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Letters to Father Jacob and the Catholic Church of Finland

Brandon Best

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Although the Catholic Church is the most prominent church in Europe, Catholics remain a miniscule religious minority in Finland. Historically, Catholics have made up between .1% and .2% of the general population (Cheney). The struggle and eventual decline of Catholicism in Finland, while in part because of growing secularism, is largely a result of Finland's protestant heritage and unique church-state relationship. In the film *Letters to Father Jacob*, Father Jacob, an elderly priest struggling to find people to serve, represents the Catholic Church. He eventually invites a former convict, Leila, into his home to foster her emotional healing with hopes she will eventually reconcile with her sister. Through Jacob's character, the movie shows the Catholic Church's warm relationship to the people, culture, and state of Finland. *Letters to Father Jacob* accurately portrays the Catholic Church of Finland's positive but distant relationship to the people of Finland and the church's decline during the 20th century, yet fails to depict the weak relationship between the Catholic Church and the state.

Finnish society's historical aversion to Catholicism has prevented the Catholic Church from developing a wide patronage. In 1959, *The Tablet*, a Catholic newspaper, described the church's problem with Finnish culture: "It is with pride that the Finns name themselves 'The most Lutheran nation in the world,' and the peculiar nature of their Lutheranism suggests that their undivided allegiance to it for four centuries springs from deeper reasons than historical accident" (Green 5). The majority of Finns are prejudiced against the Catholic Church and, for the past few centuries, have seen it as

contrary to their society and identity as a people. The Tablet further details how the individualistic nature of the Finnish people weakens the Catholic Church:

To [the Finns], the Lutheran faith is a vindication of liberty, and the Catholic conception of freedom through acceptance of revelation and authority seems a curtailment of human rights... Catholicism is seen as a tyranny based on an absurdity, and this opinion is strengthened by a fervent national feeling that dreads 'domination by Rome.' (Green 5)

The rejection of Catholicism is rooted in Finnish nationalism; while the Catholic Church purports a threat of foreign influence, the Lutheran alternative is closely allied with the domestic state, appearing to better protect the interests of Finns. While perpetuating Lutheranism, Finnish nationalism has detracted from the development of the Catholic Church.

The spreading secularization within Finland has also interfered with the Catholic Church's growth throughout the latter 20th century. In 1964, Aho Gerhard said of Finnish church practice, "[I]rregular church attendance seems to be a tradition of Finnish Christianity" (Aho 15). At that time, 30% of members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland attended services regularly. Since then, members have become increasingly apathetic to regular church services. In the 1990s, attendance slid further; only 4% of Finns regularly attended church (Park). The trend of irreligiosity is carrying over into the 21st century as well; in 2010, only 1.8% of citizens attended weekly services (Mustonen). Throughout the 20th century and leading into the 21st, Finnish culture has grown increasingly secular, hurting religious institutions. Within a society with a growing distaste for religion, the Catholic Church has failed to exhibit independent success or growth.

The dilapidated chapel and Father Jacob's own feelings of being out of place within the world in *Letters to Father Jacob* display the secularization of Finland. The church Father Jacob once led appears to have been decommissioned long ago. The Biblical scenes on the walls are sorely faded and all but three chairs have been removed from the sanctuary. The ornate chandelier and many paintings suggest a once active religious community that has withdrawn from regular church attendance. The imagery is reminiscent of Finland's dampened religious participation, the once devoted community that now sees

organized religion as superfluous to spiritual growth. Because of his desire to be more active as a priest, Father Jacob, suffering from dementia, imagines a wedding that he is supposed to perform in the antique chapel. After he realizes his error, Father Jacob falls down and laments, “Who needs an old blind priest anyway? No one.” He feels like an anachronism and that his mission--to further the name of Christ and pray for people--is irrelevant in his time. Father Jacob goes on to ask himself “What was I thinking? I don’t even get letters any more.” The letters were his last bastion of ministerial activity. Once the letters are gone, he feels he will no longer have meaningful relationships with people. Both Father Jacob’s resignation to religious apathy and the church’s derelict building reveal Finnish society’s withdrawal from religious life.

Despite Finns departure from church, religious thought and attitudes are still respected amongst society, just as Father Jacob is still respected within his community. Although Father Jacob lacks an audience to attend his sermons, his neighbors willingly serve him however they can. Before Leila comes to assist Father Jacob, the neighbor Mrs. Brügge would help him read and write letters. Only after Mrs. Brügge moves into a nursing home in the city does Father Jacob ask Leila to come and help. The postman regards Father Jacob highly as well. He regularly composed letters for Father Jacob to pray over and respond to. The postman’s evident concern for Father Jacob compels him to break into the house when he fears Leila may harm Father Jacob. Mrs. Brügge and the postman’s treatment of Father Jacob show the veneration of his position. The majority of Finns still value faith, though this value no longer manifests into organized religious practice. A series of surveys conducted in the late 1900s shows that though Finnish society holds religious sentiments, these values do not result in church activity. Approximately 42% of Finns say religion is “very important” or “somewhat important” in their life; only 20% of Finns say religion is “not at all important” to them (Wilcox, Reardon, and Manuel 266). Compared to Finland’s much larger neighbor Russia, the Finns’ religious values are surprisingly high. The same studies showed that almost 30% of Russians report religion is “not at all important” in their lives. Compared to the surrounding countries, Finnish society contains irregular religious leanings. Mrs. Brügge and the postman, who both respect and care for Father Jacob, characterize the Finns’ value for sentimental

religion, but lack of participation in religious life.

