Pilgrimage as post-secular therapy

Introduction

Pilgrimage is supposed to have several healthy aspects, some of them quite obvious, such as walking in the fresh air, or taking time out from a stressful job. Pilgrimage as post-secular therapy is a more intriguing matter. In the first place the question arises as to how we should conceive the term ‘post-secular’. In The Secular Age (2007) Charles Taylor, a main propagator of the concept, summarises his understanding of the post-secular age we are about to enter as ‘a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged’ (Taylor 2007: 534). The symposium invitation is following up this conception when it defines the post-secular society as a society with a renewed openness to spiritual issues coupled with a critical attitude. ‘Post-secular religious practices’ are here delimited by being located in such a society. ‘The spiritual’ is another key concept in this context. Charles Taylor as well as a host of other scholars describe the post-secular situation as being marked by a major shift from organized, normative religion to subjective, experiential spirituality. 1 The present resurgence of a spirituality-oriented pilgrimage in Europe demonstrates the relevance of this contention, as Ruth Illman has pointed out (Illman 2010). So far the modern pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain is the main example of this type. As Illman mentions, the concept of spirituality has generally been dissociated from traditional religions, but she adds that there is no necessary opposition between spirituality and traditional religious institutions (Illman 2010: 235). It could even be maintained that the role of traditional religion as a source of and support for subjective spirituality appears as an important field of study today. The Santiago example demonstrates that the Catholic Church, far from opposing the pilgrimage, instead cooperates in its fulfilment. This is linked to the type of pilgrim role that has developed on the Camino, which

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LISBETH MIKAELSSON

opens up a space for religion and spirituality beyond theological control and church exclusivism. Pilgrims themselves have defined and discussed this role, but it should not be overlooked that the role has also been prepared by secular authorities and organisations, as well as by the Catholic Church in Spain. The role can be adopted by believing and sceptical Christians of all persuasions, as well as New Age seekers, atheists, and even people belonging to other religions than Christianity.

In this article I will describe the institutionalized pilgrim role in more detail, then turn to the therapeutic discourse which is so prominent in the Galicean pilgrimage. Both the role and the discourse can be related to the concept of post-secularity, demonstrating that complex cultural fields such as religion and therapy, become intertwined in new ways through modern pilgrimage. My aim is also to show that churches cooperating in this type of pilgrimage are adapting to the post-secular age, finding a new sort of raison d’être in a multi-religious, international world. Here I will refer to the Church of Norway and its role in Norwegian pilgrimage. The latter is modelled upon the Santiago example.

The Camino

A special feature of the Santiago pilgrimage is the deep significance attached to the road itself, generally called the Camino. *El camino* is a Spanish term for ‘the way’. The popularity of the Spanish term, which is also used in other languages, is undoubtedly linked to its symbolic potential. Both in physical and metaphorical terms the Santiago pilgrim is a traveller, a person on her way. According to Peter Jan Margry it is the pilgrimage on the Camino which has emphasized the way in modern pilgrimage (Margry 2008). The cathedral service in Santiago city, where the journey usually ends, is part of a total package in which travelling the road is, for a great many people, by far the most important element. Since the 1970s the Camino has developed into a very special social and religious arena attracting many thousands of people every year from all over the world. Although the Camino is represented as a mysterious road, walked by world-famous celebrities such as Paolo Coelho and Shirley MacLaine (see Coelho 2006 and MacLaine 2000), the acts of pilgrimage go-

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2 In 2010 270,961 pilgrims were registered, according to peregrinassantiago.es/esp/post-peregrinacion/estadisticos/?anio=2010. In addition there are thousands of unregistered travellers.
ing on there are not as such constituted of belief in miracles and divine forces. The emphasis on the journey and the way distinguishes it from pilgrimages to Lourdes and other sacred places where people hope to be miraculously cured from a physical disease, or blessed by a divine figure. The manner of travelling to such places is often not important. The Norwegian pilgrimage, winding as it does through beautiful scenery and picturesque valleys, is a pale reflection of the Camino phenomenon.3

