



## Book Review

**Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos (eds):** *Indigenous Religious Traditions in 5 Minutes*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2022, 278 pp.

In the academic study of religion disputes about what makes certain practices religious and religions have been prevalent since the emergence of the discipline. Yet few compare to the challenge scholars face when attempting to categorize practices of Indigenous peoples and define Indigenous religions. *Indigenous Religious Traditions in 5 Minutes* is an ambitious initiative to tackle some of the trickiest questions in the field, and it has resulted in an excellent and accessible compilation edited by Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos. Much like other volumes from the *Religion in 5 Minutes* book series by Equinox Publishing, the volume addresses a range of typical and topical questions in the field. Many of the featured questions would stun even the most seasoned scholars. Were all religions at one time 'Indigenous'? Is an academic approach to Indigenous Religions innately colonizing? Do Indigenous peoples have 'gods'? Nevertheless, each question is carefully approached with reflexivity, depth, and complexity, impressively maintaining the clarity required by the five-minute limit.

From the outset Bassett and Avalos recognize the problem of terminology. The preference for using 'Indigenous religious traditions' instead of 'Indigenous Religions' is

articulated in the first chapter by Tisa Wenger (pp. 3–5), who argues that 'religion' as a product of specific European histories has never been a comfortable fit for Indigenous practices, and that 'religious traditions' signals this categorical misfit. The complicated coinage of 'Indigenous' and 'religion' is further explored by the authors in the first block of chapters, 'Indigeneity and Religion'. Here readers are introduced to approaches warning of the dangers of using religion in describing Indigenous practices in some contexts, as well as recognizing its usefulness in others. The word 'traditions' does not escape scrutiny either and is similarly approached with caution. My main question about the volume was why 'traditions' was chosen over 'practices'. I find the most compelling argument for this choice in Greg Johnson's (pp. 31–33) chapter and his argument that traditions 'entail continuity' yet are 'dynamic, flexible, and sometimes radically innovative'. The main reason for the delicate nature of such categorizations, as the editors acknowledge, is the racist colonial legacy of academic work *on* Indigenous communities (p. xv), which has only recently changed to work *with* and *by* Indigenous peoples.

Within a few decades Indigenous peoples have gained access to academic institutions not as objects of study to be measured, documented, and tested on, but as students, researchers, and lecturers. Despite

their relatively recent entry into academia and other public institutions, Indigenous peoples have already catalysed a paradigm shift, positioning themselves at the forefront of decolonizing movements with other communities subjected to colonizing missions. The impact of these initiatives is demonstrated by the presence of voices from Native and Indigenous elders and scholars in the book, who point out how eurochristian systems are deeply rooted and universalized in academia (see George 'Tink' E. Tinker, p. 199), an especially important reminder to all scholars of religion.

The format of the book, consisting of 84 chapters, each intended to be read within five minutes, could easily have resulted in a series of generalizations or failed adequately to address the set questions. In nearly all the chapters, however, the authors have managed to answer immediately and without resorting to overt simplifications. For example, Edward Anthony Polanco (p. 101), in responding to 'Do Native peoples have shamans?', begins his chapter with a straightforward 'no', before proceeding to contextualize his response and presenting a variety of terms (e.g. *curandero*, *didanowiski*, *pejuta wicasa*, *tepahtiani*) used by Indigenous communities in the Americas to describe practitioners categorized as shamans by scholars.

In addition to its accessibility and scope of themes the book's strength lies in its richness of conceptual tools rooted in critical theories and methodologies, including but not

limited to the critical study of religion, Indigenous methodologies, feminist and Queer studies, the critical study of race, and decolonial methodologies. Re(telling), unlearning, (his)tory, eurochristianity, lifeways, two-spirit, *nagual*, other-than-human, larger-than-human, more-than-human, and many other conceptual tools featured in the book are important interventions in established limiting, though universalized, terminologies in academia. This allows readers to enrich their conceptual vocabularies, as well as to reflect on the limits and locality of standardized eurocentric binaries (e.g. human and nature, religion and secular) and concepts (e.g. religion, animism, gender, disability).

It is important to note that entanglements between Indigenous practices and missionizing religious institutions have been explored in the book with an understanding of colonial histories, while acknowledging that most Indigenous people identify themselves with Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and other proselytizing religions (see Bjørn Ola Tafjord's chapter on pp. 28–30). While several chapters explore the role of Christian churches in Indigenous contexts and Indigenous Christianities (see pp. 177–178, 196–197, 226–227), there could have been more focus on the relations of Indigenous practices with other religious institutions, particularly beyond the Americas.

This brings us to another limitation of the volume, namely its geographical scope, which pre-

dominantly centres on the Americas. There are only a couple of chapters discussing Indigenous religious traditions on the Asian and African continents. Contributions focusing on Arctic Indigenous practices are entirely missing, as are those from the Māori and Indigenous Australian contexts. The inclusion of perspectives from the Sámi, Kalaallit, Inupiat, Māori, Indigenous Australian, Sakha, Evenki, Tuvan, Buryat, Ainu, and many other Indigenous peoples worldwide would have further enriched the book. It is understandable, however, that covering such a variety of cases in one volume would scarcely be feasible.

Overall, the book offers a unique and accessible though theoretically grounded and informed overview of Indigenous religious traditions. Above all it is a great resource for students, researchers, and the general public alike, offering an engaging introduction to the field. Navigating the dynamic landscape of Indigenous religious traditions can be challenging even for the most experienced scholars, making this book a helpful guide for understanding an ever-evolving field, especially if one has a spare five minutes here and there.

**Liudmila Nikanorova**

The Open University, UK

LIUDMILA NIKANOROVA, PhD, is University Lecturer in Indigenous Religions at the Open University, UK. Email: liudmila.nikanorova@open.ac.uk