

An interview with Terhi Utriainen

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This interview took place online in early 2022. I have always admired Terhi's work and been inspired by talking with her. The interview gave me a chance to probe her ideas, her inspiration, her methods and her driving intellectual concerns. I hope it will be as illuminating to the reader as it was for me.

LW: I want to start with your quite recent book on relational dynamics, which I love.* You co-edited, contributed to the introduction and wrote a chapter. I would like you to explain the genesis of this book, which is having an impact on the study of religion. How did it come to be?

TU: It was part of a big project. Peter Nynäs and I were talking and starting to think about projects – projects about practices. Actually, that was at a conference in Turku, and that was when I met you for the first time! You were wearing jeans and a red T-shirt!

* *The Relational Dynamics of Enchantment and Sacralization: Changing the Terms of the Religion versus Secularity Debate*, eds. Peik Ingman, Terhi Utriainen, Tuija Hovi and Måns Broo (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016).

LW: Ah yes! I remember sitting in the sun with you ... but were you not doing a medical project then?

TU: Well, my Ph.D. had been an ethnography of dying. Perhaps I was talking about my postdoc, when I was working on suffering.

Anyway, I remember being with you on a boat, visiting a small island, and on the way back I sat with Peter and he asked me about books on the feminist study of religion. And that's how we started planning for a project! Peter is very active and, over time, and with a group of others around him, from all this eventually came the post-secular project that led to the relational dynamics book.

I wasn't tenured then, I didn't have a permanent job. I was living from project to project, and I remember Peter asking me if I might know somebody to work on this, and I said: 'Yes, I know myself!'

It was a very heterogeneous project. It was amazing and wonderful that Peter got the money, and a lot was done and several books written. Quite a lot of people in Finland are continuing with something that was started back then. Some people were in media and religion. What I wanted to do – I hadn't started my angel project

then – was I wanted to work on something like ‘messy everyday religion’, because I had been studying women and death. I wanted to get away from death. I had previously studied women’s suicide notes, for example.

I kind of loved it and some dark side of myself still keeps doing that and supervising such things, but I sensed that I cannot do only that, because you put so much of yourself into your research work, you cannot just cut yourself out of it. I needed something else so that my mind didn’t just dwell on those topics.

LW: Angels are perhaps a good contrast to suicide.

TU: They are. We began talking with people and exploring what phenomenon to study, and we found out that women are doing quite a lot of things with angels now, and I immediately started to be interested in what was happening. That was a very happy time in my life: I was full of energy with these ‘crazy ladies’ as some people would call them.

LW: How long did it last, that ethnography?

TU: The ethnography was one very intense year and one less intense one. I’m still doing something every now and then.

But then, to go back to that book that you mentioned, the relational dynamics book, I think I was not even the biggest motor for that book. Peik Ingman, Peter’s Ph.D. student, was getting very interested in actor network theory at that moment (he was first led to it by Mika Lassander). We started reading about it with him, from different interests. Actor network theory is interesting to me even though I never followed it to the end (I never do! I don’t know ... I just never do fully). But it was very interesting, the way it thinks about ethnography.

What is interesting to me always is how people struggle with the religious and the secular.

In my Ph.D. I look at religion from a non-institutional angle. If you do that in a country like Finland, and if you are not only interested in very religious people, then you see how people combine things, make some things in some context plausible, which are not plausible in every context. And how things then happen in life.

One of my images that comes from my ethnography of the angels is of women putting themselves in the position of Mary, even the Protestant or post-Protestant women, and not just Catholic or post-Catholic women. Even if they don’t talk about Mary, I saw they are putting themselves in the position of Mary, because something happens: the light comes in, an angel comes, or something comes that can be taken as an angel, and that changes life a little. Or they hope it does ... and often it does, even a little.

So for me – as for actor network theory – there is an interest in what happens, what makes things happen, what acts – in small situations. That was the interest for me for in the relational dynamics book.

LW: Is that a completely different interest from the one that motivated you to do the earlier suicide notes and death work?

