

**Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck:** *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2015, 193pp.

In *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context*, by Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck (2015), the authors focus on contemporary religiosity in the rural county of Dalarna in Sweden. In the history of 'project Sweden' Dalarna has a special place. As a projection surface for the construction of Swedishness its landscape, traditions, and people have played an important role and continue to do so. Dalarna has become both the ideal and the symbol of national culture, values, and traditional heritage. In the Swedish context everything that happens in Dalarna is of great symbolic value.

At the forefront of Frisk and Åkerbäck's interest lie expressions and arenas within the cultural field, inspired by religious studies scholar Steven Sutcliffe, which they call 'popular religious milieus'. The term popular religion in this understanding denotes a wide range of religious elements beyond those of the established churches. It points to the non-hegemonic, unofficial character of disparate expressions ranging from healing, séances, astrology, energy massage, life coaching, to courses of different kinds. In other research literature this field is often referred to as 'new age', (new) 'spirituality', or a 'holistic milieu'.

The arena in focus is delimit-

ated and described by Jonathan Z. Smith's spatial categorisation as religion *anywhere*, meaning as expressed in the space between religion *there* (the established churches) and *here* (privatised religion). Religion anywhere is expressed by businesses, associations, and societies in places other than temples or churches, as in health centres and gyms, for example. This approach takes the idea seriously that popular religiosity is mainly expressed outside the conventional venues of religious practice.

*New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden* ties into many of the ongoing theoretical discussions concerning the parameters of the field of religious studies, as well as that of appropriate terminology for these kinds of 'fuzzy' phenomena. I read this work as part of the scholarship that critiques the theoretical logics of secularisation – logics that disregard, for example, the circulation and reproduction of religious meanings, interpretations, and imaginations in spaces and/or people often thought of as secular.

The study engages with a number of arenas and activities that cannot easily be categorised as religious or secular, such as mindfulness, yoga, and Waldorf schools. Hence, methodological considerations play an important role, as the demarcation of the area of research is in no sense clear-cut. This becomes important for reasons of comparison between different contexts, which is particularly obvious in chapter four, when the study is juxtaposed

with other local mapping studies, and the challenge of comparing the results from Dalarna to other regions is addressed.

The methodological considerations in this book are conscientious to say the least, and a critical discussion about terms and categorisations recurs throughout. This groundwork of thinking through the challenge of studying popular religious milieus is an important and valid contribution to the scholarship on contemporary religiosity.

Frisk and Åkerbäck's main contribution, however, is an empirical one. By focusing on social contexts where answers to existential questions or super-empirical beliefs are offered, the authors map the religious landscape of Dalarna. Here they present both church-oriented expressions and established religions, as well as more ambiguous expressions, from religious arenas ranging from commercial enterprises to associations and retreat centers. Their survey of the people and organisations that establish and organise various kinds of religious meetings, sessions, and courses is of great interest. Here they offer a wide range of examples that raise questions about the suitability of cultural demarcations and categorisations that rely on a strict separation between religious and secular spheres and practices. Indeed, Frisk and Åkerbäck bring new and fascinating material to the fore and make a substantial empirical contribution to the discussion of the role and expression of religion in contemporary Sweden.

The study focuses on the producers within popular religious milieus, but a quantitative estimate of the numbers of consumers of popular religion in Dalarna is also included. In this discussion it is worth mentioning that the figures for church attendance in Sweden are extremely low by international standards. In a nationwide survey in 2000 attendance at organised religious gatherings was as low as six per cent on an average weekend. With regard to participation and involvement in popular religious activities Frisk and Åkerbäck estimate that 2.7 per cent of the population between 20 and 64 are active in this milieu.

*New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden* also contains chapters providing cases that exemplify various aspects of religious change in Dalarna. In chapter six mindfulness is presented as an example of a once religious phenomenon that has migrated to the secular sphere. In chapter seven responses to religious pluralism within the Church of Sweden are discussed as an example of the obliteration of sharp divisions between official and popular religious elements. One of the main conclusions that Frisk and Åkerbäck draw from their material is that in the venues in which popular religion is played out in contemporary Dalarna, such as the beauty salon where you can both have your hair cut and your aura read, categorisations of 'the religious' and 'the secular' are superfluous and even misrepresentative. These Swedes are simply unconcerned

with traditional boundaries between the secular and the religious, the mainstream and the alternative, as these are performed as if intertwined. In the popular religious milieus and the new religious arenas that are emerging in Dalarna they see evidence of what has been observed in other parts of the world, namely that people cross borders between denominations with apparent ease, that ideology is downplayed in favour of inner experiences, that secular and religious activities are staged side by side, and that defining practices, ideas, or people as either religious or secular seems irrelevant to many people today. Hence, Frisk and Åkerbäck emphasise that an important part of the process of religious change is that distinctions between the religious and secular are becoming less obvious and less significant.

This result encourages us to think about alternative sets of questions for scholars attempting to understand the contemporary religious landscape in general. Here Frisk and Åkerbäck suggest that instead of maintaining boundaries between milieus that in binary terms are regarded as separate, one step forward might be to conduct transboundary or thematically based research, for example, by focusing on particular phenomena such as healing, charisma, or relationships with ancestors. In this way the notion of religion or the need to construct religious milieus might be side-stepped.

The ambition of this project was to investigate what contemporary

religious expressions look like, to estimate how many people are involved in this milieu, and why contemporary religion is expressed in the manner and form that it is. I read their final chapters, in which they talk about the popular religious milieus as affected by/an effect of the converging processes of globalisation, secularisation, and individualisation as the beginning of a discussion of the equally important question: how are such processes played out in the context of Dalarna? With *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden* Frisk and Åkerbäck have laid a solid foundation for further investigations of the specifics of secularity and religiosity in Sweden and for comparisons between contexts with differing religious histories.

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