

**Tommy Ramstedt:** *Knowledge and Identity within the Finnish Fringe-Knowledge Scene*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi University, 2018, 273 pp.

The theme of Tommy Ramstedt's doctoral thesis is the fringe knowledge milieu in Finland. The Finnish concept, *rajatieto*, coined in the 1970s, includes diverse phenomena connected especially with parapsychology, ufology, and esoteric currents. The fringe knowledge milieu is kept together by a number of events, magazines, and associations, and represents worldviews and ideas which are seen as strange by mainstream society.

Ramstedt aims to identify its most important media, events, and leading participants, and to observe how fringe knowledge is meaningfully constructed and becomes part of personal identity (pp. 7-8). The study is based on semi-structured interviews, magazines, and participant observations. Because the Fringe Knowledge scene is about alternative knowledge and spirituality, Ramstedt applies theoretical concepts derived from studies of alternative religion such as 'cultic milieu' (Colin Campbell), 'rejected knowledge' (James Webb), and 'stigmatized knowledge' (Michael Barkun) to illuminate his material (p. 70). Ramstedt is well read in the scholarly literature, and while he draws on several theoretical perspectives in his work, the most important perspective comes from his use of the concept 'scene'.

The concept has earlier been applied by Marcus Moberg (The Concept of Scene and its Applicability in Empirical Grounded Research on the Intersection of Religion/Spirituality and Popular Music, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 (3) (2011): 403-17) and by Ramstedt with Moberg (Re-contextualizing the Framework of Scene for the Empirical Study of Post-Institutional Religious Spaces in Practice, *Fieldwork in Religion* 10 (2) (2015): 155-72). How does the concept of scene work in the thesis? According to the author scene is 'a systematic way by which one can approach, map, and study alternative religious spaces in practice' (p. 55). The approach includes analysing the internal discursive construction of the scene, its external discursive construction, and the aesthetic of the scenic construction. An important point, Ramstedt suggests, is that this framework does not pre-theorize its object of study. This means that scene in the thesis is a general methodological framework which keeps the other theoretical tools and approaches together. Scene is thus applied more as a perspective than a theory. Structural, material, spatial, aesthetic, and discursive elements are seen as interconnected building blocks which together constitute the scene. The concept of discourse is applied and connected to the scene perspective and treated as an integral part of the framework.

Ramstedt constructs an overview of the culture of late modernity, presents the religious landscape of Finland, and analyses the prac-

tices and values of the readers of the magazine *Ultra*, before presenting 'scenic structure' and 'scenic capital'. Scenic structure consists of the infrastructure of associations, media, and events; scenic capital is the merit and importance attributed to leading people within the scene (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5, which is the longest in the thesis, the author discusses how the members of the scene discursively construct the phenomenon of fringe knowledge, and their personal and group identities. This implies that we can see how people talk about this knowledge, what the focus is in lectures and events, and how fringe knowledge is described in magazines. An important point is that fringe knowledge is constructed as a different kind of knowledge from the knowledge of scientific society – more in line with traditional religious ideas about the meaning of life and life after death. In this milieu there is an ambivalent relationship with science (p. 176ff.) and an interest in parts of popular culture such as science fiction and books like *The da Vinci Code* (p. 190ff.).

Like other contemporary loosely organized groups, the stress is on individualism and being eclectic at the same time as the fringe knowledge milieu is kept together by a certain like-mindedness. This is an ambiguity which is well known in New Age religion and alternative religion in general. Books and reading play an important role, and Ramstedt comments that one 'could thus talk about a form of armchair religiosity,

where the main activity consists of reading different books about Fringe-Knowledge phenomena' (p. 160). There are also bodily enactments in the form of meditation and sometimes in the form of dancing and walking, a sort of 'enactment of discourse' (p. 164). In addition to the concept of the authority of the individual, another concept, generally shared by the participants, concerns perennialism – that religions at their core contain a common universal truth (p. 166). The Indian concept of the world as an illusion or dream is also present (p. 167), as are millennial expectations connected with a new age (p. 205ff.). The internal discursive construction of the fringe knowledge scene is further shaped by how other people see the participants, referred to as the external discursive construction of the scene. The participants share a sense of being rejected by mainstream society, which contributes to the strengthening of their sense of unity and the creation of a feeling of belonging to an elite. Ramstedt describes this phenomenon as 'receiving authority through rejection' (p. 234).

Ramstedt succeeds in presenting an interesting analysis of the fringe knowledge milieu in Finland, and his application of the scene perspective helps to shed new light on the phenomenon. One of the benefits of the perspective is that it affords a more holistic and comprehensive picture of this milieu. Similar milieus exist in other countries. They are partly a result of the decline of institutional organized religion and

of a general weakening of religious authority structures. What is unique to Finland is that a particular concept has been coined to describe this phenomenon, *rajatieto*, which probably also contributes to the phenomenon having a stronger unity. The book will be an inspiration to those who want to study fringe knowledge scenes in other countries, as well as to those who want to study loosely organized religious milieus more generally.

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