Pilgrimage in Norway

Since the 1990s the state church in Norway (the Church of Norway) has been actively promoting pilgrimage in the country. This is a major shift in attitude for a Lutheran church which abolished pilgrimage and cult of saints in 1536, in the wake of the Reformation. Norway is part of secularized Scandinavia, but nevertheless, adherence to the state church has proved to be quite stable. In 2010 79.2 per cent of the Norwegian population, now numbering 5 million people, were members.4 While most members still baptize their children and choose the ecclesiastical ritual at funerals, attendance at regular services is quite small. Consequently the church is faced with a constant challenge to increase its members’ engagement in church activities, a fact to some degree explaining its pilgrimage enthusiasm. However, there is ample evidence that key ecclesiastical actors are personally inspired by the pilgrim ideal—its identity aspects, its ecumenical potential, its promise of an alternative life style, and its connectedness to the country’s Catholic history and cultural heritage (see Andresen 2005, Mikaelsson 2011b).

The institutionalization of Norwegian pilgrimage has gradually developed since the 1990s through an extensive cooperation between the state and local authorities, the Church of Norway, and voluntary organizations. A similar type of collaboration is behind the successful Santiago pilgrimage. The relevance of the state church in this cooperation consists primarily in its links to the country’s Catholic past, its medieval churches and monuments as well as the spiritual values incorporated in its architecture, myths, symbols and rituals. Working together for a pilgrim renaissance has led the Church to focus

3 Statistics state that 240 registered persons have done the pilgrimage to Trondheim in 2011. My reference is Cathrine Roncale, head of Nidaros pilgerimsgård in Trondheim, in an email dated 8 November 2011.
4 www.kirken.no.
more on its important share in the nation’s cultural heritage, and see itself as a resource meeting various needs in a pluralistic, late modern society. The Church is for instance called upon to collaborate in the creation of local identity through celebrations of saints—until recently almost unthinkable for a Lutheran church (cf. Andresen 2005, Mikaelsson 2005 and 2008).

While pilgrim centres have popped up in several places, the main Norwegian destination is the city of Trondheim in the country’s mid-region, whose cathedral once housed the relics of St Olav, a popular saint who attracted pilgrims from many parts of Europe during the Middle Ages (Andresen 2005, Imsen 2003). This cathedral, restored to its former grandeur, is the key destination of many routes through Norway and the other Scandinavian countries, which are now called St Olav’s Ways, having been awarded the title of European Cultural Routes in 2010 by the European Council. The routes to Santiago were the first to attain this status in 1987. The European Council considers pilgrimage as a valuable element in European identity construction, and the Camino is popularly called the Calle Mayor de Europa. Pope John Paul II has likewise hailed Santiago as a place to celebrate the memory of Europe as a spiritually united continent because of its role as a pilgrimage centre (Voyé 2002: 118–19).

Like its Spanish counterpart, Norwegian pilgrimage can be divided into different categories. A major type is organized on a purely individual basis, and performed by individuals with varying religious affiliation, walking alone or in small groups. Other main types are organized by, for instance, local congregations, schools, or pilgrim organizations. To what extent cultural elements, or prayers and services, are included the programme will differ. Pilgrims are sometimes accompanied by a pilgrim priest for a part of the way, or even the whole length of it.

The pilgrim role

There are several kinds of pilgrims amongst the multitudes on the Camino and the rather more modest numbers heading for Trondheim. Naturally their motives and attitudes differ. However, there is a segment that is especially rel-
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evant in this context. These are the ones who are critical of traditional church religion, or who feel themselves to be estranged from regular worship. Many of them could be placed in the category of church members that 'belong, but do not believe' (see Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 3; Voyé 2002: 124–5, 130). Still they enjoy the experience of sleeping in monasteries, visiting churches and walking the historical pilgrim routes. Quite a number are also fascinated by medieval history, religious myth and symbolism. In other words, as a pilgrim you can have a certain involvement with church religion, appreciate some aspects of it, but still keep aloof from it. Identification as a spiritual seeker rather than a Christian believer is likely to be adequate for a great many.\(^7\) In fact, this has been registered by the Santiago authorities (see below).

