

# Perspectives on Lived Religion and Lived Theology

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This thematic issue brings together current research focused on lived religion and/or lived theology. Several of the articles have been developed from papers presented at the national Research Conference in Theology and Religion held in Turku/Åbo in May 2024. The articles explore diverse possibilities of lived perspectives in current research, build on previous literature and critically challenge some of their assumptions. They highlight both the necessity of this perspective and the need for continued theoretical and methodological development.

The national Research Conference in Theology and Religion (TUTP)—with the theme “Traditions and transitions. Milestones and continuities”—was held in Turku/ Åbo, May 22–24, 2024. TUTP was organized collaboratively by Finnish learned associations in the field of theology and the study of religions in co-operation with the Polin Institute. The conference offered several interesting sessions and papers. A recurring theme in many papers was a focus on lived religion and the less explored topic of lived theology. This thematic issue of *Approaching Religion* brings together four peer-reviewed articles and a reflection piece, each addressing important aspects of lived religion or lived theology.

The articles in this thematic issue present somewhat different understandings of lived religion and lived theology and bring many noteworthy perspectives to bear on current research in theology and the study of religion. Though Nancy Ammerman’s seminal work is of interest to many of the projects presented, other viewpoints too are sought and the need to continue developing the ideas provided by Ammerman and others is emphasized. However, in line with Ammerman, all the contributions highlight what a lived perspective allows us to see: aspects of religious life that traditional methods and focus areas easily miss and risk ignoring.

Religious life is often so deeply entangled with everyday practices that it challenges conventional research frameworks. Recent understandings of religion have been shaped by what Nancy Ammerman calls lived religion and what Peter Berger describes as the sacred canopy. The articles published in this issue challenge us to pay close attention to the “lived” from different perspectives. Lived religion does not always fit neatly within the established religious canopy and thus challenges researchers to recognize the limits of what traditional

approaches can capture. Among indigenous communities, for instance, lived religion may take diverse and shifting forms. In addition, the challenges brought by migration create openings for new and evolving expressions of lived religion. The parallel between lived religion and lived theology highlights how both fields can learn from each other. This parallel also points to the value of interdisciplinary approaches in studying the “lived”, whether in theology or the study of religion. Their shared interest in everyday life offers a promising path for interdisciplinary collaboration and opens new opportunities for continued theoretical and methodological development.

A recurring theme in the different articles in this issue is the focus on relationships and how religion is intertwined with relations in various ways. Sometimes, it is a matter of broken relationships, and sometimes a matter of healing relationships. At times, it is a matter of a lack of relationships and isolation, and how religion can become a coping mechanism in such situations. At other times, it is a matter of power relations and how the discussion of lived religion/lived theology is affected by positions of power between researchers and the researched. Furthermore, religion is entangled in relationships on various levels. Relationships within the immediate family (parents, siblings, spouses, children, older relatives, etc.); relationships within a faith community and with its leaders, or how to become incorporated into a new community; relationships with the environment and the natural world; and relationships with spiritual beings, ancestors and God. Relations on a social and political level also affect and are affected by lived religion / lived theology. Relations between migrants

and their new country, relations with government officials, and between religious, social and ethnic groups within a society. The articles together make a strong case for non-compartmentalization. There is no way one can understand religion and theology in the lived experience without taking seriously the complex web of relationships within which people and communities live.

A growing body of scholarship has come to explore the conversion to Christianity of asylum seekers who arrived in Europe since 2015. **Iiona Blumgrund** takes on this subject from a lived religion and practice-theory perspective and sheds light on the lived experience of conversion to Christianity during the asylum process. Blumgrund’s study is based on in-depth interviews with five Christian converts granted refugee status in Finland. The analysis illustrates the importance of material objects and places, spiritual beings, social relations and religious freedom during the path to conversion. Blumgrund’s findings are contrasted with the emphasis on individualistic and spiritual motives often highlighted by asylum officials in previous research. The study underlines how non-doctrinal and doctrinal dimensions of conversion should not be separated. Her study leads Blumgrund to argue for a holistic understanding of Christianity that allows for God’s work to go far beyond doctrinal ideas and to include different aspects of life, both material and non-material.

**Mitra Härkönen**’s article turns the focus on Thai women living in Finland. Härkönen addresses a gap in research relating to Thai women’s perspectives on the challenges they face in a new environment, explored specifically through the lens of Buddhism. Existing literature has often

depicted Thai women in Western countries from a critical and problematizing perspective. This study offers a more complex understanding of Thai women living in Finland by exploring the intersection of gender, religion and ethnicity. Härkönen's research is based on fieldwork in Thai temples and life-story interviews with thirteen women. The study explores themes of suffering, coping mechanisms, and the role of lived religion in navigating personal meaning and community among the research participants. The Buddhist concept of *dukkha* (suffering) is essential and informs the participants' understanding of life's challenges and their efforts to alleviate suffering via religious practices.

Despite documented information on the involvement of different religious traditions in the work against xenophobia in South Africa, research has largely focused on Christianity. **Clementine Nishimwe's** and **George Nche's** study broadens the scope and includes interviews with participants from Christianity, Islam and African religion/spirituality residing in Soweto in South Africa. An analysis of the interviews highlights an inconsistency between the religious perceptions that people hold, and how these perceptions are translated in the contextual experience of migration in South Africa. There are different ways of understanding these discrepancies in the lived experiences of the participants. From the epistemology of the research participants such discrepancy can be regarded as a form of agency in response to the socio-economic disparity existing in South Africa.

Marojejy National Park in north-eastern Madagascar was established in 1998. To make the park economically sustainable, farmers living nearby were recruited

to ecotourism activities. Using a lived religion approach, **Jenni Mölkänen** explores the worldviews of these rural farmers, illustrating the role and importance of spirits in how they experience the environment. The environments of the rural farmers examined here are inhabited by different spirits. These spirits require people's attention in ordinary life. A lived religion approach illustrates that mundane issues can have religious dimensions. The ability to act correctly in the environment informs rural farmers' long-term presence in these environments and their claim on natural resources. Mölkänen's study argues that as scholars we must not dismiss people's experiences, for example of spirits, as irrational. The experiences can have real effects that concretely shape the lives of those we study and aim to understand.

This thematic issue is concluded by **Martina Björkander's** reflective article on lived theology. Björkander discusses the still rather underdeveloped area of lived theology and suggests a theoretical framework for it. This framework includes seeing lived theology as a particular understanding of the nature of theology, as a scholarly enterprise and as a vision for a better world. Björkander argues that we must see lived theology as a living practice and pay attention to the living and the lived. A lived theology perspective allows us to strive for a theology that is both life-giving and life-affirming. ■

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Docent of Practical theology, is a post-doctoral researcher at the Polin Institute, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. She earned a doctoral degree in global Christianity with inter-religious relations at Lund University, Sweden, in 2021. Her thesis was later transformed into a research monograph published by Brill: *Worship, Ritual, and Pentecostal Spirituality-as-Theology: A Rhythm that Connects our Hearts with God* (2024). Her research interests span various aspects of Pentecostal theology, spirituality and mission, especially as they play out in East Africa and the Nordic countries, as well as ritual studies, liturgics, ethnography and empirical research methods in theology.



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