TU: One interest I think that has followed me all the time is kind of a Miss Marple interest in detail, you know. I just love what comes in detail, whether it’s nuance in language or in an interview or when people talk together. I always ask ‘what is happening here?’ It is a basic ethnographic question, and I think this is what Miss Marple asks.

LW: Tell me how it began: were you born Miss Marple?

TU: Yes, I was born Miss Marple, an annoying child. I was an observer. But a relatively quiet one, believe it or not. I remembered everything people had done, and sometimes used it in a way that adults didn't like.

I have a lot of friends who know how to do fantastic things. They knitted so many pullovers in the pandemic. They do extreme sports. I have no special talents. I can only read and write.

I came out as I am purely because of two things. Me being Miss Marple, and when I happened to be born. It was a very good point in the history of Finland. We had a very good schooling system – because I come from a working-class background, so I was a person who benefited.

LW: So you are a highly specialized thoroughbred animal that can only do one thing?

TU: Maybe two. I also talk.

I knew very, very young that school was my way out.

It took me a while. I started at the university and my major was comparative literature and philosophy, but I didn't know if I wanted to become an academic or a writer. I don't make choices very easily. I kept alive those two paths for a while. I produced two novels and one book of poetry – the last one is from 2007. By then I had to make a choice. But both options would have let me read and write!

LW: And why did you choose?

TU: I don't know. Do you ever know completely? I had my first novel out the same year that I defended my thesis. I won the university Ph.D. prize that year. My novel

was also well received. So it was not easy. But I have to admit that one reason is security. Because being a novelist in a language like Finnish, a novel that gets good reviews but is not entertainment, that is not going to sell many copies and bring security.

LW: Can you tell me what your novels are about?

TU: The first novel is about becoming a mother, and the second is about photography and death. So not so different from what I was studying. But you have to justify things differently in fiction. Some people said I wrote too poetically for a thesis, too much effort in the writing. So I put the 'writing writing' in a novel and the plainer text in the academic work. But both are making observations, sorting them and interpreting them, and putting them into some sort of structure or plot.

LW: Have you ever read the novelist Rachel Cusk? I think your work is a bit like hers – fiction that is close to non-fiction, or non-fiction that is poetic.

TU: Oh, I love her. I love her not writing in the standard way from a first-person perspective. In my second novel, which was written long before my angel project, the narrator is an angel, an angel that doesn't realise they are an angel. It is somebody who has been sent only to listen and record things, and not to intermingle – though they do not completely succeed. The angel's mission is to be a kind of pure behaviourist observer and not to use their powers to go into people's minds – but it's too tempting for them.

It is a question that we struggle with as ethnographers: how far can you go into people's lives in your interpretations? What is the scope of observation? Can you go

into feelings, or only what people tell you about their feelings? Can we go beyond the discursive? I think that's a real problem for writers.

LW: You said you have to justify yourself in different ways in fiction and in academic work. Can you say more?

TU: Basically, in academic work it's about justification. In fiction you can use many ways to persuade. Imagination is needed in both, that's for sure. One way to say it might be that in fiction, imagination can be everywhere. In academic work, imagination is more in the context of discovery – when you find your research questions and so on. But it's not so much in your analysis and argument building. And you can play with language more in fiction.

LW: Back to the academic life, then. If academics are on a journey of discovery, do you think you can have lots of different quests? Or do you think there is one big question an academic is trying to answer, that there is some thread that connects their different projects – and which is it for you?

TU: I think a lot of academic people are kind of haunted by some question of their own, but they can formulate it in many ways. But a lot of writers say the same, that they have something that they want, if not so solve, then to explore, to go deeper. A lot of writers say that they are haunted by something. But these days, things have become more pragmatic. Academics have to solve important questions that are put from elsewhere, and writers, especially on the entertainment side of things, they kind of scout to see what is a good question to touch upon. So I think that both writers and scholars maybe are more pressed today to go into the 'project' world. I'm in the in-

between. I observe. I am always interested in something over and again, but I package it differently.

LW: What is it, Terhi? What haunts you?