Leila's unexpected parole is reasonable within the context of Finland's transition from a philosophy of harsh sentences to lenient releases that occurred throughout the 1970s. Leila was originally sentenced to a life term for killing her brother-in-law, a draconian punishment for defending her sister from further abuse. Surprisingly, after only serving 10 years of her sentence, Leila receives a pardon. Criminal Justice professors Ikponwosa Ekunwe and Richard Jones believe that Finland's justice system significantly altered the treatment of criminals between the time of Leila's sentencing to 1973, the year of her pardon.

Prior to 1960, criminal justice policy had its roots in the Russian authoritarian model of the nineteenth century. Around 1960, a social revolution took place in Finland which led to sweeping changes in social welfare and criminal justice policies. The result was that the old Finnish system was replaced by a forward looking, socially aware new way of thinking...Finnish policy makers were heavily influenced by a growing body of research that raised serious questions about the efficacy of harsh penal policies. Instead, these policy makers were struck by the growing body of literature from Nordic countries that supported the idea that recidivism could be greatly reduced by policies that focus on maintaining the connection between prisoners and the outside world and providing them with tools to survive in it. (Ekunwe and Jones 2)

Leila was tried and sentenced in the 1960s before Finland's justice system was reformed and made more lenient. However, after the revisions to the justice system, the prison system would offer parole to older convicts who were sentenced to longer sentences. Finland regularly tries alternative forms of punishment, stemming from their skepticism that hard punishment discourages criminal behavior (Garner 1). Leila's imprisonment aided her escape from the emotional pain of her past crime and broken relationship with her sister. The prison system promoted her own self-loathing and inhibited her rehabilitation to function in society. Sending Leila to Father Jacob was her best hope for reversing the apathy in her life and successfully rehabilitating her. Leila's pardon in 1973 is realistic because of Finland's transformation from focusing on punishment to rehabilitation.

The postman's attitude towards Leila reflects Finnish society's

antipathy for violent crime, yet eventual belief in the ability for criminals to be rehabilitated. The postman had a strong prejudice towards Leila, even before she arrived. When Father Jacob hobbled outside to receive his letters, he casually comments “Leila and I were just having tea.” The postman asks with trepidation, “Leila?...The lifer?” Father Jacob lowers his voice and softly corrects the postman by saying, “A former lifer. She was pardoned.” A few nights later, the postman sneaks into Father Jacob’s home to see if Leila has harmed him. When Leila discovers his snooping, she begins to choke the postman before she makes him leave. Throughout the film, the postman begins to trust Leila reluctantly as he witnesses her caring for Father Jacob. The exchanges between Leila and the postman not only represent the wariness of Finnish culture towards violent criminals, but the ultimate conviction that even violent criminals can be transformed. “Finns...are intolerant of crime and violence, yet open to the idea of alternative forms of punishment... Finns also overwhelmingly believe that rehabilitation is a better option than prison” (Ekunwe, Jones, and Mullin 17). People, in the eyes of Finns, are not born into lives of crime, but break the law as a result of societal circumstances. Although early in *Letters to Father Jacob* the postman has little trust Leila, he gradually begins to trust her character. He displays his trust in her when he reveals that he was the one sending Father Jacob the majority of his letters and then allows her to imagine a letter of her own for Father Jacob. The evolution of the postman’s attitude towards Leila exhibits the Finns’ belief in the criminal’s need for rehabilitation and ability to change.

Despite the community’s realistic treatment of Father Jacob and Leila, Father Jacob could not have secured a pardon for Leila because the Catholic Church is not sanctioned by the state of Finland. The Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Orthodox Church are the only churches officially recognized by the state. Official recognition of preferred churches comes with benefits denied to the Catholic Church. The Finnish government taxes members of the state churches on the churches’ behalf. Businesses also pay a church tax, regardless of the corporation’s religious preference (Christensen “Is the Lutheran Church?”). While the government assists official churches, other sects, such as the Catholic Church, cannot have a similar relationship with the government. In the *Journal of Church & State* Anne Birgitta Pessi and Henrietta Grönlund describe that

“In the Finns’ minds and, to a certain extent, also functionally, the church has been a public administration body for a long time” (354). This includes, as Pessi and Grönlund noted, the ability of the church to serve prisoners. The researchers described the traits of a national church as “having a close relationship to the national culture, and having chaplaincy in national institutions (such as hospitals and penal institutions)” (356). If Father Jacob was a minister within the Evangelical Lutheran Church or the Finnish Orthodox Church he may have had the influence to free Leila. Yet as a Catholic priest, writing letters to a prison would not have convinced officers of the law to reconsider Leila’s sentence. Father Jacob, as a Catholic priest, could not successfully pressure the prison system into releasing Leila into his care because he is not affiliated with a state church.

The Catholic Church of Finland has always struggled to overcome the barriers that distance the Finnish people. Social conditions, whether national pride or religious disinterest, continue to alienate the Finnish people. The government favor other churches receive has prevented Catholicism from drawing serious interest. Letters to Father Jacob’s picture of a Catholic church, appreciated, but alone and struggling to exist, properly reflects the church’s favorable, but removed relationship with Finnish culture; however, the film inaccurately implies that the Catholic Church can influence government administration. Though they see Catholicism favorably, Finns also see the Catholic Church as weak and antiquated, similar to how Father Jacob is deeply revered, yet needs much assistance.

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