


Appropriation as a perspective and topic in the study of religion and spirituality

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Cultural appropriation is a timely topic that has been taking up a lot of space in public discussions. The concept is often applied in heated debates aimed at calling out' different actors and actions as appropriation, or on the other hand to defend against such accusations. This thematic issue seeks to look at the topic from a broader and more nuanced perspective, asking what different expressions of appropriation appear in the field of and in relation to religion and spirituality. What discourses and discussions emerge around instances of religious and spiritual appropriation? And how is appropriation understood, negotiated or problematized within, across and around different religious and spiritual groups?

IN THE BROADEST SENSE, appropriation can be understood as 'the use of a culture's symbols, artefacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture' (Rogers 2006: 474). This understanding opens up a multitude of diverse processes and actions when looking at religion and spirituality. Various definitions and perspectives, such as religious appropriation (Bucar 2022), appropriation of (a) religion (Stausberg and Tessman 2013: 458), cultural colonialism (Arjana 2020), religious exoticism (Altglas 2014; Lucia 2020), or post-global religious identity politics (Borup 2020), have been used when describing issues relating to representation and commodification, as well as immaterial

and material ownership of religious traditions, artefacts, expressions or practices.

This special issue is part of the research project 'Learning from New Religion and Spirituality' (LeNeRe), funded by the Research Council of Finland between 2019 and 2023 (325148). The project explored the ways in which some people in Finland embark on learning from what are, for them, new religious and/or spiritual practices. While some individuals may merely dip their toes in the waters of interesting spiritual knowledge and practice, others form longterm commitments and ever-deepening learning trajectories that may lead to serious engagements or even full conversion. Our research participants and interlocutors told us stories about seeking and finding something new in their lives from what, for them, was a new religion or spirituality. They sought and found something valuable and different from what they had received in formal and mostly secular learning or in their childhood religious upbringing and socialization. In our research cases, they learned from the fields of both new spirituality and more traditional religions (LeNeRe blog).

Learning is often regarded in very positive terms, and so it was for our interlocutors too. As bell hooks (1994) has shown,

learning and teaching may even provide solutions in situations of inequality through liberative pedagogies that help to collectively imagine ways to transgress and move beyond oppressive boundaries. Research should, however, also pose critical questions related to religion and learning, and ask, for example, whose is the religion being learned, who is learning and what is the purpose of learning, as well as who has the privilege and resources to learn religion and spirituality (and from whom)? Through these kinds of questions, we can see that the keen interest in learning from religious and spiritual practices and the enthusiasm for transferring that learning to one's daily life, in the form of coping or enchanting cultural tools (Swidler 1986), may point to issues pertaining not only to appreciation but also to appropriation. When learning from religion that is not one's own, one is simultaneously often not simply borrowing but also in some ways using for one's own ends elements of other people's (sacred) traditions or taking on the role of an expert who represents the tradition of others – and often without asking for consent. The ethical and political issues of representation are often also related to racial and economic inequalities, as thoroughly discussed by Amanda Lucia in her book *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020).

Notwithstanding, it may be too naïve and simplistic just to turn the coin and choose to emphasize the flip-side so as to see reckless appropriation instead of sympathetic curiosity and appreciation, as Lucia also reflects on when analysing the layers of uses and understandings of yoga in the context of transformational festivals. Our diversified and globalized contemporary societies may already be so irrevocably complex that the entanglements of

appreciation and appropriation cannot be resolved through any simple categories or policies. Instead, we should develop better and a more subtle discernment of actors, motives, goals, means, (often troubled) histories, and contexts case by case.

In the course of our project, we were confronted with and interested in the above dilemmas, and encountered Liz Bucar's new book *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation* (2022). Bucar here approaches the question of appropriation of religion through three case studies, two of them directly bearing on the theme of learning. One of the cases discusses study trips to the Catholic pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela and the experiential learning methods used in order to enable the students, coming from various religious and non-religious backgrounds, to understand and appreciate the pilgrimage experience. The other case is yoga courses and teaching and the ways they draw on Asian traditions while often downplaying the spiritual aspects that are not the focus of interest of many secular practitioners seeking personal well-being.

Instead of straightforward answers or simple recommendations as to what to do with or how to think about the examples discussed or similar ones, Bucar challenges us to think relentlessly, to ask more questions, to reflect and seek more knowledge about the often complex historical, cultural, social and existential issues related to religion. Her suggestion, consequently, is that instead of refraining from engaging with foreign or new cultures and traditions, we should perhaps instead borrow 'more'. This entails more responsible and ethical borrowing and learning that engages with different issues and topics relevant for various cultures of origin. In this way appropriation may push us to learn more. Some of the authors for our special issue, from the

different positions that are rooted in their case studies, engage with Bucar. We are extremely happy that Liz Bucar accepted our invitation to provide an epilogue to our special issue and in this way continue the discussion.

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Together, the articles paint a picture of the complex and ambiguous discussions that are actualized in intersections of appropriation and religion. Instead of providing proof for or against appropriation of different religious traditions *per se*, we wish to provide insights into how this topical societal, political and academic debate affects the practice and research of religion and spirituality. Moreover, we consider appropriation as an effective viewpoint that can help to uncover injustices and structural inequalities, as well as the varying and sometimes conflicting (majority and minority) positions and interpretations involved, that might affect the practice of religion on various levels. The articles also display the multifarious and even paradoxical roles that religion and spirituality can have in relation to appropriation. While religious or spiritual traditions (such as, for example, their symbols, rituals or aesthetic expressions) can become appropriated, and religious actors and institutions can also act as appropriators. It is also possible that 'religion' and 'secularity', in many ways value-laden cultural and discursive categories, play roles in processes of potential allegations of appropriation.

