

Rituals and ritualization

Special issue dedicated to professor Terhi Utriainen

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This issue of *Approaching Religion* is dedicated to Terhi Utriainen, Professor of the Study of Religions at the University of Helsinki. It is published on the 7 November 2022, Terhi's sixtieth birthday, and contains reflections and research articles written by Terhi's colleagues in Finland, the UK and the Netherlands. All the research articles address the theme of rituals, which is one of Terhi's special foci of interest as a scholar of religion. This editorial first outlines Terhi's academic career and then introduces the individual texts that make up the issue.

IN THE FINNISH ACADEMIC TRADITION, it is customary to honour the career of distinguished members of the scientific community on their sixtieth birthday with a Festschrift. In Terhi's case, we opted for a two-part tribute. Therefore, in addition to this special issue, we have also put together a Finnish language edited volume titled *Uushenkisyys*. This monograph – edited by Tiina Mahlamäki and Minna Opas and published by the Finnish Literature Society – is a comprehensive introduction to new spiritualities, yet another field of study to which Terhi has contributed in a significant way.

With these two publications, all of us who have participated in their making wish Terhi a happy birthday and thank her for her collegiality and friendship, as well as for her invaluable contribution to the study

of religions both as a discipline within the universities of Helsinki and Turku and as the ongoing collaborative endeavour of an international academic community.

Terhi began her academic career as a student of comparative literature, but soon switched her focus to comparative religion. Her *alma mater* is the University of Helsinki, from where she graduated with the degree of Master of Arts in 1989, Licentiate of Philosophy in 1993 and Doctor of Philosophy in 1999. For the first ten years after receiving her doctorate, Terhi was employed in temporary positions at the University of Helsinki, working alternately as research fellow and senior lecturer. In 2009, she was appointed to the position of senior lecturer with a permanent contract. In 2016, after the retirement of a colleague, Terhi became acting professor of the study of religions at the Faculty of Arts. It was from this position that she left the University of Helsinki, in the beginning of 2018, to take up the post of Professor of the Study of Religion at the University of Turku. In Turku, Terhi also served as director of the doctoral programme in history, culture and arts studies. She returned to the University of Helsinki four years later, however, now assuming the chair of Professor of the Study of Religions at the Faculty of



Some see angels, others imagine them - and research them. Terhi at the Snellman University College in Helsinki, September 2015.

Theology. While feeling sad to leave behind a wonderful work community in Turku, Terhi was at the same time happy to resume closer collaboration with colleagues in Helsinki, to switch to a more convenient commute and to be done with job applications once and for all!

Terhi's colleagues both in Finland and abroad know her as an outstanding, inspiring and prolific scholar. Since her early career, she has engaged with themes related to gender, embodiment, vulnerability, and death. More recently, she has written extensively on healing, enchantment, and ritual. Terhi masters both fieldwork and textual methods, but her focus on vernacular culture, as well as her empathetic

and boundlessly curious attitude towards her topics of study, has made her partial towards ethnographic approaches. In fact, many of her studies have contributed to the development of ethnographic methodology in the study of religion. As for Terhi's choices regarding the publication and dissemination of her work, they reflect her commitment to preserving Finnish as a language of scientific discourse. In writing scientific monographs in Finnish, she has gone against the grain of contemporary academic trends. Terhi's two novels, and the other works of fiction that she has published, are another testimony to her love of the Finnish language. Naturally, her list of publications in English, which includes articles, book chapters and edited volumes, is impressive as well.

Terhi's academic achievements have received institutional recognition on many occasions. For her doctoral thesis *Läsnä, riisuttu, puhdas. Uskontoantropologinen tutkimus naisista kuolevan vierellä* ('Present, Naked, Pure: A Study in the Anthropology of Religion on Women by the Side of the Dying'; SKS, 1999), she was awarded the annual dissertation prize of the University of Helsinki. In 2004, Terhi was granted the title of Docent in the Study of Religions and Women's Studies, and in 2021, she was invited to become a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. In addition, her debut novel *Välimatkoja* ('Journeys Inbetween') was shortlisted for the prestigious Runeberg Prize for fiction in 1999.

Over the years, Terhi has persistently sought research funding for herself and her junior colleagues, and wider collaborations and consortia. She has also been successful in her efforts. She has, for example, acted as principal investigator in two research projects funded by the Academy of Finland, 'Finnish Women Writing on Religion and

Gender' (2007–10) and 'Learning from New Religion and Spirituality' (2019–23), the latter still ongoing. For the year 2010, Terhi took a leave of absence from Helsinki to work as research fellow at Åbo Akademi University, where she was affiliated with the Center of Excellence project 'Post-Secular Culture and a Changing Religious Landscape in Finland' led by professor Peter Nynäs.

