

# **A PALER SHADE OF NOIR?**

Reconsidering pessimism in Christian thought and Nordic crime fiction

Inaugural lecture as Emeritus Research Professor of Nordic Theology  
Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College

The Revd Dr John W [Jack] Dyce

The Peedie Kirk, Kirkwall, Orkney - 22 March 2018

## **Introduction**

Let me first express my appreciation to the College for conferring on me this emeritus chair of Nordic theology following my retirement as Principal of the College. At one level, it is clearly a generous act, or perhaps a celebration that after my 18½ years as the academic head of the institution, I could be retired to the pastures of research. I think it is a tribute however to something more profound, a conviction within the College that theology is to be broadly understood, that theology comes from and is about God who is as fully at work in the world as in the church and that theology ought to draw deeply on many different wells of inspiration.

This is very much consonant with those parts of Nordic theology to which I find myself most attracted and most in tune. To Scandinavian “creation” theologians (holding together the first and second articles of the creed) ‘the world is not a strange and alien place – this world is God’s own creation, and is our home’ (Gregersen et al. 2017:8), in which ‘the secular and the religious are interlaced and overlapping both historically and in everyday life’ (Gregersen et al. 2017:14).

My career has embraced time in the church as a minister, ordained in 1976, and in working for fourteen years in local government education services. It was in adult education that I first really encountered Scandinavia, involved in a European action research project on the labour market in Denmark and Scotland. There, I met the life and work and the legacy of Grundtvig, the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and hymn-writer, inspirer of folk high schools, scholar of Old Norse mythology, member of the then Danish parliament and shaper of what was to become the smaller and more modern Denmark following the times of absolute monarchy. Professionally, I was impressed by a society that took the education of adult seriously, but in truth I fell in love with almost everything. I made friends (who, remarkably, remain friends), I discovered

the music of Carl Nielsen, I enjoyed Tivoli Gardens with its gentle fun, I celebrated the varieties of Danish smørrebrød for lunch, I found a society that was a bit more egalitarian, collaborative, proud in a modest kind of way, and tolerant of diversity (albeit experience has given me a more nuanced evaluation of Danish society).

And so Denmark and the Nordic world has become a very big part of my life and my work. I like to suggest that my interests are eclectic, though others suspect that I am indeed Jack of all trades and master of none, a *tusindekunstner*, a thousand tasks artist. Though my principal academic interest remains Grundtvig – his educational, cultural, and theological thinking – I much enjoyed my studies at the then Centre for Nordic Studies in the UHI (I have brought along my postgraduate hood as a token of appreciation) and am grateful to those who taught me there; and, in recent times, I have found great pleasure in reading and reflecting on Nordic Noir, Scandinavian crime fiction.

So - The sub-title of the lecture, ‘Reconsidering pessimism in Christian thought and Nordic crime fiction’ might seem an eccentric pairing brought about by my personal interests – and there is truth in that! The link is indeed the issue of pessimism which plays a strong part in both Christian theology and Scandinavian crime novels and films, but they are held together also by the role of narrative. Recently, I was reading a review (Haag 2018:5) of the 2018 film *Mary Magdalene*<sup>1</sup> in which one line struck me: ‘the film makers are storytellers, not theologians’. Are they so different? The comment reminded me of the extent to which my own way of doing of theology is in fact significantly related to and drawing upon narrative and indeed a broad and deep mine of story (Fiddes 2009). Books, Grundtvig suggested, as living things were concerned with ‘the elucidation of human life in all its directions and relationships’ (Broadbridge and Jensen 1984:44). My premiss for this lecture is that Scandinavian crime fiction literature is indeed a source for the elucidation of human life.

### **Scandinavian crime fiction - Nordic Noir**

And the form of fiction with which we are concerned this evening is popularly, or perhaps commercially<sup>2</sup>, referred to as Nordic Noir, Scandi-crime. Of course, it is now an international phenomenon, in books, television series and films – Jo Nesbø, Henning Mankell, Anne Holt, Jussi Adler-Olsen and

---

<sup>1</sup> Director: Garth Davis; writers: Helen Edmundson, Philippa Goslett

<sup>2</sup> As Stougaard-Nielsen (2017) suggests, ‘Nordic crime fiction ... is perhaps only really “Nordic” when viewed or read from abroad - ... where the branding of national peculiarities is essential for attracting the attention of potential funders, publishers and book buyers in a crowded, globalised field’.

Stig Larsson<sup>3</sup> are widely read here, and there is a strong whiff of the Nordic in Ann Cleeves' *Shetland*<sup>4</sup>.

Is Scandinavian crime fiction a genre in any meaningful sense ... [or] is it simply a vague term for a collection of books that happen (in most cases at least) to originate from the same geographical region? Or, indeed, is it just a cynical marketing ploy? Tonight, I think we don't need to become involved in a semantic conversation, or of determining what falls within or outwith the genre. For working purposes, let's assume that it's 'a particular type of Scandinavian crime fiction ... typified by its heady mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives. ... a dimly-lit aesthetic ... matched by a slow and melancholic pace, multi-layered storylines, and an interest in uncovering the dark underbelly of contemporary society' (Creeber 2015:21,22).

### The Melancholy mood

I remember from my schooldays the little punning song *Life is butter melon cauliflower* – life is but a melancholy flower. It might be suggested that it is the anthem of Nordic Noir! Is there a particular Nordic propensity to the melancholic? Hansen and Waade (2017:83) reflect on the work of prominent Nordic creatives such as Jean Sibelius, Munch's *Melancholia*, August Strindberg's *The Father*, and Ingmar Bergman, commenting,

For centuries, *melancholy* has been a core concept in aesthetic theories and philosophy as well as a medical term; it was echoed in the rise of the romantic artistic genius, in which the melancholic and troublesome emotional conditions of the artist themselves were considered to be qualities with a positive influence on the works of art' (citing Hornbek 2006:123-46).