The above sketch is an attempt to delineate a kind of post-secular attitude to church religion which seems typical of many pilgrims such as are, for instance, frequently met with in the Norwegian magazine *Pilegrimen*, issued by the Confraternity of St Jacob, an organization which is neutral as to religion and worldviews.\(^8\) This attitude is good enough for the authorities who have created an institutionalized pilgrim role in Spain and Norway. In the following, the outer conditions for performing this role will be presented.

In addition to a number of routes marked with pilgrim symbols, authorities in both countries have taken some responsibility for providing beds for the night, pilgrim guides and other requisites. In Spain there are plenty of cheap hostels, called *refugios*, which are reserved for pilgrims along the Camino. In both countries pilgrims can have a pilgrim record or passport, in Spain it is called the *credencial*. This is a most interesting document in our particular context as its description on the internet shows:

[The *credencial*] presupposes that the bearer is making the pilgrimage for spiritual reasons. This does not necessarily mean Roman Catholics and pilgrims will not be asked about their denomination, or even whether they are Christian, although of course historically the pilgrimage itself has meant Christian pilgrimage. Today and in practice, however, the *credencial* covers anyone making the pilgrimage in a frame of mind that is open and searching. (www.csj.org.uk/passport.htm)

\(^7\) Cf. Illman 2010: 228, referring to an international research project called ‘The Pilgrimage Project: a study of motivations and experiences in sacred space’, headed by Dr Miguel Farias at Oxford University. The majority of respondents preferred to identify themselves as spiritual, rather than religious.

\(^8\) The Confraternity of St Jacob is the first Norwegian pilgrim organization, founded in 1996.
The *credencial* is printed and issued by the cathedral authorities in Santiago, and made available at points along the Camino. It secures access to the *refugios*, and it should be stamped every day at the *refugio* or some other appointed place. When arriving in Santiago, the pilgrim presents her record at the Pilgrim Office near the cathedral in order to get the diploma, called the *Compostela*, an embellished certificate written in Latin confirming that one’s pilgrimage has been completed. There are certain conditions which have to be fulfilled to get the Compostela. Walkers must have travelled at least the last 100 km, cyclists the last 200 km, in one stretch, to qualify. People are asked their motivations for the journey, and those who do not qualify as having a spiritual motivation can have another document, a *certificado*, to attest to their pilgrimage. According to Nancy Frey, the religious motive was amplified to ‘spiritual’ in the 1990s (Frey 1998: 127).9 The Norwegian authorities have copied this general arrangement and now pilgrims that have walked the last 100 km to Trondheim can have a diploma called *Olavsbrevet*. A pilgrim passport to be stamped at various points along the routes charts the wanderings.

In this way Spanish authorities and their Norwegian followers have created a pilgrim role which distinguishes the ‘real’ pilgrims from comfort-seeking tourists, but is inclusive when it comes to religion and worldview, merely requiring at least a vague spiritual motive for the journey. Their organized routes and institutionalized norms enable modern pilgrims to walk in the footsteps of medieval pilgrims and experience a sensual link to the past through their bodily exertion. Pilgrim authenticity is thus primarily attributed to physical exercise,10 leaving ample room for individual understanding of the journey.

There are commercial and other interests in pilgrimage which prefer an inclusive pilgrim role (cf. Mikaelsson 2010, Selberg 2011, Uddu 2008). But even the churches have reasons to accept it. The kind of self-contained interest in the Christian tradition and its monuments that was characterized as a post-secular attitude open up new possibilities for the churches to communicate with the age in which we live, realizing more and more that secularization does not necessarily imply that people lose interest in spiritual matters. Of course the churches are aware that pilgrimage can be a new way to evangelize