Even though Terhi's studies have focused on the Finnish context, she is also well known and well respected internationally. She has participated in several international research networks related to themes close to her heart, such as gender studies and death research. In recent years, she has closely collaborated, for example, with colleagues in the European Research Network on Death Rituals. She has also served in various advisory and expert functions abroad, including as a steering committee member, dissertation examiner, funding application reviewer and invited speaker. What is perhaps most important, in all these different venues and capacities, is that she takes the role of an active and constructive discussant, wooing her interlocutors with insightful remarks and bubbling laughter. It is the combination of cutting-edge research and disarming personality, we believe, that makes Terhi so popular among her colleagues abroad.

Back home, Terhi is known as a wise, empathetic and passionate teacher. She is especially beloved for her skills and dedication as a supervisor of master's and doctoral theses. We, the authors of this editorial, for one, are forever grateful to Terhi for all that she has done for us, first as a dissertation supervisor and later as a mentor and colleague. Terhi has served and continues to serve as an important adviser for many of her peers and junior colleagues, including those who have not been her students

per se, as they navigate the pitfalls of academic life. One thing that makes her such a well-liked member of any academic community she participates in is her readiness to listen and to help, be it through offering a word of encouragement, an alternative perspective or an important contact.

The theme of this special issue is rituals and ritualisation. Ever since her early studies on Karelian laments and women's suicide notes, Terhi's research has included a ritual perspective. It was her ethnographic project on angel healing practitioners, however, that gave her a unique vantage point to examine women's everyday micro-rituals. Terhi's work on angel spirituality elucidates how, using the tools of ritual framing, contemporary Finnish women make their daily lives sparkle with enchanted moments and tap into angelic companionship. With perception and subtlety quite unique to her, she examines how her interlocutors navigate controversies that may arise with the collision of religious or spiritual epistemologies and ontologies with dominant secular ones.

Such conflicts or tensions also constitute an important theme in the first text of the special issue. It is written by **Linda Woodhead**, F. D. Maurice Professor in Moral and Social Theology, King's College, London. Based on an interview with Terhi, it takes the form of a dialogue between two leading scholars who share many interests and greatly value each other's work. The interview introduces Terhi's major research themes, including her early work on practices and meanings related to death and dying, her project on angels and her ongoing research on learning in and from the contexts of religion and spirituality. It also presents Terhi's insights on the value of the academic study of religion – especially slow research that is able to articulate important nuances in people's experiences

and shed light on the margins of modernity.

The first of the six research articles included in the special issue is written by the docent and senior lecturer **Heikki Pesonen**, one of Terhi's long-standing colleagues at the University of Helsinki. His article introduces the reader to Roy Rappaport's ritual theory. Pesonen uses Rappaport's work to conceptualise the relationship between religion, rituals and ecological concerns, applying this framework to two specific cases of environmental activism: the Canadian Mi'kmaq indigenous community's struggle over their sacred mountain and the ordination ritual that Thai 'eco-monks' have coined for trees under threat of felling. These cases exemplify a mechanism of action that Pesonen calls the strategic function of environmental rituals. This means that they involve rituals that draw strategically on sacred principles that are difficult to contest without questioning the fundamental worldview of the community. Pesonen argues that this feature of religiously motivated environmental activism can make it more efficient and influential than secular or political approaches.

Timo Kallinen, Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Eastern Finland, investigates contemporary conflicts over the traditional Ghanaian ritual of libation. Since the West African nation of Ghana attained its independence from British rule in 1957, its traditional culture has been promoted in all sectors of public life. In accordance with this principle, the ritual offering of libations, which consists of a ceremonial offering of drinks to ancestral spirits and gods, has been performed side by side with Christian and Muslim prayers in various national events. In the past ten years, however, the role that traditional (religious) rituals should be accorded in the public space of a modern nation-state

has also been vigorously debated. Kallinen applies Webb Keane's work on semiotic ideology and modernity to analyse how the two sides of the dispute understand the function and meaning of the ritual. According to Kallinen, the conflict thus ultimately hinges on two different understandings of modernity.

Senior lecturer **Alexandra Bergholm** is another co-worker of Terhi's from the University of Helsinki. After Terhi became acting professor and subsequently transferred to Turku, Bergholm took up the position of senior lecturer vacated by her. Bergholm's article presents the reader with an Old Irish text from the mid-eighth century composed by an Irish monk known as Blathmac son of Cú Brettan. The text is a collection of poems, a long devotional composition meditating on the life, death, resurrection and Second Coming of Christ. Whereas previous research has focused mostly on the linguistic and socio-historical value of Blathmac's text, Bergholm seeks to approach the poems from the point of view of the study of religions; her analysis therefore starts from the presumption that the text was intended to be used as a prayer. She discusses the poems' devotional discourse by investigating the intersecting themes of martyrdom and memory and concludes by suggesting that the repetition of the sacrificial imagery of the poems in a ritual practice of prayer can constitute an experiential and embodied process of meaning-making for the practitioners.