In the 2016 BBC television programme, *Art of Scandinavia*, Andrew Graham-Dixon observed that the linking by Montesquieu of climate and character was one that seemed to make sense in a Norwegian context.<sup>5</sup> In many Nordic Noir novels, the landscape seems to form part of the narrative (Ingold 1993:152-74) ; characters, narrative and landscape a unity (Jakubowski 2012). Johan Theorin, the novelist, writes<sup>6</sup>, of 'the [seasonal] weather and the atmosphere of the landscape affect[ing] the characters of the story' (Peacock 2014:168). The landscape and its companion, the dreich climate, seem to seep into the characters of the novels and also reflect a reality about the people itself - the environmental and inner landscapes in tune with one another, reflected in

---

<sup>3</sup> Nesbø (Norway), Mankell (Sweden), Adler-Olsen (Denmark), Holt (Norway) and Larsson (Sweden) are perhaps best known for the Harry Hole, Wallander, Department Q/Lost Causes, Vik/Stubo (Modus) and Millennium series respectively.

<sup>4</sup> The Shetland Quartet and later books; see also the BBC television series.

<sup>5</sup> BBC4 Art of Scandinavia. Episode 1: 'Dark Night of the Soul', broadcast BBC4 on 14 March 2016

<sup>6</sup> referring to Theorin's own website

Wallander's father's recurrent painting of a 'melancholy autumn landscape'<sup>7</sup>. There is a feeling of melancholy and restlessness arising [it seems] from the thoughts and life under the grey and somber northern sky' (Sorensen, Jens Erik 1991:107), though it has been suggested by one translator of Scandinavian crime fiction that 'too much emphasis has been placed on the "gloom"' (Marlaine Delargy, quoted in Forshaw 2012:75).

It is perhaps this melancholy that is one strand of the appeal to readers. John Lier Horst, a former police officer and the author of the William Wisting series, has suggested so:

Readers ... feel a conspicuous fascination for what we might call 'Nordic melancholy', concocted from winter darkness, midnight sun, and immense, desolate places. The taciturn, slightly uncommunicative Nordic crime heroes have a particular dark aura; they are lone wolves living in a barren, cold part of the world, constantly embarked on an uncompromising pursuit of truth and clarity. What's more, the entire idea of paradise lost is a prominent feature of Nordic crime; the social-democratic, efficient society attacked from within by violence, corruption and homicide. (Horst 2014/2016)

Horst's mention of the social criticism dimension to Nordic Noir is an important and recurrent one, a sense of loss of what once was or was imagined to be a source of pride for the Scandinavian nations – a deep regret that this had been taken from them. 'Research on welfare is easily tempted towards melancholy, as if we walked through a city landscape where certain proud monuments of our blessed, but austere, past remain while others have dissolved into ruins, to be replaced by new and alien structures'. 'The Nordic welfare state has often been referred to as a secular religion, a higher organising principle, that binds the citizens together' (Stenius 2008:75), so of central importance socio-economically but also in terms of Nordic identity.

Shane McCorrstine asserts that 'a cultural history of modern Scandinavian identity could be written purely through reference to pessimistic attitudes' and asks: '... why is Scandinavian pessimism such a significant cultural component? Why has Sweden been described as a 'worn-out or at least partially demolished paradise?'<sup>8</sup> (McCorrstine 2011:77)

There is of course something a little puzzling about why a region that regularly tops 'happiness' tables and that gave the world the word *hygge* should gift us also such an extensive and thriving seam of crime fiction literature. Indeed, Nordic crime rates compare favourably with others. For example,

---

<sup>7</sup> Mankell H (2002) *Faceless Killers*

<sup>8</sup> Mankell H (2004) *The Dogs of Riga*

Iceland [the home of authors Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Arnaldur Indriðason] is a low crime country. The annual murder rate averages just 1.8 murders a year. There have been years without a single homicide .... And when murders do occur, they are mostly the results of intoxicated fights or family feuds. Unsolved murder cases, so-called murder mysteries, are almost unheard of.' (Pakes and Gunnlaugsson 2017)

The prevalence of crime writing may reflect, rather, levels of anxiety about crime in some Nordic nations. Political platforms for elections, from Social Democrats (Petersen et al 2012:17; Stougaard-Nielsen 2017:17) to the right-wing people's parties (Dahl 2015), have frequently emphasised the promise of security and peace of mind and sought to trade on fears.

### **Scandinavian utopianism and Paradise lost**

Arguably a common feature in Norden (and related to noirness) is some sense of loss of what once they had (or thought they had), of what once they were (or imagined themselves to be). I do not mean to suggest that the Nordic nations are at all carbon-copies of one another; they are distinct and go to some efforts to affirm both their commonalities and their differences.

A central image of Norden is the *folkhemmet* (The People's Home), the universal provision that underpins the welfare of all within each Nordic society, the significant role of the state, democratic participation in decision-making, some measure of economic regulation, a sizeable public sector, access to universal and free education and health care, even some levels of social engineering. (It also implies that all are expected to contribute fully to the society.) The development of a Nordic social and economic model owed much to the dominance of political social democracy across Scandinavia, though one can assert that there developed a 'hegemony that the idea of the universal welfare state had been obtained' between the end of the Second World War and the 1960s' (Brandal et al 2013:66).