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10 Articles in *Pilegrimen* demonstrate that the question of authenticity engages many pilgrims. It is not just what a pilgrimage should be in terms of physical exertion and mental outlook, it also concerns the historicity of the chosen pilgrim routes in Norway.
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(see Frey 1998: 127), but there is more to it than that. Pilgrimage has clearly demonstrated to the Church of Norway that many people who avoid evangelization or preaching are receptive to the mediation of religion in historic sacred places, in architecture and rituals, as well as in nature. Also, the desire to feel connected to the traditions of one’s ancestors has become apparent as a contemporary identity issue having spiritual overtones (see Hardeberg & Bjørdal 1999). Summarized in a common saying, pilgrimage has shown the Church of Norway that measures associated with ‘a lower threshold and a loftier ceiling’ will make the church more relevant and attractive to a wider segment of people. Of course I am speaking in broad terms; there are still groups in the state church that do not fit this description. But there is ample evidence that the church is accepting a new public role as a cultural and spiritual resource able to meet various social and individual needs in contemporary society (see Aagedal 2010). The Church of Norway’s function as a comforter of the grieving nation was for instance fully demonstrated after the terrorist acts of 22 July 2011 in Oslo and at Utøya.

In contrast to the external pilgrim role, the inward aspect of it is more open. To a large extent it is up to the individual to create the inward, personal meaning of one’s pilgrimage. Frey explains that there is no shared definition of the spiritual journey among Camino pilgrims, but ‘it is generally related to this idea of the uncontained, nonstructural, personalized, individual, and direct relationship one has to ultimate reality’ (Frey 1998: 31). At this point we should perhaps be wary of the tendency to universalize postmodern or post-secular pilgrims as spiritual seekers looking for profound, transformative experiences. The Compostela’s demand for a spiritual motivation is no reliable indicator as to the candidates’ real intentions, nor their pilgrim experiences. Granting that many can be placed in the spiritual seeker category as examples of the quest culture Steven Sutcliffe and others are speaking about (Sutcliffe 2000 and 2003), it should as well be emphasized that this category may include a mixed group of devoted Christians, atheists, fitness enthusiasts and heritage tourists.

Nevertheless, a common element in current pilgrim discourse is the emphasis on the inward and outward journeys and the fusion of the two. This is illustrated by the Norwegian princess Märtha Louise, who made a pilgrimage with her husband-to-be in 2002 before the couple were married at the cathedral in Trondheim. The couple wrote a book about it afterwards,11 and

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11 Due to its celebrity authors and romantic title, Fra hjerte til hjerte (From heart to heart, 2002), the book had much more public as well as critical attention than a book of this kind would normally have.
especially the princess's tale is a good example of the pilgrim role I am speaking of—a role which uses the church as framework and source of spiritual nourishment without limiting the individual's freedom of reflection and inspiration. The royal couple were accompanied by a pilgrim priest who seemed to function as a good companion, but hardly as a clerical authority. Apparently their psychological journey was made up of a mix of prayer, fairytale, myth, literature, Celtic Christianity, fantasy, and readings of symbols and signs. The princess displays a characteristic seeker identity when she exclaims that 'I will always be a pilgrim, on an eternal quest for my inner church. My high altar.' (Prinsesse Märtha Louise & Ari Mikael Behn 2002: 5). In retrospect, it signals her now famous preoccupation with alternative spirituality (cf. Kraft 2007 and 2008).

The happy young couple did not go on the pilgrimage for therapeutic reasons. However, a playful twist on a Norwegian fairytale proves their familiarity with the idea of a psychological lack so characteristic of the therapeutic discourse in our time. In an encounter with a nasty troll (!), the bridegroom bravely retorts that they are pilgrims on their way to Trondheim to become whole persons (Prinsesse Märtha Louise & Ari Mikael Behn 2002: 28). The passing comment touches on a major theme in modern pilgrimage, the importance of holism, or the fusion of the outward and inward journeys. This fusion seems to be a vital aspect of its therapeutic function.

**Pilgrimage as therapy**

Nancy Frey refers to pilgrims who call the Camino la ruta de la terapia—the therapy route. This epithet could be amplified into a general concept—any pilgrim route where you move along on foot for a length of time could be termed a therapeutic route. When the journey as such is considered to have therapeutic functions, it generally means that the suffering to be cured is psychological in nature. Walking as a pilgrim provides medicine for the soul—its pains, problems or lacks, including the experience of a spiritual void.

