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## Religion and Spirituality as Sites of Learning: Editorial

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# Religion and Spirituality as Sites of Learning

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Learning penetrates religion in many ways. Primary religious socialisation – sometimes referred to as religious nurture – is the process by which children are explicitly and purposefully taught to do things religiously or they learn implicitly by following what their families and other people around them do, speak and feel. In secondary religious socialisation one sets about learning something additional to or different from what was learned and internalised in one's religious or non-religious childhood home and surroundings. Secondary socialisation may also entail processes of unlearning something previously learned in order to grasp and master the skills, ways of thinking and feeling, and discursive habits of the new worldview and context of life. Learning in both primary and secondary socialisation can in some cases turn into a thoroughly religiously informed way of life. Alternatively, religious learning may not always be sufficiently lengthy and committed to result in full socialisation. Many people engage in religion merely in special situations or turning points in life, and after that particular need is over, religion loses its acute significance. Furthermore, religious learning may also have intended or unintended effects and consequences beyond the more strictly bounded religious sphere and may come to be reflected in personal and relational life much more widely. (See Long and Hadden 1983; Sherkat 2003; Collet Sabe 2007; Berliner and Sarró 2008; Erricker, Ota and Erricker 2012; Scourfield et al. 2013; Klingenberg, Sjö and Broo 2019.)

## Religion and learning

Even if learning thus informs and intertwines with religion, it is a phenomenon and perspective that is not often explicitly focused on or thematised in research. The explanation may be that learning is often self-evident or implicit, especially when it takes place outside formal learning structures and institutions. A researcher needs to know how, when and where to look for it. But how then should we understand learning if we want to make it our target in studying religion?

First, there are different levels of formality of learning. Formal learning designates intentional and structured learning within an education or training institution, and non-formal learning similar processes outside such official institutions – often, but not always, having its own less official institutional frames. Informal learning refers to either intentional or non-intentional, non-structured and often implicit learning that occurs as part of daily life (Marsick and Watkins 2001; Rogers 2014). In religious contexts, all three can be found: formal, non-formal and informal learning, and their manifold overlaps. We can think of religious schools, courses, and pastime activities, for example.

Secondly, as Alan Rogers (2014) emphasises, learning can be understood to form a broader and more porous category than education. An important difference is that learning guides scholars to pay attention to more or less intentional processes of change as well as knowledge and skills acquired in various kinds of activities. The framework of learning encourages researchers to take into account learners' points of view (adults as well as children, and individuals as well as collectives) and to study their pursuits in relation to often complex cultural, intersubjective and diversely mediated processes. For scholars of religion this means that we focus on the range of lived or vernacular levels of religious learning, that is, on how learning in the contexts of religion actually takes place and not only how religious institutions – or the outside world – would like, or not like, to see it happen.

Learning is by no means a completely new perspective in the study of religion and spirituality. The seminal collection of anthropological papers edited by David Berliner and Ramon Sarró (2008) provides an excellent starting point and compass by bringing together cases and perspectives of learning in different religious and spiritual traditions and contexts (see also Utraiainen et al. in press). The book emphasises the social context of religious learning, noting that Durkheim wrote that religious conversion is “similar to the transformation all educators try to effect upon their pupils” (in Berliner and Sarró 2008, 5–6). By citing this, Berliner and Sarró suggest that religious conversion, and socialisation more generally, are inherently learning processes that shape worldviews, morality and life-orientations.

The social nature of learning goes beyond the issue of context to include *how* people learn. The principal theorist of this process was Albert Bandura (1971), who

stressed the importance of learning by observing others. Later theorists were to move from observation to participation, with Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), for example, focusing on learning in communities of practice. New learners would not only observe those with experience but would learn by participating as apprentices in the various communities to which they belonged – for work, leisure, religion and so on. This was referred to as situated social learning. Wenger's inventory (1998) included four components: learning as belonging (community), learning as doing (practice), learning as experience (meaning) and learning as becoming (identity), with the “community of practice” being the means to integrate these components. A number of scholars of religion have drawn on Lave and Wenger's work to explore how newcomers, established practitioners and even religious leavers learn and unlearn the beliefs, practices, traditions and experiences appropriate to their stage in the spiritual lifecycle (see, e.g., Lee and Knott 2018, 34–54; Lee and Knott 2021). In this special issue the conception of learning in communities of practice and the broader understanding of social learning has provided a theoretical framework for many of the authors.