It would, however, be easy to overlook the extent to which Lutheran theological ethics provided an underpinning for the Nordic model (Sorensen 1998:364-65), rooted in Luther's suspicion of the money economy (Lindberg 2003:172-3) and the responsibility of the civil powers to 'govern in accordance with God's will, to secure justice, and to provide for the needy' (Doherty 2014:67). 'Here are the roots of the sense of social solidarity which remains such a powerful influence in the Nordic world even today', argues Robert Nelson in his book on *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy. A Different Protestant Ethic* (Nelson 2017).

Even before more recent neo-liberal reversals of and restrictions in governmental activity (Baeten 2016), Nordic Noir in its infancy had levelled

criticism of the Nordic Model which concealed a reality of corruption, bureaucracy, consumerism, undermining of personal responsibility, poverty, discrimination, disillusionment. The so-called godparent authors of Nordic Noir, Sjöwall and Wahlöö turned to crime writing to expose the cracks in the façade.

In an interview for *The Guardian* in 2009, Maj Sjöwall commented,

We realised that people read crime and through the stories we could show the reader that under the official image of welfare-state Sweden there was another layer of poverty, criminality and brutality. We wanted to show where Sweden was heading: towards a capitalistic, cold and inhuman society, where the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. [and the journalist noted ...]

They planned 10 books and 10 books only. The subtitle would be "The story of a crime" – the crime being society's abandonment of the working classes. (France 2009)

(Earlier, Søren Kierkegaard (1847:164), on his once-desired ambition to be a police agent, reflected 'I realized that it was good that I did not become one, for most police cases involve misery and wretchedness – not crimes and scoundrels. They usually involve a paltry sum and some poor devil.')

Yet, there may be implicit also a crime of betraying Nordic optimism, even utopianism, as suggested in Horst's phrase, the 'idea of paradise lost'.<sup>9</sup>

Nations and even transnational cultural communities (a status we might afford to the Nordic region) often rely upon some sense of a golden age, either held to be historical or imagined and mythical, to sustain, reinforce and revive their sense of meaning and purpose and identity (Smith 1999), in some ways imagined through three related myths:

**A Myth of the Heroic Age, or How We became Glorious...**

Every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration. The future of the ethnic community can only derive meaning and achieve its form from the pristine "golden age" ... The epoch in which they flourished is the great age of liberation ..., which released the energies of the people for cultural innovation and original political experiment. (p.65)

**The myth of decline or how we fell into a state of decay ...** tells us how the community lost its anchor in a living tradition, how the old values became ossified and meaningless, and how ... common sentiments and beliefs faded to give way to *rampant individualism and the triumph of partisan interests* over collective ideals and communal solidarity. (p.67)

**A myth of regeneration, or how to restore the Golden Age and Renew our community as "in the Days of Old"** [-] here we move from the sphere of explanatory myth to that of

---

<sup>9</sup> See also Hansen and Waade 2017:90

prescriptive ideology: from an idealized, epic history to an account of “required actions”, or rationale of collective mobilization. (p.67)

The golden age of the *folkhem* and the notion of a perfectable society is still part of the Norwegian national psyche (Forshaw 2011, and 2012:124), suggests Staalesen, the Norwegian novelist and creator of *Varg Veum*. ‘I think [he says] that the generation to which I belong (I was born in 1947) still has a dream about an ideal society, a functioning democracy based on welfare and society.’ [ 20] Michael Booth’s jocular book title, *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: The Truth about the Nordic Miracle* (Booth 2014) is not entirely ironic in hinting at the possible perfectibility of society, or least something very close.

It is common to see one of the most visible cracks in the Nordic façade in the murder of Olof Palme, the Swedish Prime Minister in 1986. ‘His assassination in Stockholm shocked a country that had regarded itself as a utopian welfare state, [an event treated in Leif GW Persson’s *Falling Freely, as in a Dream*<sup>10</sup>]. PM Palme did not even have any security with him when he went out into the city square that night, typifying the total and complete trust Swedes and other Scandinavians had in their fellow citizens and in their states’ security’ (Abrams 2013).

More recently, of course, Norway suffered the terrible attacks perpetrated by Breivik in the bombings in Oslo and the shootings on Utøya. Henning Mankell, the author of *Wallander*, wrote in the aftermath of the mass murder by Breivik, ‘The distant and in many ways idyllic Norway, the country with the oil and the wealth, is suddenly exposed to the banality of evil’ (Mankell 2011). Such national trauma can impact significantly on assumptions about identity, community, solidarity, predictability, shared traits, consensus in values, innocence. This is not to suggest that such questioning was not already apparent in the Nordic nations. The attempted portrayal of Breivik as ‘a lone monstrous fanatic’ (Stougaard-Nielsen 2017:195), therefore aberrant and pathological, did not displace wholly some sense that ‘the heart of darkness lies buried deep within ourselves’ (Myhre 2011) and questions rose around social issues such as child welfare (Breivik’s dysfunctional childhood), mainstream as well as extreme racism in society, attitudes towards immigration and integration, the marginalised within successful society, the collapse of social bonds in a society imagined to be coherent and caring.

Such traumatic national events, truly awful in themselves, have of course the capacity to impact on the national psyche as a whole, though the adaptive responses vary. While Nordic Noir’s portrayal of the state of Norden is

---

<sup>10</sup> *Faller fritt som i en dröm*

generally one of gradual decline, these terrible events have sometimes been read in terms of loss of innocence - 'the snow was no longer white; it whipped around him in a shade of grey', to borrow a phrase from Anne Holt's novel, *The Lion's Mouth* (Holt 2014: loc 3023)', idealism had been wounded (Lundin 1993: 8), 'Scandinavian innocence' was no longer sustainable (Stevenson 2010).