The physical exertion is a crucial element of the mental cure. To find the inner way one has to give priority to bodily experience. Like a number of other scholars, Frey emphasizes the important role of movement which combines physical and mental levels:

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Through the movement of the body, through learning new rhythms and perceiving with all the senses, various meanings of the journey begin to emerge which also relate to the life-worlds of the participants. Throughout the journey pilgrims are confronted with personal, physical, and mental challenges as well as unexpected acts of kindness and patience. . . Pain and the limitless horizon may lead one to a greater sense of humility. . . Sleeping on the floor reminds another of how easy it is to live with less. . . (Frey 1998: 220.)

According to Frey, the therapeutic pattern seems generally to be constituted by two elements. The first is a keen realization of personal wounds or missing elements in one's everyday life. Divorce, death, losing one's job, alienation from one's body, work, self or society are often the reasons for these wounds or lacks. The second element consists in experiences of renewal or transformation. Therapy as it is experienced on the Camino is very often a gradual process in which you open up to the suffering in your soul while you move along. Relief comes from the regenerative effects of walking, from meetings with nice people, and various impressions of the surroundings. (Frey 1998: 45, 220–1.) Pilgrimage stimulates people to 'rework the past' and 'move towards a renewed future' (Frey 1998: 46, 222). A symbolic act which emerges as therapeutic in many pilgrim accounts, is the practice of carrying stones representing mental burdens. A famous place for the depositing of these burdens on the Camino is marked by the large iron cross (Cruz de Ferro), on the highest mountain, which stands 1,504 metres above sea level. Here a heap of stones, jewellery and other personal belongings demonstrate the popularity of this custom. People often bring stones from home for the purpose. This practice is also taken up in Norway.

Pilgrimage and the therapeutic ethos

As Märtha Louise's husband jokingly indicated, even for happy and well-functioning people, pilgrimage can have a therapeutic function. Who has attained the ideal of perfect health and mental balance which reigns in modern society? Compare the complex and idealistic understanding of health expressed in the definition of the World Health Organization:
Health is a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO 1998).\footnote{Compare the original version from 1948: ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease of infirmity.’ In 1998 the WHO added two notable elements, ‘state’ was now ‘a dynamic state’ and ‘spiritual’ a necessary component in complete well-being.}

The state of ideal health is not compatible with problems and wounds, then, and suffering of any kind should be avoided. The WHO definition reflects the enormous scientific, social, commercial and individual preoccupation with health from the perspectives of different professions and interests. In line with this understanding of health, scholars speak about the \textit{therapeutic turn} in our society. The focus on therapy is such that it is reasonable to argue that we live in a therapeutic culture, even a therapeutic state. The cultural theorist Eva Illouz maintains in \textit{Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help} that therapy in many forms now exceeds national borders and is the basis for a new worldwide discourse about selfhood that has crossed and blurred compartmentalized spheres of modernity (Illouz 2008: 6). This culture of therapy is seen as the effect of several processes: the dissemination of psychology, individualization, capitalism, and secularization. Secularization in this field means a far-reaching shift from a belief in God-given liberation and support to a belief in an individual self that can handle the challenges of life with the right tools and resources, such as psychotherapy, knowledge, meditation, and alternative therapy (see Madsen 2010: 17). And one may add, pilgrimage. The quest for one’s true identity or deeper self, which is a significant aspect of contemporary pilgrimage, thus becomes a process with therapeutic aspects. Ian Reader sums up the contemporary pilgrim renaissance as an ‘expression of a quest toward a more autonomous, individualized and personalized spirituality’ (Reader 2007: 226).

