The Surplus of Evil in Welfare Society: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction

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Abstract: The best-selling Scandinavian crime fiction of the last ten years extensively deals with the problem of remaining evil in a peaceful and just welfare society. It develops a view of “secular theodicy” which aims at explaining the presence of radical evil in a secular late modern society. In this explanation it employs the Lutheran imagery of “hidden God” (Deus absconditus). The paper reviews recent novels by Henning Mankell, Anne Holt, Sven Westerberg, Helena von Zweigbergk and Anna Jansson.

Key Terms: Crime Fiction, Theodicy, Lutheranism, Welfare State, hidden God

At the closing banquet of the recent meeting “The Future of Lutheran Theology” in Aarhus, Denmark, an American Lutheran professor described the Danish society as follows: “Many Americans have felt that the social justice of our dreams has come true in Denmark. The streets are safe and clean, everybody seems to have decent clothing, healthy food and a nice home.”

This description aptly corresponds to the Northern European self-understanding. Throughout the 20th century, Scandinavians have tried to build a welfare society which provides a good living standard for the middle class and a strong social safety net for all weak and non-privileged. Many investigations and political elections continue to give the result that the Scandinavians are willing to pay high taxes in order to preserve this advanced level of social welfare for all members of the society.

The Social Criticism of Best-Selling Crime Authors

This ideology is in Sweden called folkhemmet, the common home of all folks. It is seldom questioned by serious politicians. On the other hand, artists and film makers such as Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), Lars von Trier (Denmark) and Aki Kaurismäki (Finland) have often looked behind the welfare curtain and found that the niceness and good will present in these peaceful societies has its shadow side. In the most popular Scandinavian fiction of the last ten years, that is, in crime fiction, the dark side and particularly the society’s inability to understand radical evil, plays a prominent role. It is my aim to describe this literary genre somewhat closer.

The contemporary popularity of Scandinavian murder mysteries in the largest European book markets, especially Germany and France, continues to have astonishing proportions. The best-selling Swedish crime author, Henning Mankell, has sold over 15 million books which have been translated into 35 languages. His nine-volume detective series, whose hero is a melancholic Swedish policeman Wallander, has dominated the top ten book lists in Germany for years and is perhaps beginning to do so in the English-speaking countries as well.

In the preface to the last, or latest, volume of Wallander series, Pyramiden (The Pyramid, 1999),
Mankell describes the overall message of his crime stories as follows: He is concerned with the future of Swedish democracy and with the social justice. His books should have as their subtitle: tales of Swedish uneasiness. Mankell’s literary Swedes worry about the future of their society amidst the threat of massive criminality and social unrest.

Mankell is pointing at the vulnerability of folkhemmet. While he develops this idea in a narrative and best-selling fashion, some other crime authors have attempted to identify the same uneasiness in a more programmatic and a more literary manner. In her six-volume crime novel series, Anne Holt, a prominent politician and Norway’s minister of justice 1996-1997, describes the blind violence present in the middle of abundance and social security provided by Norway’s oil income. Her novel Demonens död (The Devil’s Death, 1995) tells the story of 12-year old Olav. This boy has been taken from his immature and alcoholic mother and is put into the care of good educators at a children’s home. Despite of all good will of competent social caretakers the hyperactive Olav is portrayed as a completely disgusting and repulsive child to the extent that nobody can be sympathetic to him. In the context of a murder mystery taking place at the children’s home Anne Holt asks the question: how can it be that all our social investment is of no help in confronting the seemingly radical evil present in this little boy? The welfare society and the folkhemmet ideology provides no answer to this question.

Demonens död sold over 100,000 copies in Norway alone and it got the most prominent domestic book prize in 1995. One characteristic of recent Scandinavian crime literature is that it attempts to be serious literature while reaching large audiences at the same time. A major reason of Holt’s and Mankell’s popularity is that their readers are also pondering the so-called “surplus of evil”, that is, the problem why we still meet so much unexplained badness and tragedy in spite of our best efforts to build up a just welfare society which takes care for the poorest and the most mistreated.

God as Symbol Facing the Secular

Emptiness

It is clear that with this question the problems related to God and theodicy also come to the focus of attention. No less than three of the most recent best-selling Swedish crime novels have the word “God” in their title. Before describing these works closer we should notice that they are not theological or explicitly religious novels. “God” is for these murder mysteries a symbol of absence and emptiness. The books outline a secular theodicy that asks: si Deus non est, unde malum? A late modern translation of this would be: if there is no God, how can we cope with evil? Scandinavian societies are, paradoxically, both the most Lutheran and the most secular late modern societies. People do not speak about God and they honestly believe that all goodness is built with the resources of tax money and through the morals of individual people working in fair and uncorrupted structures.