Of course, while such horrendous criminal events loom large in memories and imaginations, as Simon Jenkins wrote in *The Guardian* in the aftermath of Utøya,

The Norwegian tragedy is just that, a tragedy. It does not signify anything and should not be forced to do so. A man so insane he can see nothing wrong in shooting dead 68 young people in cold blood is so exceptional as to be of interest to criminology and brain science, but not to politics (Jenkins 2011).

That's right; to extrapolate from one traumatic event or indeed from the existence of crime as reflected in crime fiction is a nonsense, and a horrendous nonsense. Yet the response to evil deeds may tell us something about a society.

The reader of crime fiction wants to know about motivation, about prior events and experiences, about social context, about psychological processes, about alternative explanations. And a society nurtured on reflective analysis and self-criticism is liable to inquire into causality, and not merely the immediate causes but underlying and deeper causes. Andrew Anthony, the British journalist with an interest in Scandinavian crime fiction, has challenged what he regards as 'the overly deterministic "Scandinavian analysis of errant behaviour, which invariably ascribes criminality to society's faults"' (Brunsdale 2016).

In the Nordic context and in its crime fiction, I think there is nonetheless a particular perspective. Lene Kaaberbøl, with Agnete Friis the author of *The Boy in the Suitcase* (Kaaberbøl and Friis 2008, tr 2011), tries to explain this 'insistence on explaining *why*' a crime happens - Brought up as we are in societies brimming with affordable childcare, free education, free health care, and a penal system emphasizing rehabilitation ... we are still entranced by those who, on the page at least, take a switchblade to the welfare state cocoon' (Kaaberbøl 2014-15:28). The focus is more on macro-explanation than on the specifics of the 'case'. The investigation may appear to be of one or more murders but there is a parallel investigation of society itself, not least in those novels and series that spotlight particular issues in Nordic society - violence towards women, corruption, the impact of globalisation and its importation of less desirable features, the abuse of power, ecology and climate change, drugs, immigration and minorities, homelessness, treatment of mental health issues

---

<sup>11</sup> My italics

... . In *The Bridge*<sup>12</sup>, the Dano-Swedish TV production, the so-called, self-named Truth Terrorist, though ultimately shown to be pursuing a more personal agenda, at first appears to be bringing into the light issues that, like the shooting of many of the series' scenes, otherwise may lurk in a crepuscular gloom.

The recurrent underlying question emerges, for example, in Anne Holt's *The Death of a Demon* (Holt 1995/2013) where there has been a murder in a 'well-run children's home' (Brunsdale 2016 loc 8001) is 'how can it be that all our social investment is of no help in confronting the seemingly radical evil present in this little boy? [and] The welfare society and the *folkhemmet* ideology provide[s] no answer to this question' (Saarinen 2003:132). Another author has said that 'I want to examine the individual psychological, social, cultural or political mechanisms which form the basis for the ultimate evil, murder. I am looking in other words after the evil *enigma*<sup>13</sup>' (Eeg 2012).

Many of these social issues are rooted in a denial of the humanity of some or in creating an environment in which we do not flourish as human beings. In the tradition of Sjøwall and Wahløø, the link is drawn between crime and the dehumanising processes of society where 'people think of themselves not as human beings but consumers' (Brunsdale loc 12805), a shift portrayed in *The Bridge* television crime series where cars are regularly shown scuttling across the Øresund bridge connecting Copenhagen and Malmø – consumers, commuters and clients (Ek 2006:14) not citizens, or members of a cultural community, or anything with any depth of human connection. In particular, this re-casting of human beings as consumers is challenged. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (2017:28) offers a passage from Villy Sørensen's 1955 *Købmanden*, translated as *The Grocer* (Sørensen 1991).

[P]eople thronged in front of the new shop's gaily-lit windows, in which the whole shop was on show like an advertisement – abounding in goods that had never been seen in those parts before, because the whole grocer hadn't thought them necessary ... There were enough shop assistants for everyone, for they all served themselves and took the goods they wanted, and to which coloured advertisements drew their attention. ... Everyone paid up willingly, for all his wares were cheaper than the old grocer's; but their bills were bigger, for now they were allowed to buy things they didn't need. (Sørensen 1991:75-76)

And one commentator on the passage (Kjældgaard 2009:36) alerts us to a Danish play-on- words for 'to serve' – linked to 'to set free or emancipate' but

---

<sup>12</sup> Bron|Broen – The Bridge

Created by Hans Rosenfeldt (also principal writer); Director Henrik Georgsson

Joint creative and financed production by Sveriges Television and DR

First screened on SVT1 on 21 September 2011 with DR1 screening on 28 September 2011

Series 2 from 22 September 2013

Series 3 from 27 September 2015

Series 4 from 1 January 2018

<sup>13</sup> My italics

also 'to dispatch' with its connotation 'to kill' (Stourgaard-Nielsen 2017:29). What appeared to be a more abundant life (in terms of access to goods and services) had the potential also to kill our human-ness.

When I delivered my last inaugural lecture as Principal, back in 1999, my theme was a difficult-to-translate Danish term *folkelighed*. It is a multi-faceted word that we cannot explore this evening, but one strand of its meaning and its ethical power is a belonging to community and a shared commitment to each other. Practically and politically, this underpins and supports universal provision to meet the needs of all and enables its resourcing through public taxation and spending.

At the heart of the message of the Danish thinker Grundtvig is

the basic fact that you always find yourself in a certain context. A historic and dynamic context expressed in language, history, common myths, songs, religious heritage and common problems. Further, you are a part of the web between the dead and the unborn, you are dependent on other people and they depend on you. You are tied to them because you are tied together in a common destiny and that is your place in the world. So in order to become yourself...you must go to your place in history ..., and there you will find yourself and what is expected of you (Nielsen 2011).

