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**Religious Experience:  
North and South, edited by René Gothóni, Bern 2012,  
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This outstanding book is based on papers delivered at the “Religious Experience: North and South” international symposium convened at the University of Helsinki, Department of World Cultures/Study of Religions in collaboration with the University of Malta, Faculty of Theology in October 2010. The essays in this volume focus on how religious experience is linked to tradition and discuss current debates, politics, beliefs, rituals and spirituality in Finland and Malta, namely, in the north and south of Europe. According to statistical data and popular perception, Malta is one of the most Roman Catholic countries and Finland one of the most secular countries in the world. This book, with its unique comparative perspective, illuminates the differences between northern and southern Europe in attitudes, norms, traditions, rituals, religious values and everyday practices as well as exploring areas such as bioethics, patriotism, national identity and freedom of religion.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first, René Gothóni, Hector Scerri and Paul Galea offer a theoretical sketch and introduction to the theme: *religion and experience*, which is particularly relevant to the contemporary religious situation in Europe. René Gothóni (a scholar in the study of religions and editor of this book) presents three German notions of experience, framing the term *religious experience*. He also elaborates on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s game theory and gives evidence that this theory helps the reader to move in the field of hermeneutics. Then, Hector Scerri explores from various perspectives how the family meal offers the possibility of a religious experience. According to him, a family meal supports the community, because a family gathering is connected with preparing, cooking and sharing the same food. Secondly, he appreciates the spiritual sharing, which is a constitutive dimension of authentic

table fellowship. He also studies the humanitarian, ethical and pedagogical dimensions. And thirdly, he describes three specific meal traditions typical to the island of Malta, e.g. the family meals connected with the village religious *festas*. In the final chapter of this section: “Discriminating Personality Traits Related to Religious Vocation by Means of the NEO PI-R Personality Inventory”, Paul Galea using NEO PI-R Personality Inventory tries to respond to a few questions. The most important of them probably is: whether specific personality features could be predictors of an individual’s particular preferences. Analysing data from 100 psychology students (49 male, 51 female) and 62 male seminarians, he has found significant differences in all personality factors except *Neuroticism*. Students from the seminary scored higher on *Agreeableness* and *Conscientiousness* and lower on *Openness* experience.

In the book’s second part: “Religion and Politics”, Emmanuel Agius provides a vision on religious values and bioethics. Using a case study (conducted among Maltese and Finns), he demonstrates how religion and culture influence the bioethical decision-making process. In the next paper, “One Religion, One Nation? State, church and Freedom of Religion in Finland”, Tuula Sakaranaho highlights the relations between religion and politics in Finland in the context of a multicultural society. She presents the religious landscape of Finland and elaborates upon the development of religious freedom. In her opinion, even if 80% of Finns belong to the Lutheran Church, Finland is gradually facing a growing religious pluralism and has to deal with the recognition of religious rights in modern society. Then, George Grima in his article “A Changing Scenario for Politics, Culture and Religion in Malta” focuses on the changes occurring in today’s Maltese society. Reminding that even if the Roman Catholic Church is still strongly present in Maltese society, religious life is no longer as monolithic as it has been in the past. The important question is: What would Catholicism like to be under the impact of individualism and what has to be taken into consideration in order to function meaningfully in a transforming society? Risto Pulkkinen in his paper “Finnishness and Religion: Finnishness as Religion?” deals with the dilemma whether strong patriotic attitudes can be categorized as religion. He is convinced that there is a kind of phenomenological likeness between patriotism and religion and consequently argues that a profound alteration in the social conditions of religious belief has taken place in the “sacred” history of the Finns. Risto Pulkkinen presents some of his opinions on the basis of the case of Carl Axel Gottlund, who searched for the original purity of Finnishness.

In the book's third part there are many examples of religious experiences. Authors set forth their own account of the contemporary religious situation in Malta and Finland, using the case studies method to show how the religious experience is still present in European society. In the paper "The Maltese Village *Festa*", Emanuel Magro argues that the *fiesta* – the popular form of religiosity in Malta – gives a potential space for religious experience and an opportunity for the maturation of the Catholics' faith. According to Magro, it is not surprising that *fiesta* comprises both sacred and secular activities, but also gives the Maltese the chance to harmonize their "potential spaces" and "transitional objects", which support a high level of religious belief and practice in Malta. Subsequently, Adrian Gellel and Mark Sultana, relying on the interviews with *fiesta* organizers from different villages try to examine the religious and spiritual roots of the Maltese feast. Authors give a special attention to the feminine aspects of spirituality in Maltese popular religion. They conclude that "the *fiesta* is a complex phenomenon, which apart from being a cultural and social activity, is deeply religious and perhaps even more a spiritual activity" (p. 227). In the next article, Heikki Pesonen and Terhi Utriainen remind the reader that present society leaves everyone on their own, at liberty to do *our own spiritually*. As they see it, the consumer revolution, individualism and the rise of feminine culture are some of the external manifestations of this change. Using two case studies, they examine the post-modern religiosity of Finnish women in the relationship to this complex issue. The cases may also be seen as a critical reflection upon the Lutheran Church in Finland. Riku Hämäläinen in the article "The Finnish Sauna: A Potential Space for Transition", briskly covers different meanings of the sauna. The first is that many Finns perceive the sauna as a special place and in the past as a *sacred* place, in which the transition between everyday routines and the ritual drama as well as between the profane and the sacred is possible. The sauna has also been part of calendar rites, crises and transition rites, and so indicates symbolic meaning. Finally, the Maltese *fiesta* and the Finnish sauna are seen as constituent elements in the construction of local identity.

According to René Gothóni and Tuula Sakaraho, "there are striking similarities and differences between Malta and Finland. Both of these countries are small nations in the fringes of Europe. Each of their histories has been shaped by the experience of colonialism; while Malta was colonized by Britain, Finland was a part of neighbouring countries, namely Sweden and Russia, at different times. Colonization notwithstanding, both Malta and

Finland manage to declare independence and constitute their national cultures based on language and religion” (p. 6–7). This book is unique in many ways, but first of all in the sense that it offers, in one volume, various perspectives of two countries facing huge internal and external changes and trying to find ways of supporting religious experience in a pluralistic society.

Probably, the aims of the book have been for the most part descriptive rather than evaluative in the treatment of the present religious situation in both countries. Yet it seems to me that the authors leave a space for the reader to make his/her own evaluation; e.g. for me, being Polish, I have been struck by the continuing importance of religious markers of ethnic or historical identity in societies forced to defend their integrity against external influences or oppression.

The book’s style is simple, communicative, understandable and direct. Since the language used lacks unnecessary jargon and technical terms, it is a great pleasure to read. I do hope that not only academic staff and experts, but also students will find it satisfying. The authors remind the reader that in the situation when institutional religiosity decreases in its importance, various modes of spirituality are seen to be on the rise, and so a country like contemporary Finland is not as secular as it might be imagined to be. Obviously, this interpretation of the present situation can be contested. From the perspective of many members of the Roman Catholic Church, it probably seems that society is under pressure from secularization and the privatization of religion. I do hope that the reader would have a chance to decide which of these points of view is closer to being correct. As a pastoral theologian, I strongly recommend this important book, which provides an insightful way of articulating how the religious experience is linked to tradition and national identity. I also recommend this book to those who are willing to search for new insights that may prove to be fruitful when examining the religious experience of other countries and peoples.