


Religious heritage and change in the North

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The current issue of *Approaching Religion* is based on a conference arranged in Åbo/Turku, Finland, in November 2022, with the theme 'Religious Heritage and Change in the North'. The conference was organized jointly by the research network Religious History of the North (REHN, Umeå University), and the research project 'Changing Spaces: Ritual Buildings, Sacred Objects, and Human Sensemaking' (Inez and Julius Polin Institute for Theological Research/Åbo Akademi University).

THE CONFERENCE SOUGHT to provide a platform for scholarly reflection on religious heritage in times of change. The focus was thus a concept at the intersection of practised religion and cultural heritage, or understood differently, a heritage specifically related to religion. The conference explored themes and cases where religious heritage has been challenged, reinterpreted, or even reinforced as a result of changing realities of, for instance, a social, economic, technical or environmental character. Change – both sudden and slow – is therefore a common thread across all articles in this publication. One form of change recurring in several of the articles is that brought about by destruction. Sometimes, the destruction is involuntary and accidental – such as when a religious building is destroyed by fire. At other times, religious heritage is deliberately destroyed –

for example, when it is removed by regimes that consider it obsolete, useless, or even dangerous.

The focus of this thematic issue is religious heritage, both in the present and as a historical phenomenon. Often heritage tends to be viewed in the present as something that needs to be secured for the future. However, as some of the articles in this issue show, similar concerns have been raised in the past. Religious heritage has been destroyed and preserved, and both the very concept and the perceptions of it have changed over time. Moreover, as also shown by some of the contributors, religious heritage is created and constructed and is therefore also often contested and disputed.

As the articles illustrate, the concept of religious heritage includes both tangible and material heritage such as buildings and objects, but also immaterial or intangible heritage, such as traditions or customs practised by religious communities. Over recent decades, many religious sites, objects and even practices have been reframed primarily as cultural heritage. In some cases, this interaction between heritage and practised religion has enabled the continued existence of religious traditions or the emergence of new, alternative practices.

In other cases, redundant places of worship have been sold, sacred objects have been museumized, and sometimes religious practices have been transformed into folk festivities, raising questions of whether religiosity is lost or lingers on. Although in many respects there is a kind of symbiosis, or at least synergy, between religion and cultural heritage, the relationship between them is also characterized by tension and conflict. In times of transformation, there is an urgent need for scientific research in this area. Here we hope to make a relevant contribution – with a particular focus on religious heritage and change in the predominantly (post-) Protestant Christian Northern Europe and the Nordic countries.

The issue opens with the contributions by the keynote lecturers of the conference, Arne Bugge Amundsen and Irene Stengs. **Arne Bugge Amundsen** in his contribution leads the reader from the Reformation to the present day and seeks to nuance the image of the Nordic countries that have previously often been perceived as mono-cultural Lutheran societies. He looks into the different cultural levels of the outwardly dominant position of the Lutheran churches. Religious culture, he argues, should not only be viewed from the perspective of royal power, legislation or official professions. Daily practice, everyday life and oppositional voices should also be taken into account. During the whole post-Reformation period there were many smaller groups of believers who had different religious practices, seeking inspiration outside the majority church. In the nineteenth century, the relationship between citizenship and religious identity came to an end in all Nordic countries. The nation would no longer coincide with the territorial Lutheran church. Instead, the focus gradually shifted to cultural heritage. For instance, many old church buildings were

museumified if they were emptied when parishes chose to build new, more practical places of worship. In recent years, as Bugge Amundsen shows, churches have developed new ways to look at national religious heritage, breaking with a long tradition. For instance, the Church of Norway has included national minorities like the Sami and their tangible and intangible heritage. A welcome development, and at the same time, according to the author, a challenge from the perspective of religious heritage in the twenty-first century.

In the very title of her contribution, **Irene Stengs** establishes an important point of departure – important for the topic of religious heritage as a whole – namely, that religious heritage is created and does not arise by itself. This, in turn, raises interesting follow-up questions, such as who decides what ultimately qualifies as religious heritage and how such a process impacts religious items or buildings. Since the answer to these questions often depends on historical and local circumstances, ethnographic research is required. This is also what Stengs provides in her article by analysing destroyed church buildings – a topical theme in many parts of the West. Actors fall back on various motives in the attempt to elevate certain objects to the status of cultural heritage – and there are certainly others than merely religious ones – and here Stengs makes an interesting observation, pointing to the emotions evoked by accidental church destructions, such as fires. She shows how such emotions – regardless of whether they relate to religious or secular sentiments – often induce among people a wish to restore the churches to their original, ‘authentic’ state. Such events, where churches are destroyed, also demonstrate the so-called ‘sacred residue’ of redundant churches and religious materiality. This residue is most often

traced to the building's sacred past but it can also – as Stengs shows – be caused or triggered by other qualities, dimensions or effects such as emotions.

Gunilla Gunner and **Carola Nordbäck** take the reader to a Swedish outpost in the Russian Empire: the Swedish church of St Catherine in St Petersburg. This church – built in 1865 but with roots in the sixteenth century – was closed in the 1930s, and for many years it served as a sports school. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, it was reopened. It was not only the parishioners who took an interest in the building and wanted to renovate it but also the state of Sweden, which wanted to utilize it as a centre for Swedish–Russian relations. Negotiations for the renovation of a joint church and cultural centre were held over many years, but without success. Based on the religious heritage complex concept (Isnart and Cerezales), Nordbäck and Gunner express a desire to reconsider the connections between religion and heritage and review the processes by which heritage is constructed. Moreover, they ask what is at stake for religious communities when they cooperate with heritage actors, and try to explain why such cooperation sometimes works but at other times ends in conflict.