Senior lecturer **Helena Kupari**'s article is also concerned with prayer practices, this time among contemporary Finns who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland as adults. Kupari is Terhi's former doctoral student; her current academic affiliation is the University of Eastern Finland. In her contribution, Kupari argues that the devotional lives of converts to Orthodoxy

constitute an interesting topic of study, since their religious trajectories challenge the standard conceptualisation of the modern subject as someone who is primarily concerned with the truthful expression of her internal states. Kupari uses interview material to investigate the interplay of interiority and exteriority in Finnish converts' religious practice. To conceptualise this dynamic, she turns to Adam Seligman's theorisation of ritual and sincerity as two modes of organising social action. Kupari's analysis demonstrates that while her interviewees understood sincerity as the driving force of religious practice, they valued Orthodox ritual as a resource. Moreover, their engagement in ritual action helped them come to terms with the ambiguities of their daily lives, including their conflicting obligations and wavering commitment.

Post-doctoral researcher and university teacher **Jere Kyyrö** and docent **Teemu T. Mantsinen** are Terhi's colleagues from the University of Turku. Their article also discusses contemporary Orthodox Christian ritual. More specifically, they apply Catharine Bell's concept of ritualisation to analyse a cluster of events that has taken place annually (pre-Covid) in Finnish North Karelia. It combines an Orthodox Christian village and chapel feast with religious processions that travel to nearby villages and other points of interest, including a deserted Finnish village nowadays located in Russia. Because of their multivariate and unique nature, the events attract participants with both religious and non-religious motivations. Relying primarily on participant observation of the events, Kyyrö and Mantsinen investigate the process through which the different segments are brought together to form a coherent and structured whole. They argue that the Orthodox priests responsible for officiating at the festivities have a key role in this process:

through their ritual mastery, the priests are able to merge the different events into a unified entity, balancing between the many motivations of the attendees.

The special issue ends with an article written by **Anne-Marie Korte**, Professor of Religion and Gender at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and one of Terhi's close international contacts among scholars of gendered religion. Her text dives into the colourful world of drag culture. In 2017, a young Spanish school teacher named Borja Casillas won the first prize at the Gran Canaria Drag Queen Contest with his performance as Drag Sethlas, which used strong Christian imagery. The celebrated show was aired on national Spanish television, which eventually led to several lawsuits against Casillas, as he was accused of a blasphemous attack on religious beliefs. Korte's article, which is connected with her earlier piece focusing on these blasphemy accusations, describes Drag Sethlas's performances and analyses them from the point of view of gender studies and religious studies. Korte illuminates the role of ritualisation in the provocation that this type of popular artistic performance with religious connotations can evoke and suggests that it is the presence of a double theatricality in the performance – the combination of a 'holy drama' with specific drag theatricality – that contributes most to the provocation. ■

HELENA KUPARI and MAIJA BUTTERS
Guest editors

Helena Kupari, Ph.D., is a scholar of religion and university lecturer at the School of Theology, University of Eastern Finland. Her recently finished post-doctoral research project, funded by the Academy of Fin-



land (2019–22), discussed the religiosity of Finnish cultural workers who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland as adults. Her wider research interests include contemporary Finnish religiosity, lived and everyday religion, intersections of religion, gender, ethnicity, age and class, theories of practice, and social memory research. She is the author of *Lifelong Religion as Habitus: Religious Practice among Displaced Orthodox Karelian Women in Finland* (Brill, 2016) and the co-editor of *Orthodox Christianity and Gender: Dynamics of Tradition, Culture, and Lived Practice* (Routledge, 2019).

Maija Butters holds an MA in cultural anthropology and a Ph.D. in the study of religions, both from the University of Helsinki. While her MA thesis (2001)



focused on the Tibetan Buddhist exile community in India and the importance of Buddhist art there, her doctoral dissertation (2021) concerned contemporary Finnish death culture. In her dissertation, she investigated how hospice patients talk about death and dying and what kinds of strategies they had at their disposal to cope with their situation. Butters is currently engaged in post-doctoral research in the 'Learning from New Religion and Spirituality' project funded by the Academy of Finland and led by professor Terhi Utriainen, where she is investigating the learning trajectories of Finnish converts to Islam.