### **The research project Learning from New Religion and Spirituality**

The research project Learning from New Religion and Spirituality (LeNeRe), funded by the Research Council of Finland (2019–23), aimed to explore the vernacular and lived worlds of religion and learning in the context of a largely secular contemporary culture. The project also aimed to focus on adults. One starting point was the observation that in a contemporary society such as Finland, learning is one of the most esteemed cultural values. Surveys

indeed show that learning, education and wisdom score very highly among the values of Finns (e.g. Helkama 2015). Learning is conceived of as a precondition for transformation, innovation, flexibility and resilience – and, therefore, the key to both an individual's success in life and the very survival of society and even the ecosystem. Learning also features prominently on the agendas of Finnish governmental agencies that promote Finland as a global expert and model of modern learning. Lifelong learning is presented as a civic responsibility, for instance in the programme of the previous government of Finland, which describes Finland as “a country where one constantly feels like learning something new” (see also *Education in Finland: Key to the Nation's Success*). A similar ethos can increasingly be found in many other contemporary societies globally, and features also in the UNESCO document *Learning, the Treasure Within* – with one sub-heading reading “Learning Throughout Life: The Heartbeat of Society”. However, in policy talk, learning is mostly understood to concern formal learning inside the secular structures of education.

Another starting point was previous research on the contemporary religious landscape by LeNeRe project members. The earlier work and individual projects provided observations that the strong ethos of learning, and an eager will and orientation to learn, could also be seen when adult members of society engaged with what for them were less familiar religious-spiritual communities and practices – such as meditation, shamanic drumming circles, energy healing courses, or conversion processes (Utriainen et al. 2015; Annunen 2017; Utriainen 2019; Husgafvel 2023). Starting from these casual observations in previous individual projects in which learning was not the primary focus, the LeNeRe project

aimed to further explore contemporary religious-spiritual milieus as contexts of learning and to understand processes through which people may want to integrate their religious or spiritual learning in other spheres of life. Furthermore, through a focus on the transferability of religious and spiritual skills and notions, one aim of the project was to open fresh perspectives on two issues: on the dynamics between the “religious”, “spiritual” and “secular” domains of contemporary culture; and on the potential instability and fuzziness of the boundaries between them when looked at through the lens of lived and vernacular forms of learning.

The LeNeRe project constituted five case studies that focused on diverse religions and contemporary spiritualities as sites and sources of learning: 1. learning Tibetan sound healing (Linda Annunen); 2. learning to become (a better) Muslim in the context of Ramadan for both converts and born Muslims (Maija Butters); 3. interest in mindfulness and Buddhist meditation among psychologists, psychotherapists and educators (Ville Husgafvel); 4. learning the first steps in becoming Orthodox Christian (Helena Kupari); 5. engagement in lifelong learning of diverse forms of contemporary spirituality as adults (Terhi Utriainen together with Tiina-Mari Mällinen). As the project was funded during the years affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct in-depth ethnographic research through participant observation to the extent initially planned, but fortunately, it was possible to draw on previous ethnographic research by project members. The most important materials have been long thematic interviews with individuals and small groups conducted both face to face and online, complemented by fresh ethnographic engagement and observation when possible.

Some results of the fourth and fifth case studies can be found in the present special issue (in the articles by Kupari and Utriainen as well as Mällinen and Utriainen) while the results of other cases are published in different forums (Annunen et al. 2022 on new spirituality from the perspective of learning; Annunen and Utriainen 2023a on manuals and other learning materials, and 2023b on learning to experience a new kind of body; Husgafvel and Utriainen 2023 on transreligious learning; Butters and Utriainen (forthcoming) on learning to become a better Muslim). Among shared observations from all the cases was that *a.* religious and spiritual milieus and communities offered a wide variety of attractive social and experiential (often sensuously and emotionally engaging) ways and methods of learning, and that *b.* the interlocutors often used their religious and spiritual learning to complement their other learning achieved in secular educational structures. We also noted that people may wish to learn from religion and spirituality not only for their personal life, but also for work life, though they were not always able to be open about their religious learning, which therefore often remained socially invisible.

Learning is a phenomenon that is often regarded in very positive terms but the interest of the LeNeRe project was also to ponder the more critical aspects. This is reflected in the project's previous special issue "Appropriation as Perspective and Topic in the Study of Religion" (*Approaching Religion* 13, no. 3, 2023) edited by Linda Annunen and Terhi Utriainen. On the basis of the articles in this special issue, we should ask such questions as whose is the religion being learned, who is learning and what is the purpose of learning? Through these questions we can see that the interest to learn from religious and spiritual

practices and the enthusiasm to integrate that learning in one's daily life may sometimes lead us into the deeply entangled issue of appreciation and appropriation much discussed today. In the issue, this thematic was also discussed in the concluding remarks by Liz Bucar, author of the book *Stealing my Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation* (2022).