TU: Well, it's difference. Between people, but it's also increasingly difference between people and other things as well. I think what took me from studying literature to studying religion was that it was so strange. I came from no religious background at all, and when someone I knew became religious, I thought – what is that power that makes that difference? A difference at nearly all levels of life, all spheres of life between us. I'm interested in difference.

LW: If you had been born in the nineteenth century, would you have been an anthropologist going off to study other cultures?

TU: Well, maybe. But the difference does not have to be very big. I'm also very happy with the smaller differences.

LW: Difference is a very abstract kind of thing. Why this fascination?

TU: Many facets of difference. For example, I am interested in how we can live together when we are different in so many respects.

I haven't been able to write about this yet, but when I was interviewing the women with angels I got fascinated in the men sitting quietly in the corner of the sitting room. What is it like for them when they live with women who have their heads in the clouds and share their lives with angels? So that's one level of difference. Is it epistemic difference for them? Are they thinking that the women see the world in a faulty way? Or is it an emotional difference – the women feeling something with angels and not them? What is it?

LW: It's a wonderful project because it's about relationships between people and with the other-than-human, and the triangles.

TU: And I think we already know quite a lot about the third-person perspective in religion, but we don't know the second-person perspective so much, and how the non-religious think about it.

LW: But now I start to think you're not Miss Marple, because she is not haunted by difference. She wants to find out what bad person did this so they can be handed to the police.

What do you hope will happen with the knowledge you produce?

TU: I think that knowledge about differences and relations and how people relate to the world is extremely important in an increasingly standardised world. I think that knowledge standardises, and I find that this kind of basically anthropological type of knowledge, which is slow to produce – slow knowledge – is very important. It is even more needed now than we think it is.

We need to find different ways of relating to one other, and relating to various non-human others. Maybe I'm producing something for the storeroom and future needs. But it is needed today, because, for instance, when I was doing the angels thing, the church administrators in Finland wanted to talk about it with me. They asked: 'Terhi, tell us what the women want'. Those women who, if they leave the church, will empty the church.

But it seems that not too many people these days are given the resources to produce this kind of slow knowledge on difference.

LW: In the introduction to the relational dynamics book which you co-authored, and which you titled 'Towards more symmetrical compositions', the view is distant and critical towards the modern project: are you?

TU: Partly, yes, I am. For instance, one thing that is not so much emphasised by Bruno Latour, despite his criticism of modernity, but is emphasised by others, is the standardisation.

LW: Like Weber on rationalisation.

TU: Yes. Modernity standardises many things, including knowledge and knowledge production, and the forms of knowledge that count as legitimate knowledge. Latour talks about purification, about how modernity leaves things out of its vision, things that make a difference, because making a difference is sometimes close to making things happen. And when Latour looks at what makes things happen, he wants to include things that modernity doesn't give space to in its schema, including non-human things of many kinds.

What I want to look into might be called the secret pockets of modernity, pockets on the garment that modernity has closed. When I use the word 'knowledge', I mean the epistemic and embodied aspects. We know that it may become dangerous to societies to ignore these differences and not allow them to become conversation partners.

I'm a scholar of religion. If I was a scholar of something else, I would probably want to bring out other things that modernity may want to forget. But I am a scholar of religion, so I concentrate more on these things that are there but that the modern self-understanding finds so messy and strange that they don't want to touch them even with their little finger. I think

this is dangerous, it's not nice, it's not democratic, and it might also be dangerous.

But it is difficult because modernity does not give a place, for instance, to my angel ladies, in the sense that it might want to either ridicule them or make entertainment out of them. So the ethical part of finding those pockets and opening them for analysis has to be considered, because I don't want to make entertainment of them.

LW: As well as Latour, you talk quite a lot about Robert Orsi in the introduction. Can you position your work in relation Orsi, please?

TU: First of all I think that he writes well. I find it very difficult to make myself read something that I don't like as writing. And he also does an analysis of the very complicated and very vulnerable relations between many things, like between modernity and folkish religion. And how people's lives happen in those crossroads. He has done it very well.