In the wider human community too 'Christian faith has to be lived in a humane way, in accordance with a shared sense of humanity.' (Gregersen et al. 2017:8) Indeed, Løgstrup, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and ethicist, asserts our mutual obligations as simply coming with human existence as a fact (Løgstrup 1972:17-23). Mutual obligations *simply come with human existence*; it comes with the territory. To quote Løgstrup,

Trust is not of our own making; it is given. Our life is so constituted that it cannot be lived except as one person lays him or herself open to another person and puts him or herself into that person's hands either by showing or claiming trust. By our very attitude to another we help to shape that person's world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his or her world not by theories and views but by our very attitude towards him or her. Herein lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands. (Løgstrup 1956:18)

This calls for 'a decentering of the subject, which, in keeping with Lutheran and Løgstrupian ethics, places the factual tacit demands of the other at the *center*<sup>14</sup> of our lives and interests' (Kristensson Uggle 2017:97).

The tension between individualism and community is explored in Anders Bodelsen's *Think of a Number* (Bodelsen 1969). (I am indebted to Stougaard-Nielsen for this summary) -

[It] is a crime novel about one individual's inability to adjust his personal desires to the needs of the collective. His unethical self-serving actions, his conspicuous

---

<sup>14</sup> My italics

consumption signify his inability to maintain meaningful social relationships that, due to the welfare state's 'liberation' of the individual from social bonds, demand ethical choices that transcend the individual. Borck is in many ways still a child of the welfare state, as he hides the money in his school lunch box; a child who still has to grow into a welfare citizen, who is able to differentiate between the ephemeral dream world of advertisements and what makes for real happiness or an authentic life. (Stougaard-Nielsen 2017:55)

If neoliberalism, consumerism and individualism have in measure undermined the Nordic welfare state, the welfare state too is charged with undermining the natural social bonds.

### **Fallen-ness and flawed humanity**

I quoted the phrase 'the evil enigma' a few moments ago. Self-evidently, Scandinavian crime fiction is concerned with contexts and issues of evil – there is one or more murders together with a host of other social wrongs. Amidst all the social analysis and criticism, there are sometimes hints at something darker.

Let me share with you this little (I hope, amusing) Reformed theology story

–

Responding to his owner Matt affectionately calling him a "good boy" for fetching a stick, local Calvinist canine Rupert reportedly reminded him that "according to the Scriptures, nobody is a good boy."

"We've been over this, Matt. We're all corrupted — every one of us," Rupert reportedly said to his owner after stopping mid-stride to address the glaring theological error. "How can you call me a good boy when we have all been marred by the effects of sin?"

According to witnesses, the dog went on to lecture his owner for several minutes, stressing how easy it is to forget who we really are in light of God's blinding holiness and our desperately fallen nature.

"Do not call me a good boy — I am a depraved wretch," he added before picking up his stick and continuing to play. (The Babylon Bee 2018)

In Nesbø's *The Snowman*, Aune is suffering from cancer. He observes, 'The more aged I become, the more I tend to the view that evil is evil, mental illness or no. *We're all more or less disposed to evil actions ...*<sup>15</sup>' (Nesbø 2010:544).

If Nordic Noir worries away at the question of society's place in all this and sometimes explores the inner motivations of criminals, it also can suggest that the murderer is less untypical of humanity than we should like to imagine.

---

<sup>15</sup> My italics and emphasis

Christian Jungersen, in his novel *The Exception* (2004, tr 2006) explored the issue of genocide, and in an interview he pondered,

I've long thought it enormously interesting that people you think of as congenial, charming, and nice can sometimes completely change character and turn into virtual demons if certain situations present themselves. ... In reality, evil is most often committed by people like you and me, who think we're doing the right thing and that what we're doing is perfectly reasonable. With this story about four women, I want to show the self-deception that makes it possible for all of us to be evil and yet convince ourselves that we're not. (Bartholdy 2004)

This resonates with the observations of Karin Fossum in the BBC documentary *Nordic Noir: The Story of Scandinavian Crime Fiction*<sup>16</sup> when she explained that

if a murder had happened in her tiny Norwegian town, she likely would have known the victim, the victim's family, and/or even the murderer personally. She would know the murderer as a "good person, before they committed this one act." With this consciousness, Fossum, like other Scandinavian crime writers, aims to depict all parties involved in the crime with this same moral complexity. Audiences will find, then, that these stories are not the same "good vs. evil" mysteries one would expect from Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie, or Harry Potter. In Nordic noir, the "bad guy" is not always a bad person, and the "good guy" is not without flaws. (Abrams 2013)

Even the heroes of Nordic Noir, perhaps the anti-heroes, are portrayed as flawed if not evil. Often this is expressed in quite physical terms. Wallander has been described as 'a fat, divorced southerner who is so burned out that he can hardly make it to work', suffering diabetes and depression; Beck suffers from stomach aches and nausea; Varg Veum and Harry Hole are alcoholics; Erik Winter takes headaches; Van Veeteren has cancer; Lars Martin Johansson is in poor health; and Martin Rohde's vasectomy hints at demasculinisation. They are the visible products of a welfare state that cannot solve all the problems of human life, symbols of decay woven into the very fabric of what it is to be human. They mirror what Nordic Noir identifies as the root problem. Something has afflicted the nation and its people, a sickness in the psyche, a dis-ease, notably present in the ailing detective. Violence, corruption, exclusion, bureaucracy, neoliberalism, the collapse of social solidarity etc. are 'symptoms' of an unwell society. It is unwell, through failures certainly, but also through an inherent and inevitable weakness in human society, the presence of evil.