### Contents of the special issue

The present special issue of *Approaching Religion* is one of the major outcomes of the LeNeRe project and its final conference "Religion and Spirituality as Sites of Learning", organised together with the Donner Institute in May 2023 in Turku/Åbo. The keynote presentations were given by Professors Mulki Al-Sharmani, Kim Knott and David Winchester. In some of the over fifty conference papers learning was a key theme while in others it was an elaborated perspective that drew mostly on the approaches of social learning but also from other theoretical sources such as embodied learning. We are extremely happy to present the thirteen articles and one review that cover topics ranging from the learning of newcomers to committed practitioners as well as those who leave religion altogether. We are also given detailed perspectives, for example, on experiential learning as well as the processes and outcomes of religious and spiritual learning and unlearning.

The contributions to this special issue approach the central theme of learning from a variety of intriguing perspectives. The range of topics is geographically diverse and includes both historical and contemporary forms of religion, spirituality, and non-religion. In terms of research methods and materials, the evident emphasis on ethnographic case studies is complemented with a skilful use of archive, online, and textual sources. The contributions also

help us to understand individuals and communities in different stages of the learning path, whether this means religious newcomers and experimenters, committed spiritual practitioners, or people leaving religion and related process of unlearning and relearning. These different points in the religious-spiritual “life cycle” provide us with a broad organizing principle for the issue as a whole.

In the opening article, **Helena Kupari** and **Terhi Utriainen** explore the learning of newcomers in a Finnish Orthodox Christian community and ask how beginners learn participation in Orthodox liturgical life and related embodied ritual conduct. Their micro-sociological approach draws from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s social-learning theory, and particularly their concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” in conceptualising the initial stages of involvement and inclusion in a religious community. The following article by **Olivia Cejvan** draws on a different aspect of Lave and Wenger’s work and shows how community lore contributes to teaching and learning in the contemporary esoteric society Sodalitas Rosae Crucis (SRC). As part of the ethnographic fieldwork in Sweden, the author herself became a student and initiate of the society. **Reet Hiimäe**’s article, in turn, focuses on a specific form of religious experimentation she terms “hop-on-hop-off spirituality”. Grounding the analysis on Estonian examples, Hiimäe shows the learning value ascribed to such approaches by practitioners themselves and discusses various dynamics of contemporary spirituality conveyed by the term.

**Mulki Al-Sharmani**’s article shifts the focus to committed religious practitioners by examining the use of the Qur’an in the everyday life of Muslim women in Finland and Egypt. Through the analysis of life story

interviews, she shows an intricate interplay between the individual experiences and personal histories of the women and the layered and shifting meanings of Qur’an as daily religious practice. The article by **Tiina-Mari Mällinen** and **Terhi Utriainen** explores long-term commitment and learning in the Neo-Hindu movement of Mātā Amritānandamayī Devi, better known as Mother Amma. Drawing on a variety of ethnographic materials and public documents, they show how pervasive the language and ethos of learning may be in contemporary spiritual contexts, how formal secular education may complement spiritual practice, and what intimate guru–disciple relationships may offer to highly educated Western practitioners. **Emine Neval** investigates recent transformations within the Islamic Hizmet/Gülen movement in its diasporic phase. Through ethnography conducted in Finland, her article shows the importance of informal conversation groups called *sohbet* as spaces for religious learning, social interaction, and affirmation of shared religious identity.

In the next two articles, teachers and educational materials take centre stage. The article by **Katarina Plank**, **Helene Egnell** and **Linnea Lundgren** examines new spiritual practices that are taught and learned within the Church of Sweden. Their rich and topical ethnography concentrates on the framing of these holistic practices, such as yoga and meditation, and on the ritual specialists who teach them. **Robin Isomaa** combines online ethnography and critical discourse analysis to study YouTube atheists as informal teachers who produce educational resources for both an atheist and “potential atheist” public. The article investigates different types of educational videos and focuses on ways of thinking about science, philosophy and religion that the content creators utilise and promote.

The following two articles focus on the history of religious and spiritual educational reforms in their respective social contexts. The article by **Peter Boros** seeks to understand the development of modern Buddhist educational reforms in early-twentieth-century China. The analysis draws on Wenger's social learning theory and focuses on important Buddhist teachers and their communities of practice. Similarly, **Aaron French** concentrates on early-twentieth-century educational reforms and the interplay between individual agency and broader structural changes. His article explores Rudolf Steiner's esoteric Waldorf pedagogy not only as a site of spiritual learning but also as educational resistance against capitalism, materialism and corporatism in Germany after the First World War.