I first read his Madonna book and I have read and reread all the prefaces to the different editions because I think that they are a valuable part of the book. He is a historian first. I'm not good with history at all, and I appreciate it when someone is. He does more than I do also by way of auto-ethnography. This is partly because he has a more religious family background than I do, so he's more in there than I am. He also plays with actor network theory even though he hides it almost completely in his footnotes. But he manages to write in an interesting and illuminating way about complexities without making them like mere variables in a quantitative way of thinking.

LW: In that same introduction you raise criticisms about ventriloquising research subjects and taking too much power.

TU: Yes. That is the danger of the hermeneutical project of understanding. What do we project into what we want to understand? It's also maybe a kind of a generational thing. I grew up in the 'verstehen' paradigm but I have also grown up in the methodologically agnostic paradigm, and in Finland we have always had relatively good teaching about methods and methodology and the danger of reading too much in. That is why I am hesitant sometimes with auto-ethnography because it sometimes gets close to projecting from my own experience, if I'm an insider.

I published my field diary with the angel project in Finnish. And there I write that it is important to sometimes to draw some line in how far you can go in understanding. That can be an important line. Anthropologists ask one another, how far did you go into the rabbit hole? Everybody makes their own choices. Going all the way into the rabbit hole is not always respectful.

LW: You hint in the introduction that part of the answer is in placing the researcher as just as one node in the network – a more 'symmetrical composition'.

TU: Yes, that was my idea. I think that we have to be a kind of node that things go through. Research literature for one thing, that comes through us. And you sometimes participate in a group. You can't take yourself out of the picture completely. But you shouldn't overemphasise that too much. The older-generation professors used to love to tell stories about how they became, for example, one of the shamans, an honorary shaman – and I personally wouldn't do that.

LW: Why don't you like that?

TU: That somehow feels like taking too much space. I don't even like over-long

paragraphs from my students on self-positioning. Your analysis should mostly show it. I don't like it to be pages long because it again takes the focus.

LW: Takes too much space in the network.

TU: Precisely.

LW: It seems to me and others that Finland is currently very productive in religion scholarship. Can you explain that? Is it the folklore tradition? Is there something that makes it easier to see bits of modernity that other scholars don't look at?

TU: We are in an interesting situation in Finland in the study of religion. I think we represent the best of past, present and future! [laughs]. I mean making the best of the traditional study of religion in Finland, but in a new way. The best was the folk-religion research. I worked in the Finnish Literature Society for two years as a librarian. That is at the heart of folklore tradition. It is tied up with the national-romantic tradition of collecting folklore. Not only Finland, of course – there were the Grimm brothers, and a wider European project. But for us, it was a very big part of the nationalist project when nationalism was not yet a bad word. It was tied up with making Finnish a 'civilised' language and preserving and creating mythologies. When the materials started to come in, it created a huge collection, and they were organised really well. The classification system came to be used elsewhere. Folklore studies was the crown jewel of what came to be humanistic sciences in Finland. It had that status for a long time, and folk-religion research grew with that.

I think that is the basis. The sociological emphasis tended to see it as old-fashioned, but then came the everyday religion as

a corrective measure in sociology. So in Finland we said: 'Well, what's new, we have been doing this already?'

LW: Do you think the concept of vernacular religion is helpful?

TU: I do. I prefer it to the concept of lived religion. The latter has a different background. It is a corrective. Vernacular, however, comes from anthropological and folkloristic backgrounds. It has more nuance, perhaps, including greater sensitivity to politics and class. Lived religion is more idealising, 'this can be religion, and this can be religion, and this is really nice'. It was born from the secularisation discourse, in part, as a counter. I think [Nancy] Ammerman theologises and idealises a bit. [Leonard] Primiano emphasises that the vernacular perspective starts from a class-based society. And then there is, of course, a lot of important critical and feminist research that is important to me.

LW: These different qualifiers for 'religion', each has a different background, and a different approach, though they overlap. I have to teach this pluralistic genealogy to my students at the outset or they get confused. These overlapping but different concepts: folk religion, vernacular religion, everyday religion, lived religion, popular religion, and so on.