**Humankind is no ape ... but a unique, wonderful creation** <sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Timeshift series, December 2010

<sup>17</sup> Grundtvig (1832) Norse Mythology

Contrary to the conclusion to which we might jump, this quotation from Grundtvig is not a response to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* as it was published in 1859 and Grundtvig's phrase comes from 1832!

The Nordic Noir picture of human beings might be thought to be as bleak as a rainy Nordic city or a misty landscape but I want finally to explore briefly a more positive reading of humanity. As I mentioned in my introduction, I came into the Nordic through my encounter with Grundtvig, the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century Danish priest and more. One of the things that has sustained me is finding there and in later Scandinavian theology what Wingren, the Swedish theologian, refers to as 'a *positive*<sup>18</sup> doctrine of humanity<sup>19</sup>, a theological anthropology (Wingren 1947.59: xi).

Grundtvig did not doubt the theological and human reality of The Fall, or indeed the fact of evil in the world, or still faith in Christ as the way of salvation, or that human beings can turn their back on what is life-giving ('Humankind, to God's only Son blind, in Your sight claims its own merits'<sup>20</sup>) but he resisted the notion that the Fall was utter –

'we should not consider nature in us and around us, as the property of the Enemy, but as the work of God, which never fell from his hand or slipped from his care ... however much it was spoilt by sin and put to shame by death as the wages of sin. Yes, we shall consider nature as God's work, in us and around us, which shall in no way be hated, mistreated and destroyed, but loved, cleansed, healed and sanctified' (Grundtvig's sermons: 4th Sunday after Trinity, 1838).

And, in one of his hymns *Menneskelivet er underligt* - 'What a great wonder is human life, all kinds of description exceeding, enlight'ning us all from age to age wherever our lives we are leading ... Humans are all in God's image made ...' (Grundtvig 2006).

Sid Bradley, the Anglo-Saxonist, writing on *Beowulf* and Grundtvig says that

the poet celebrates the Creator Lord's delight in creation and sees the manifestation of the Creator within his creation, in its orderliness, beauty, radiance, and teeming life - and, at its centre, under God's providential care, humankind, endowed with knowledge of God and with creative visions and skills and a will to emulate God's bright order within the human family and community. Here a theological issue lies close in the background of this Anglo-Danish legend-history: that humankind preserves, despite the Fall, the image of God in which it was created; and that the establishment of human communality when it is ideally conceived both reflects the orderliness and beauty of God's primary act of Creation and will be providentially overseen by God (Bradley 2004:236).

---

<sup>18</sup> My italics

<sup>19</sup> orig 'man'

<sup>20</sup> *Du, som går ud fra den levende Gud* (Grundtvig 2002); see also Michelsen (1983)

This action in which we are ‘loved, cleansed, healed and sanctified’ is salvation, a recapitulation in which creation is restored and humankind restored to its fullness of humanity, a regaining of lost humanity (Kristensson Ugglå 2017:99). ‘We may say (with a little exaggeration) that to be saved means nothing other than to be a human person, conscious of one’s flaws and yearning for perfection, and with the Gospel as the clear spring from which one can drink’ (Karlsson 2013:148). Against a tendency in 20<sup>th</sup> century theology to affirm Christ’s divinity very much at the cost of his humanity, the Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren asserted of Jesus Christ, that ‘he who lives and gives us eternal life is a human being, the only completely healthy human being’ (Wingren 1983:18).

‘In contrast to Luther, Grundtvig argued that human beings never lost the positive traces of being “created in the image and likeness of God”. Accordingly, the Christian triad of faith, hope and love, can be recognized, appreciated, and ... also exercised by non-believers’ (Gregersen et al. 2017:8), in whom ‘God’s prevenient grace in creation’ (Dokka 2017:208, quoting the Swedish Bishop Einar Billing) is at work in them.

Of Adler-Olsen’s *Redemption* (Adler-Olsen 2013)<sup>21</sup>, Brunsdale (2016: loc 1029) considers that the author ‘invests this grim tale with unshakable faith in humanity’s goodness’. In the midst of wrong, the good can still shine through. Adler-Olsen relates from his childhood his experience of the hospital where his father was a psychiatrist and of coming to know that one patient who was kind to him - brought him meals from the central kitchen and even gave him a kitten - had killed his wife. He was ‘nice and evil at the same time, good and evil in the one person, we all have’. (Adler-Olsen and Corbett 2013: 31’00”-31’22”)

Crime fiction at its best invites us into a world of mystery (we usually do not know who dunnit!), but it can lead us also into exploring the mystery of human life, of human relationships, of human society – a world riddled (in both senses) with ambiguities and contradictions.

Donald Allchin was the external examiner for my PhD *viva* – fortunately a man as kind as he was wise. On Grundtvig and the enigma of human-ness, Allchin wrote

Humanity is, from the beginning, a great and unparalleled wonder, riddle, mystery, experiment. All the words are necessary to express his attitude towards our common humanity. There is wonder and amazement at the mixture of littleness and immensity in the human calling. We are earth clods, we are fashioned out of dust, yet we aspire to

---

<sup>21</sup> *A Conspiracy of Faith* (US) (2013) *Flaskepost fra P* (2009)

the divine. Humanity's life is a riddle, never fully explained, never immune from conflict and tension. The intermingling of wisdom and foolishness, of self-sacrifice and destructive self-seeking, of ardour and coldness in human history, personal and universal, these are not things which human beings can in themselves explain, clarify, let alone transfigure. For this we must wait upon God. (Allchin 1997:145)