In the second article on Swedish heritage in the Russian Empire, **Irina Seits** investigates the Branobel corporation, which operated in Azerbaijan between the late nineteenth century and the Russian revolution, and mechanisms of heritagisation that transformed oil from a natural to a cultural resource. Branobel was founded by the brothers Robert and Ludvig Nobel in 1879. Seits reflects on the role of Branobel's corporate narrative in the heritagization of oil and in justifying the formation of a world's order based on fossil fuels, and on the business promotion strategies and mechanisms that the Nobel family devised

and developed by approaching and exploiting local religious symbols. For instance, the company created an emblem of the Ateshgah Fire Temple in Baku – a past temple with a natural fire, used as a Hindu, Sikh and Zoroastrian tabernacle since 1745. Seits notes that the Nobels appropriated the myths associated with the region to draw a symbolic line linking their civilizing industrial activities with the symbolic heritage of the local past. They created a narrative that aimed at establishing a historical and symbolic continuity between the region's traditional pasts and its industrial appropriation by Branobel, presented as an inevitable evolutionary stage of a civilizing progress.

Kim Groop's article deals with memory activism in the context of a destroyed religious heritage in Leipzig, Germany. Groop studies how different stakeholders used the past in writings, demonstrations and speeches to force the leadership of the University of Leipzig to rebuild the destroyed Paulinerkirche – the University Church of St Paul. This had been part of a monastery, transformed into a university church during the Reformation. In 1968 the socialist regime had it destroyed. After German reunification, opinions differed on whether the church should be rebuilt or whether a university assembly hall should replace the old church site. As Groop shows, the activists fighting for church reconstruction invoked the Reformation in various ways, but they also used other tropes such as the peaceful revolution. The article shows that Lutheranism's emphasis on the 'word' had taken on a partly new meaning. Just as the memory of the Reformation linked to the university church was no longer connected only to a church-history event, but also to civic participation and activism, the word no longer denoted only the word of God, but perhaps even more the free word expressed in unfree times.



Inauguration of the new university church in Leipzig 3 December 2017.

Janice Holmes's article is a historical case study from the Swedish context. However, it is not the usual objects of devotion or religious events that are under scrutiny. Instead, Holmes takes a closer look at how the religious space in a free- and low-church setting – more precisely a Baptist congregation – at times was adapted to house social gatherings such as birthday parties, and how the materiality used and displayed at these events reflect religious identity or manifest the lived religion of these communities. The investigation is thus about the ‘space-making’ of a religious community. In addition to confirming previously known facts – such as that low-church communities had a flexible approach to their sacred spaces – Holmes is able to show, among other things, how the materiality used to decorate birthday parties in the church buildings reveals something about the attitudes and approaches these communities had to the surrounding society, but also how these communities

engaged in and sought to bring change to it.

The theme of redundant and destroyed churches and their lingering sanctity recurs in the article by **Erik J. Andersson**. In his church-history case study from a Swedish context, Andersson discusses the identity of Kinnarumma's old wooden church after it was relocated from its original location to become part of an open-air museum at the beginning of the twentieth century. By referring to Crispin Paine's comparison of *museumification* to *sacralization* – both of which are processes that remove an object's exchange value and place the objects outside the world of commodities – Andersson notes that the religious identity of the church building never fell into oblivion. Andersson's study also illustrates how time-bound and context-bound questions of both religious and cultural heritage are. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was common to abandon old church buildings when building new ones, instead of reusing materials from the old churches

in the new buildings, as had been done in the past. At the same time – thanks to an increased interest in cultural history, folklore and local history – churches such as the Kinnarumma church were saved, not because they were valued as religious heritage but because they were seen as bearers of cultural heritage.

Lise-Lotte Hellöre looks in her article at a different aspect of religious heritage, namely that of intangible or immaterial heritage. Considering that social-caritative acts – or diaconia as it is often labelled – is one of the original and foundational practices of the Christian church, diaconia is – as Hellöre notes – situated on the border of past traditions and future challenges. And since diaconal work takes place at the very intersection of church and society, it reflects – but is also sensitive to – various societal changes. This delicate position, and the immaterial nature of the work, make it challenging to assess. Hellöre seeks to determine the value created by diaconal work in the case of the Porvoo diocese in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and identifies new areas of development and of assessing the value creation of diaconia.

Taken together, these articles shed new light on diverse questions, contexts and case studies relating to the theme of religious heritage and change in the North, in line with the aim of the conference it documents. We also believe that the issue raises novel, intriguing questions for future research and hope the articles will be of interest to scholars working in the field of heritage studies in the Nordic context and beyond. ■

KIM GROOP and JAKOB DAHLBACKA
Guest editors

Kim Groop is a university lecturer, associate professor (docent) and researcher in church history at Åbo Akademi University. He is also the chairperson of the Donner Institute. In his research, he has dealt with the history and legacy of the Christian mission and European colonialism in Tanzania and Namibia as well as issues relating to cultural memory and religious as well as political uses of the past. At present, his main focus is the university church in Leipzig: a church that the GDR regime demolished in 1968 and which was later rebuilt to be inaugurated in 2017.



Jakob Dahlbacka (Th.Dr and docent in Church history) serves as university lecturer in practical theology at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. In his research, Dahlbacka has combined his interest in Nordic church history – especially revival history – with theories on uses of history, cultural memory and spatial meaning-making. These were also the topics of his doctoral thesis (*Framåt med stöd av det förflutna. Religiöst historiebruk hos Anders Svedberg, 2015*). His most recent monograph (*Platsens sakralisering: Annekterande, meningsskapande och rituella sakraliseringspraktiker vid återbruktagandet av Lutherkyrkan i Helsingfors, 2021*) analyses the re-sacralization of the Luther Church, Helsinki, and deals with the topics of sacrality, space and narration in a Nordic Lutheran context.