With **Kim Knott's** article, the analytical focus turns to unlearning and the challenges of discarding previously held views and behaviours. The article applies insights from organisational studies to academic and vernacular literature on leaving religion. Through this investigation, Knott shows the potential usefulness of the concept of "unlearning" in the study of religions and also the need for further research. The next article by **Igor Mikeshin** applies the concept of unlearning to an ethnographic study of adult conversion in a Russian Baptist community. Based on his analysis, Mikeshin sees unlearning one's "old sinful ways of living" as an integral part of the conversion process. In the final research article, **Nella van den Brandt** and **Teija Rantala** explore women's struggles to unlearn parts of their former religious belonging in minority Christian traditions. Drawing on extensive interview material from the UK and Finland, they argue that examining gendered, spatial-social and embodied unlearning and relearning

helps us understand these disengagement processes.

In addition to the original research articles, the special issue has a review article by **Yael Dansac**. Here, she presents a synthesis of her previous publications and describes the analytical model of somatic pedagogics based on her ethnographic research on neo-pagan ritual practices held in European megalithic sites.

Taken together, the articles of this special issue present an impressive and intriguing array of insights, conclusions and new questions pertaining the subject at hand: making visible as well as analysing learning and unlearning in the context of religion and spirituality. They form one of the most substantial special issues published throughout the journal's fourteen years of existence, both in size and depth, and aptly illustrate its aim to approach the field of research in its multiplicity, with broad and critical theoretical and methodological implications. We hope these articles will offer valuable resources for students, researchers and teachers – and form vantage points for many new explorations. ■

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and KIM KNOTT  
Guest editors

RUTH ILLMAN  
Editor

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**Terhi Utriainen**, Ph.D., is Professor in the Study of Religion, Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki. She was the leader of the project “Learning from New Religion and Spirituality” (LeNeRe; funded by the Research Council of Finland between 2019 and 2023 [325148]); presently she leads the project “Whose Angels? Art, Research and Enchantment” funded by the Kone Foundation (2023–26). Her research focuses especially on contemporary vernacular religion, religion and gender, and ritual studies. Her recent publications include “Lived Religion Meets Secular Life: The Dynamics of Framing and the Subjunctive Power of Ritual” (*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2020). She is the co-editor of the books *Post-secular Society* (Transaction Publishers, 2012), *Finnish Women Making Religion: Between Ancestors and Angels* (Palgrave, 2014) and *The Relational Dynamics of Enchantment and Sacralization: Changing the Terms of the Religion Versus Secularity Debate* (Equinox Publishing, 2017).



**Ville Husgafvel**, Ph.D., is a post-doctoral researcher in the study of religions at the University of Helsinki. His doctoral dissertation “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as a Post-Buddhist Tradition of Meditation Practice” (University of Helsinki, 2023) explored the recontextualisation of Buddhist meditation in contemporary mindfulness-based programmes. In the project “Learning from New Religion and Spirituality” (funded by the Research Council of Finland, 2019–23), he studied the mindfulness-related learning trajectories of Finnish psychologists and psychotherapists. Current research interests include the modern history of mindfulness and the application of contemplative pedagogy in ecosocial education. Open access publications: “Contemporary Mindfulness and Transreligious Learning Paths of Mental Health Professionals” (*Religions*, 2023), “The ‘Universal Dharma Foundation’ of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction:

Non-duality and Mahāyāna Buddhist Influences in the Work of Jon Kabat-Zinn” (*Contemporary Buddhism*, 2018), “On the Buddhist Roots of Contemporary Non-Religious Mindfulness Practice: Moving Beyond Sectarian and Essentialist Approaches” (*Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 2016).



**Kim Knott** is Professor Emerita at Lancaster University, UK, and President of the European Association for the Study of Religions. Her research interests include religion, space and place; the “secular sacred”; transmission and learning; and religion, migration and diasporas. Recent work on ideological transmission and learning (with B. Lee) is published in *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2021) and *Politics, Religion and Ideology* (2020).

Dr **Ruth Illman** is the Director of the Donner Institute for Research in Religion and Culture in Turku, Finland. She holds the title of docent in the study of religions at Åbo Akademi University and in the history of religions at Uppsala University, as well as doctoral degrees in the study of religions (2004) and Jewish studies (2018). Her main research interests include cultural encounters and diversity, contemporary Judaism, religion and the arts (especially music) and ethnographic research, primarily by developing the analytical approach of vernacular religion. **Website**. Photo: Linda Svarfvar.



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