## REFERENCES

- Abrams R (2013) *Characteristics of Crime Fiction from Snowy Scandinavia*. Online at <https://space.org.uk/2013/07/10/characteristics-of-crime-fiction-from-snowy-scandinavia-by-rachel-abrams/> [Accessed 13 March 2018]
- Adler-Olsen J and Corbett D (2013) 'Jussi Adler-Olsen Discusses a Conspiracy of Faith with David Corbett (Corte Madera, CA), 28 May 2013'. Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHKLSqsGJ9E> [Accessed 13 March 2018]
- Allchin AM (1997) *NFS Grundtvig. An Introduction to his Life and Work*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd
- Baeten G, Berg LD & Hansen LH (2016) Introduction: neoliberalism and post-welfare Nordic states in transition, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 97:3, 209-212
- Bartholdy B (2004) 'He sees through women. Interview with Christian Jungersen on *The Exception*.' October 2004. Tr Tiina Nunally. Online at <http://www.christianjungersen.com/interviews/he-sees-through-women/> [Accessed 16 March 2018]
- Bodelsen A (1969) *Think of a Number*. Trans D Hohnen. NY: Harper and Row. [Orig *Tænk på et tal*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal]
- Booth M (2014) *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: The Truth About the Nordic Miracle*. London: Jonathan Cape
- Bradley SAJ (2004) 'Before Irenaeus: The Making of Grundtvig the Medievalist', *Grundtvig Studier*, Årg 55, nr 1: 234-54
- Brandal N, Bratberg Ø, and Thorsen DE (2013) *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Broadbridge E and Jensen NL (trs) (1984) *A Grundtvig Anthology*. Edited, annotated and introduced by NL Jensen, W Michelsen, G Albeck, H Toftdahl and Chr Thodberg. Cambridge: James Clarke and Co
- Brunsdale MM (2016) *Encyclopedia of Nordic Crime Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc.
- Creeber G (2015) 'Killing us softly: Investigating the aesthetics, philosophy, and influence of Nordic noir television'. *Journal of Popular Television*, 3(1), 21-35
- Dahl KT (2015) *Tryghed og tillid i vores sundhedssektor. Kristian Thulesen Dahls Ugebreve - mandag den 20. april 2015*. Online at <https://danskfolkeparti.dk/tryghed-og-tillid-i-vores-sundhedssektor/> [Accessed 14 March 2018]
- Doherty S (2014) *Theology and Economic Ethics. Martin Luther and Arthur Rich in Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford UP

- Dokka TS (2017) 'Creation Theology and Ecclesiology in a Fragmented World', pp201-214, in NH Gregersen, B Kristensson Ugglå, and T Wyller (eds & ch1)(2017) *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: Løgstrup, Prenter, Wingren, and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
- Eeg H (2012) 'The Entire Portrait of Grete Lise Holm', *Dagbladet Information*, quoted in Brunsdale 2016, loc 1809. [The web link referenced there was not available when checked, 16 March 2018.]
- Ek R (2006) 'The Öresund Region – Six Years with The Bridge'. Towards a New Nordic Regionalism? Conference arranged by the Nordic Network of the Regional Studies Association in Balestrand, Norway, 4-5 May 2006
- Fiddes PS (2009) 'Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Volume 11, Issue 1
- Forshaw B (2011) 'New Stars of Nordic Noir', *The Independent*, 9 July 2011
- Forshaw B (2012) *Death in a Cold Climate. A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- France L (2009) The queen of crime. *The Guardian*, 22 November 2009. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/nov/22/crime-thriller-maj-sjowall-sweden> [Accessed 14 March 2018]
- Gregersen NH, Kristensson Ugglå B, and Wyller T (eds & chapter one) (2017) *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: Løgstrup, Prenter, Wingren, and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
- Grundtvig NFS (1832) *Nordens Mythologi, Udvalgte Skrifter*, ed Holger Begtrup. Copenhagen Vol.V:408
- Grundtvig NFS (2002) *Du, som går ud fra den levende Gud. Den Danskesalmbog* (2002 ed), nr 291
- Grundtvig NFS (2006) *Menneskelivet er underligt. People's High School Songbook* nr 094.
- Grundtvig NFS Grundtvig's sermons: 4th Sunday after Trinity, 1838. Translated in *Extravagant Creation* (2011). Online at <https://extravagantcreation.wordpress.com/2011/03/27/grundtvigs-sermons-4th-sunday-after-trinity-1838/> [Accessed 10 March 2018]
- Haag M (2018) 'How faithful to the Bible is the film Mary Magdalene?', *The Times Saturday Review*, 10 March 2018
- Hansen KT and Waade AM (2017) *Locating Nordic Noir. From Beck to The Bridge*. Cham: Palgrave European Film and Media Studies
- Holt A (2013, orig 1995) *Death of the Demon*. Trans Anne Bruce. London: Corvus
- Holt A (with B Reiss-Andersen) (2014), *The Lion's Mouth* [orig. *Løvens gap*] Trans Anne Bruce. London: Corvus
- Hornbek B (2006) 'Tankens Exces: Renæssancens Omburdering af Melankolien', pp 123-46 in *Renæssancens Verden: Tænkning, Dagligliv og Efterliv*, ed. Ole Høiris og Jens Vellev. Aarhus: Aarhus UP
- Horst JL (2014/16) 'The secret of Nordic Noir?', *The Hindu*, 5 April 2014; updated 21 May 2016. Online at <http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/the-secret-of-nordic-noir/articles5875988.ece> [Accessed 10 March 2018]
- Ingold T (1993) 'The temporality of the landscape', *World Archaeology*, 1993, 25(2): 152-174
- Jakubowski M (2012) *Following the detectives: real locations in crime fiction*. Cape Town: New Holland Publishers