The tacit presupposition of this ideology is that we can remove all evil through producing political justice, fair treatment of individuals and sufficient financial resources. If this does not happen, however, a problem of “secular theodicy” emerges. Why does there remain so much evil in spite of everybody’s best intentions? God or religion cannot be blamed, because in a secular welfare society God plays no political role. Scandinavian social democracy thus creates its own, secular problem of evil.

It is this secular theodicy which is indicated with the symbolic name of “God” in the contemporary murder mysteries. The secular presence of evil is therefore described as the absence of God by the authors who do not aim at describing God or religion at all.

Sven Westerberg’s novel Guds fruktansvärda frånvärde (The Terrible Absence of God, 1999) got the prize of best Swedish crime book in 1999. Its story is told by a woman working as forensic psychiatrist. Her family life is nice and orderly, but in her work she meets the chaos of the surrounding world. In the story she treats a depressive young man who is accused of murdering his professor at the university. Slowly she finds that the truth behind the murder is much more complicated than the police forces think.

More important than this plot is, however, the inner world of the psychiatrist. In continuous inner
monologues she wonders about order and chaos, luck and unhappiness, health and tragic illnesses. She feels that the contemporary Swedish society is characterized by the terrible absence of God. This expression is not theological, but denotes the final incapability of persons to create a safe place where we can live in balance. Religious belief is of no help in this situation: devotional literature seems very strange in the eye of this secular psychiatrist. On the other hand, without God the secular world only offers the riddle of pointless suffering.

Many Scandinavian authors of previous generations accused narrow-minded religiosity for conflicts and intolerance. The contemporary authors, however, claim that modernist liberal tolerance does no better in offering social welfare. The welfare state is helpless in facing the radical evil expressed by brutal crime and tragic life histories of the criminals. In a sense, crime is also in these novels a symbol of that chaos and disorder which affects every secular person.

In her murder mystery *Det Gud inte såg* (What God Didn't See, 2001), Helena von Zweigbergk outlines a picture of a liberal Lutheran woman pastor who works as prison chaplain. The women prisoners mock at her emphatic mood and tolerant attitude which they only can find naive and paternalizing. Her religious liberalism fails in trying to meet the brutal reality of the prisoners.

She can nevertheless provide some pastoral care to one woman prisoner who is isolated from all others in the prison. Allegedly, this woman has killed her baby. The chaplain begins to investigate the case on her own. Zweigbergk has written the whole book into the form of a dialogical prayer between the chaplain and her God. But this prayer finally remains a monologue, since God never responds. Moreover, all the ideas the chaplain gets in the process of this prayer prove to be tragically false. A person with professional training and with best intentions cannot help any other person, but only harm them. The murder mystery is solved in the end, but probably nobody is helped by that.

A Secular Theodicy

It is no accident that in all these three Swedish authors the hero, or storyteller, is a woman. In Scandinavia, where women have worked both in police force and in Lutheran clergy for a long time, this is not considered to be a progressive trend. On the contrary, some critics claim that it is an aspect of commercialism. Women buy and read more books than men, and as readers they want to identify themselves with women characters. In his most recent detective
novel, *Innan frosten* (Before the Frost, forthcoming 2003), even Henning Mankell has replaced his old policeman Wallander with a woman hero who happens to be Wallander's daughter.

In spite of these considerations it may also be the case that moral issues and, in particular, the crisis of welfare society can be more effectively portrayed through the eyes of woman characters. Criminality is often linked with international drug traffic, mafia bosses, economic frauds and other issues related to international capitalism and globalization. The social democratic ideology of *folkhemmet* can be seen as a womanist or small-scale communitarian ideal. The raw capitalism and globalization connected with criminals are in some sense masculine forces, aiming at destroying the weak members of the society.

The masculine—feminine division is not, however, very illuminating in interpreting contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction. There is after all a concealed theological or ethical undercurrent in the above-mentioned books. It is not for nothing that so many of them have the word “God”, or “Devil”, in their titles.

I have consciously chosen two shorthand expressions to highlight this theological undercurrent, namely “surplus of evil” and “secular theodicy”. With the surplus of evil I mean the puzzle caused by criminality and tragic destinies in a society that has just structures, good people and abundant resources.

This kind of welfare society often provides an individual citizen with the feeling that the local community and the state can take care of all needs of an individual. Political rhetoric emphasizes that the society should take responsibility for everything. In addition to health care, education and security, “everything” includes many activities for children, teenagers and elderly people, good public libraries, extensive support for art, culture, sports and other hobbies, and so on. In newspapers and other media, the public sector and politicians are normally blamed if some social needs of the citizens, however small they may be, are not met adequately.