The issue opens with **Tero Heinonen's** article, taking the reader to the intersection of two important but not equally powerful cultural systems in a trans-national context: indigenous religious traditions and tourism. He focuses on the practice and re-interpretation of ayahuasca and cacao ceremonies among Finns travelling

for meaningful spiritual experiences. Heinonen illustrates the central position of emotions and embodied expressions when contemporary Finns engage in these practices. In relation to cultural appropriation, this shows how religious traditions can become modified and utilized for the individualistic spiritual well-being needs of modern-day westerners.

Helen Cornish addresses confrontations with allegations of appropriation among modern witches. Her article pays attention to the colonial past of witchcraft and how modern British witches express anxieties over questions of appropriation and practice of ethical witchcraft. Cornish concludes that Liz Bucar's recommendations towards more aware borrowing are not easily applied to the case of contemporary witchcraft, as the process is not merely a question of appropriating things or ideas, but instead brings up the difficult question of how to navigate unethical practices of people in the past that have shaped present-day activities.

Viliina Silvonen's and **Kati Kallio's** article deals with the very entangled disputes about the ownership of the tradition of Karelian laments in present-day Finland. Besides questions of ownership, the debate on a broader level brings up issues of minority rights, ethnic identities and the status of the Karelian language in Finland. The authors argue that at the heart of the dispute lie disagreements over what such oral (and sometimes sacred) traditions as the laments are, who owns them and what can be done with them. The authors conclude that for Karelian activists the debate about laments relates to questions of structural injustice and the rights of Karelian language speakers and the Karelian minority in general.

Albion Butters addresses the use of pagan visual symbols for fascist purposes,

and minutely analyses how the Nordic alt-right has appropriated religious symbols for their purposes. The investigation provides insights into how religious symbols can be appropriated for political and racist purposes, and how this is both a historical and contemporary issue. One common threat in the appropriation of the symbols discussed is that their use reflects varying shades of whiteness in a genealogical process that Butters calls ‘meta-appropriation.’

Appropriation very often relates to power relations between majority and minority religious positions. **Milena Parland’s** article discusses the form of appropriation within the Finnish school institution from the perspective of critical race theory. Her analysis suggests and experiments with an interesting perspective of ‘fraudulent appropriation’, to capture a specific form of misrepresentation that may occur when people outside minority religions take on the authoritative role of experts in religious education.

Sometimes appropriation becomes tightly entangled with questions of inter- and intra-religious borrowing. **Jip Lensink’s** article, based on ethnographic fieldwork and a material religion approach, confronts the reader with issues in the context of the interesting case of the Indonesian Moluccan minority within and outside the Netherlands. She focuses on different generations and their (re)interpretations of religion in the Moluccan Protestant church from the perspectives of ‘practices of appropriation’ that in her understanding are not easily distinguished from borrowing.

Finally, the article by **Marcus Moberg** and **Tommy Ramstedt** delves into appropriations of mindfulness practices within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). Focus is thus on the ways in which a majority religion makes use of a relatively new spiritual practice. The authors

point to four ways of justifying mindfulness within the context of the ELCF: disassociating mindfulness from its Buddhist roots, underlining the scientific validity of the practice (and thus disconnecting it from the category of religion), emphasizing the wide popularity of mindfulness in Finland, and ‘Christianization’ of the practice. They conclude that the case of mindfulness within ELCF constitutes a particular form of ‘appropriation from religion *into* religion’, thus pointing at intriguing power dynamics in the contemporary religious field in the Nordic context.

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As this collection of articles illustrates, the topic of appropriation infiltrates a large variety of religious and spiritual traditions, practices and perspectives. Many of the discussions presented here relate to issues of structural equality as well as minority rights and majority privilege. However, they also provide us with knowledge of the highly complex and ambiguous nature of the topic of cultural appropriation, and especially how this comes to be expressed in religious and spiritual contexts or in ways related to religion and spirituality. Relations between the desire to learn, curiosity, admiration and harmful appropriation are at times separated by a delicate, fine line. As we noticed, appropriation (within the religious sphere) quite frequently also relates to aspects of seeking new knowledge and learning, when questions of borrowing, ownership and representation appear as people engage in, for them, new and previously largely unfamiliar traditions.

Even if appropriation is sometimes considered merely a buzzword, we think it still needs to be discussed in the study of religion. It is our hope that this special issue, with its variety of case studies and perspectives, can help to bring forth the need for

scholars of religion to engage with the topic, both on the level of the objects of our studies, and also as an obligation to promote sustainable ethical science and scholarship. The concept is challenging, at times even provocative, and demands the difficult task of self-reflection and evaluation of various kinds of privileged positions and power relations. As the Finnish activist Maryam Abdulkarim proposes in her forewords to the Finnish translation of Reni Eddo-Lodge's book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, people in majority positions should pause at feelings of discomfort that discussions about minority rights might induce. This thematic issue is an attempt to do so, to stop and consider such challenging and demanding questions that the perspective of appropriation might give rise to in relation to learning about and from religious traditions in modern societies. ■

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in Finland. Her doctoral thesis, *Med fötterna på marken och huvudet i himlen: En ritualeoretisk studie av schamanistiska och västafrikanska trumverksamheter i Finländska städer* (Åbo Akademi University, 2017), studied the practice of drumming as a ritual in neoshamanistic and West African drum circles, as they are performed in present-day Finland.

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