- Jenkins S (2011) 'The last thing Norway needs is illiberal Britain's patronising', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2011. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/26/norway-illiberal-britain-patronising> [Accessed 14 March 2018]
- Jungersen C (2006) *The Exception*. (Orig *Undtagelsen* 2004) Tr Anna Paterson. NY: Barnes and Noble
- Kaaberbøl L (2014-15) 'Will There Be Snow?', *Mystery Readers Journal*, 30, Winter 2014-15:27-29
- Kaaberbøl L and Friis A (2011) *The Boy in the Suitcase* [orig *Drengen I kufferten* 2008]. Trans 2011 by L Kaaberbøl ) NY: Soho Press
- Karlsson J (2013) 'Gustaf Wingren' in SJ Kristiansen & S Rise (eds) *Key Theological Thinkers from Modern to Postmodern*. Farnham: Ashgate
- Kierkegaard S (1847) 'Journal NB2: In Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, Journals NB-NB5, 4. Eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelhørn et al., Oxford: Oxford UP
- Kjælgaard LH (2009) 'Fremtidens Danmark: Tre faser I dansk fiction-sprosa om velfærdsstaten, 1950-1980', *Kritik* 191:31-43
- Kristensson Uggla B (2017) 'Gustaf Wingren and Scandinavian Creation Theology', pp 91-111, in NH Gregersen, B Kristensson Uggla , and T Wyller (eds & chapter one) *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: Løgstrup, Prenter, Wingren, and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
- Lindberg C (2003) 'Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues' in DK McKim (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*. New York: Cambridge UP
- Løgstrup KE (1972:17-23) *Norm og spontanitet*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal
- Løgstrup KE (1997, orig 1956) *The Ethical Demand*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press
- Lundin, B (1993) *Århundrets svenska deckare* [The Century's Swedish Crime Story]. Bromma: Jury
- Mankell H (2002) *Faceless Killers*. Trans ST Murray. London: Vintage
- Mankell H (2004) *The Dogs of Riga*. Trans L Thompson. London: Vintage
- Mankell H (2011) 'Norway attacks: Anders Behring Breivik will join history's human monsters', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2011. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/25/norway-attacks-anders-behring-breivik>. [Accessed 14 March 2018]
- McCorristine S (2011) 'The Place of Pessimism in Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander Series' pp 77-88 in A Nestingen and P Arvas (eds) *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press
- Michelsen, W (1983) 'Sin samtids kritiker - N.F.S. Grundtvig 1783-1872', *Grundtvig Studier*, Årg. 35, Nr. 1 (1983) pp7-28
- Myhre AS (2011) 'Norway attacks: Norway's tragedy must shake Europe into acting on extremism', *The Guardian*, 24 July 2011. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/24/norway-tragedy-extremism-europe> [Accessed 13 March 2018]
- Nelson E (2017) *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy. A Different Protestant Ethic*. Aarhus: Aarhus UP

- Nesbø, J (2010) *The Snowman* [orig. *Snømannen*] Trans by Don Bartlett. London: Vintage Books
- Nielsen KS (2011) The Importance of Grundtvig's Thinking in a Historical and Contemporary Perspective. A Lecture given for the LEAH Assembly, Skærum Mølle, 9 March 2011. Online at <http://studylib.net/doc/7653975/grundtvig-s-thinking-in-a-historical-and-contemporary> [Accessed 12 March 2018]
- Pakes F and Gunnlaugsson H (2017) 'How a rare murder in Iceland has chilled the nation', *The Independent*, 8 February 2017. Online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/murder-in-iceland-nordic-noir-first-ever-a7566776.html> [Accessed 16 March 2018]
- Peacock S (2014) 'Interview C: Johan Theorin', pp. 161-69 in *Swedish Crime Fiction. Novel, Film, Television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Persson LGW (2014) *Falling freely as in a dream*. Trans Paul R Norlén. London: Doubleday. Orig. *Faller fritt som i en dröm* (2007/2012 Albert Bonniers Förlag)
- Petersen JH, Petersen K and Christiansen NF (eds) (2012) *Dansk velfærdshistorie. Velfærdsstatens storhedstid. Vol 4*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag
- Saarinen R (2003) 'The Surplus of Evil in Welfare Society: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 42 (Summer 2003): 131-35
- Smith AD (1999) *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Sorensen JE (1991) *Melankoli. Nordisk Romantisk Maleri* Aarhus: Aarhus UP
- Sorensen Aa (1998) 'On Kings, Pietism, and Rent-Seeking in Scandinavian Welfare States'. *Acta Sociologica* 41:4, 363-75
- Sørensen V (1991, orig. 1955) 'The Grocer', pp48-52 in *Harmless Tales*. Trans. P Hostrup-Jessen. Norwich: Norvik
- Stenius K (2008) 'Hüzün or Nordic Melancholy', *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 25(2):75-6
- Stevenson J (2010), *Scandinavian Blue: The Erotic Cinema of Sweden and Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s*. Jefferson NC: McFarland
- Stougaard-Neilsen J (2017) *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury
- The Babylon Bee (2018) *Calvinist Dog Corrects Owner: 'No One is a Good Boy'*, Online at <https://babylonbee.com/news/calvinist-dog-corrects-owner-no-one-good-boy/> 1 March 2018. [Accessed 12 March 2018]
- Wingren G (1947/2004) *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*. Trans Ross Mackenzie. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. Orig. *Människan och inkarnationen enligt Irenaeus* (Lund: 1947)
- Wingren G (1983) *Människa och kristen. En bok om Irenaeus*. Stockholm: Verbum