Such a welfare society can obviously bring about many blessings. But its citizens have probably lost something of their understanding of the brutal reality which cannot be controlled by good will and tax money. Especially in Sweden, where no wars have been fought during the last 200 years, people are very puzzled when they face crime, violence, oppression, suffering and death.

This may explain the enormous contemporary popularity of Swedish crime fiction. Through reading these novels people can better grasp the uncontrollable surplus of evil still present in their own society and perhaps also in their own lives. Literary theorists have pointed out that murder mysteries are most popular in countries with low crime rate.

My other expression, “the secular theodicy” aims to be a more theological tool for the understanding of what is happening in contemporary Scandinavian fiction. A traditional theodicy often modifies one of the following three propositions in order to make them compatible: 1) God is good, 2) God is omnipotent, 3) there is real evil. A secular theodicy formulates, analogically, three propositions: A) our society and the people in it aim at being good, B) our society has enough resources for good life and education for everybody, C) there remains too much real evil.

Scandinavian social politics can to some extent be described in terms of this secular theodicy. For many decades, social democratic parties employed a modification of the third proposition (C) along the lines of traditional theodicy; there is no real evil, but only ignorance. It will slowly but necessarily pass away when we have enough good politics (A) and enough resources (B). In the 1990s, however, people have increasingly found that this explanation does not hold. The third proposition remains problematic, although the two first ones remain sufficiently believed and empirically verified.

### The Impact of Lutheranism: The Hidden God

Unlike many other religious traditions, Lutherans have often attempted at modifying the first proposition in order to explain theodicy. God is a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God, whose goodness remains a mystery for us. In the secular theodicy of contemporary crime fiction, the authors are in a way focusing their attention on the first proposition. They openly admit that we cannot understand the demonic drive within human beings. Crime authors outline a *homo absconditus*, a humanity whose real intentions remain hidden.
In stressing the hidden nature of the moral agent, the secular theodicy of contemporary Scandinavian fiction echoes the Lutheran tradition of Northern European societies. The titles of Westerberg “The Terrible Silence of God”, Zweigberk “What God Didn’t See” and Jansson “God Sits Silent” all underline this hiddenness. “God” is only symbol for our inability to understand evil, but at the same time the explicit presence of this symbol connects the books with theodicy and the Lutheran tradition of Deus absconditus.

There is probably yet another Lutheran feature in this secular theodicy. Lutherans, unlike many other confessions, have traditionally been reluctant to explain evil as an absence of goodness. Sin, death and devil are real elements of Lutheran theological realism, giving it sometimes an almost dualistic character.

Scandinavian crime authors very consciously oppose the picture of evil as a mere ignorance or as lack of education. Evil is for them a comprehensive destructive power which stretches out to crime, violence, social injustice and even to illnesses. Old Lutheranism conceived all these in terms of Verderbnismächte, that is, powers of darkness or destruction, powers that cannot be explained in terms of ignorance only.

Also here one must add that the crime authors cannot be blamed for any lack of social responsibility. The individual career of criminals is often outlined in terms of tragic failure of both parents and the society. The authors are definitely not opting for more policemen to the streets, but they are defending the Nordic welfare state. What they want to show is that this welfare state is always vulnerable to radical evil and that we cannot control the powers of darkness present in all societies, although we are most certainly called to do so.

It might be that while the ideas of these crime authors are new to the Scandinavian and other European readers, they are just simple and self-evident for American people. An American reader of Henning Mankell and other Scandinavian authors must imagine the small and safe Scandinavian welfare society in which these novels take place. Even bigger European societies, like Germany and France, have in practice an extensive social safety net which effectively prevents the people from seeing the radical evil in the immediate neighbourhood. This in part explains the popularity of Mankell and Holt in continental Europe.

With its social criticism and philosophical underpinnings, the Scandinavian genre of crime fiction is different from its English counterparts. In its use of melancholy characters and complicated plots it might have received something from P.D. James and other British authors. The mutual relationships among criminals, the society and the police force are, however, conceived in a manner which in my view has no precedent in English literature. Concerning the treatment of evil, William Golding’s books might come close. The Lutheran view of “hidden God” present in Swedish novels does not, however, emphasize the individual human evil, but the incomprehensible darkness lurking in all societies.

Much of this literature is now being translated into English. We have all of Henning Mankell and some of Anne Holt available in English. Probably all books reviewed above will be present at the American book market in a year or two. All of them are already in print in Germany. My guess is, however, that these books will not be as popular in America as they have been in Europe. An American reader must have a conception of the European welfare state in order to understand the context of the crimes. For American Lutherans, however, contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction might be interesting and relevant, both for theological and for contextual reasons.