The addition of ‘spiritual’ to the list of health indicators can in itself be interpreted as a piece of post-secular evidence. Historically spirituality is interwoven with organized religion and piety, but in the modern world it does not necessarily involve belief in God or a divine order of existence. To place spirituality in the context of health as the WHO does, emphasizes its subjective and human character. If we follow this line of thought, repressed or undeveloped spirituality will result in a diminished quality of life, mental impoverishment or even illness.
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In parallel with the intensive focus on health and therapy is the widely held idea that our type of society creates a lot of problems and ills, including a spiritual drought. Pilgrim discourse is often characterized by a general criticism of modern life while at the same time recommending pilgrimage as a method to cope with the situation. One example of this tendency is the Norwegian psychologist Einar Lunga, an experienced pilgrim who has used pilgrimage as therapy for patients. In a well-known speech from 2007, Lunga maintains that human beings are biologically equipped to be wanderers, and that our natural instinct to walk on foot is suppressed by a motorized lifestyle and all the activities which require that we sit. Another frequent criticism repeated by Lunga, is the time pressure and stress resulting from being ruled by the clock, which entails that our innate rhythms and tempos are suppressed. In contrast, pilgrims must establish their own, voluntary discipline of daily routines, and decide what pains and exertions they are willing to endure. (Lunga 2007: 3.) For Lunga, pilgrimage helps people to realize that the source of one’s life lies in one’s inner being and that joy of life must come from within (ibid.). Lunga’s views exemplify the WHO understanding of the spiritual faculty as a constituent part of health. He argues that the discovery of an inner self that accompanies physical movement is a spiritual insight (Lunga 2007: 4). The effect of this awakening is a profound change in perception:

...the world becomes sacred and sacralized, a continuous magical mystery like it was in childhood. The wanderer feels born again, the world is born again. Another human being, another world—a ‘conversion’. If a person has experienced this breakthrough and discovered the inner dimension of wandering, it will no longer disappear. It enriches your life...Without being connected to religion, it is anyway a feeling related to religiosity. (Lunga 2007: 4.)

In a study of the Norwegian magazine Pilegrimen I noted that variations of this kind of transformative experience were often reported (Mikaelsson 2011a). Abraham Maslow’s well-known idea of ‘peak experiences’ and Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘fullness of life’ also give clues to the kind of experience many pilgrims report.14

14 Compare Taylor’s phrasing: ‘We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be.’ (Taylor 2007: 5.)
Both pilgrim accounts and research indicate that pilgrimage helps people in several ways: to recover from suffering, to restore their hopes for the future, and to trigger spiritual experiences of the ‘fullness of life’. These are all significant, therapeutic aspects connected to the post-secular pilgrim role as it is established in contemporary Europe.

Concluding remarks

In their book *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (2005), Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead describe the subjective turn in modern culture as a turn ‘towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences’ away from ‘life lived in terms of external or “objective” roles, duties and obligations’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2). The type of holistic journeying described here is an example of this subjective turn. It has a therapeutic character, but interestingly, it is also linked to a new, external, pilgrim role created by ecclesiastical and secular authorities. When they open up to pilgrim seekers and outsiders without, as before, emphasizing to them the importance of conversion and faith in God, the churches have more or less accepted a new role as spiritual therapist. Of course there are many self-identified pilgrims who do not care about the institutional role prepared for them, but this fact does not supersede the importance of the role and its associations with a type of authenticity that emphasizes bodily sensation and historical tradition, and leaves the inner meaning of the experience to the individual.

The pilgrim journey provides a new kind of meeting place for believers, seekers and unbelievers, in which a Christian framework and social communitas contribute to a common existential space. In this way pilgrimage becomes a bridge between secular society and the churches. However, allowing for the large variety of people going on pilgrimage, it is as relevant to think of the phenomenon as a religious melting pot, a space for cross-over spiritual experiences. Pilgrimage substantiates Charles Taylor’s words that we are ‘at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee’ (Taylor 2007: 535).

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15 Traditional Christian conceptions of sin, remorse, guilt and atonement seem to be relevant to a special category of pilgrim, namely prisoners. According to theologian Leif Gunnar Engedal, such categories function as an ‘existential sounding board’ for prisoners partaking in pilgrimages to Trondheim which have been arranged by the Church of Norway, prison authorities and the Confraternity of St James since 2006 (Engedal 2010: 60).
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