense Other.

Ideas of good and evil are not just a part of religion, but in a lot of stories these themes are still connected to religion. Over all though, and following Mikael Tapper (2011), the way crime stories construct some characters as evil can from an ideological standpoint be argued to be problematic. Constructing someone as evil leads to one not needing to really understand this person. The only way to deal with evil is to get rid of it. This in turn often brings in the so called avenger hero, the hero that takes it upon himself (and it is still often a he) to save the world from evil, a task he needs to take care of since the system that should deal with crimes does not seem to work. This type of character is present in Scandinavian crime fiction too and has been problematized (Tapper 2005; Tapper 2011). It is a character that questions the legal system at hand and puts justice in the hands of the individual.

To begin with *Priest of Evil* too seems to glorify the lonely hero/policeman. The policemen and women in the film remind the viewers of characters from American police shows, to the point almost of cliché. The men and women in Harjunpää's team seem to all dress

in jeans and leather and all are strong individuals. Harjunpää too does a lot of work on his own. Interestingly though, the avenger hero is not allowed to succeed in this film. When Harjunpää's colleague goes after Johannes on his own, he is beaten up by Johannes. It is instead Harjunpää, together with the rest of the team, who end up capturing Johannes. And, as mentioned, they do not kill Johannes, but instead make sure to capture him alive. One could then argue that Johannes too has rights in the world of *Priest of Evil* and though his actions and faith seem mad, he too has the right to a fair trial and presumably the mental health aid he is arguably in need of.

Though Scandinavian crime films, as many other crime films, often represent religion as a problem, since this is what the narratives in a sense require, the films do not always present simple solutions. Social structures are questioned, but the belief that the legal system can still work is also to be found. The religion of the Other does tend to become a problem, but the idea that religion has a place in society is also presented, though this place is to the most part, as can be expected in societies as secularized as the Nordic countries, to be found at the margins. For those at the margins though religion can have an important role to fill and can help one deal with many types of problems. These films do then suggest that the Nordic countries are quite secular, but the focus and interest in religion also suggest post-secular traits (Sjö 2012); religion is considered essential for understanding society, but religion at the same time comes across as something far from unproblematic.

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