TU: They come in binaries. Popular religion is the opposite of elite religion, for example. Lived religion of official religion. 'Vernacular religion' is an approach that tries to break the binary. It is a perspective, not a thing. Perspectives show you a view of the world and you should not think that it is actually a part of the world – though we do, of course!

LW: Where is your current work taking you?

TU: I'm working on learning in religion and spirituality, in a project with people from the Academy of Finland. We are looking into how we learn about learning, and the value of learning, in contemporary society, when we look at how people learn in and from religion.

That is interesting because learning is in EU and UNICEF and similar documents as the big, big cultural value. But when it is valued it is valued in the service of economic growth, and development of individuals and societies. But what is forgotten is that as religious scholars, we see other potencies of religious learning for many people, which can even end in conversions. But it can end in something different, and in any branch of religion you find all these interesting ways of learning.

In real life, people combine their religious learning with their secular learning, formal learning with informal, and develop new competencies and skills. So here we have a blind spot in the modern approach to learning – that these things are not made visible, and when they are it is as scary things like radicalisation or as mere 'humbug'. Religious learning is not very valued as contributing to the big picture of learning. So we're looking into the informal parts of learning and how people develop trajectories of learning, and so on.

Religious scholars could and should be interested not only in religion and media, but also in looking into these big societal values (like learning) and the less visible aspects. This is really the vernacular approach, you know.

This is where I am now. And to go back to Latour, he thinks we should focus on 'matters of concern' and I feel that all I have been studying are matters of concern. That

here we are not only relating, strictly speaking, to religion, but to the religious aspect that is so important in wider areas. Only religious scholars have that know-how to walk there.

LW: Are you interested in matters of concern to the people you research or to society more generally?

TU: Both. Ethnographers mostly go and look at matters of concern to people. But my interest is never only about the people because I think that they reflect and construct and articulate larger matters of concern. So they are also points of articulation – I like this notion.

LW: You are a professional educator. That's your world, and the learning theme is real for you here as well. Can you talk a bit about that role: what you like, what's good and bad in it to you, how you see universities and how you'd like them to develop?

TU: Well, first of all, like my uncles say, I'm the first person ever to go to university in my family. My uncles say 'Terhi never got out of school'. She got stuck. So, because I am in the water it is a bit difficult to think about it. But I obviously find it important because I'm here and it allows me to work on the matters of concern that I find important. It is very exhausting sometimes, personally, because you have to do all these things that the university wants you to do, and you should excel in too many things. Personally, teaching and research is what I like and I would like to find better ways to combine them, because that would feed both sides.

I'm a bit afraid about the future of this slow production of knowledge. The concentration time, the thinking time, the reading time is hard to find. In my university

the human sciences are struggling at the moment, and I know in other universities too. That's really worrying and I don't know how we should act. We seem to be acting as if we can be as quick and flexible as any other, but then we are not always doing the things that we do the best. I would love to find the way to argue from our strengths and not make us like the others.

I love to work with people of different generations, and working in the study of religion attracts a very varied and versatile group of people – people from so many different backgrounds and different experiences and different ages. Sometimes what I would like to have more of is time just to think.

I was invited by Steve Sutcliffe to the British Society for the Study of Religion conference panel where he had asked people from different places in the world to think about, basically, does the study of religion matter, because religion can be studied in many ways in many disciplines. And I think that kind of thinking is so important, instead of running after this piece of money and that next project etc.

LW: Terhi, this has been so helpful and illuminating. I have loved your work for a long time, and you have given me an even deeper appreciation. You have explained your enduring interest in differences, and how important it is that some people are able to investigate slowly, and articulate differences – differences that we often don't want to see. Differences that do not fit modern visions. Difficult work that people don't want. But you nevertheless have an assurance about your work and its importance: even if today people don't see that it is important, one day they will. You are doing something that may be of value in the future, not necessarily now.

TU: Well, we need a bit of conviction about that because it's very difficult to act if you don't believe in what you do. I would like to add that if you want to work a bit for the future, then you should write so well that people want to read it in the future. That is my struggle because I don't write so well in English. I would so much like everybody to turn into a Finn! [laughs].

LW: No problem. Next life for sure. ■



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