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Is appropriation a useful category for scholarship on religion?

Concluding remarks

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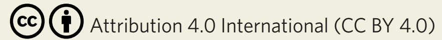
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Let me start by thanking the editors for the invitation to write this epilogue for this special issue of *Approaching Religion*, in which several scholars consider widely different case studies, using the framework of appropriation to see what we might learn. In general, as I argued in my book *Stealing My Religion* (2022), I think appropriation can be a useful concept for religious studies. Appropriation is prominent in public ethical debates about popular culture right now as a way to identify types of cultural borrowing that cause some sort of harm or exploitation. And yet religious appropriations in most forms seem to get a pass. Even as moral outrage over racial or ethnic appropriation is increasingly common, religious borrowing is accepted or even encouraged. This is especially true of spiritual seekers – as Tero Heinonen's article on religious tourism shows – who are suspicious of 'organized religion' and think personal curation of religious practice severed from religious institutions, hierarchies, and doctrines is the only way to be religiously engaged and still free. Individuals who are themselves religiously affiliated also presume they can adopt religious practices without bad consequences – as Jip Lensink's article discusses in respect to practices of appropriation in the Moluccan Protestant church. And I think the exercise of analysing religious appropriation might well teach us something about the utility and limits of appropriation, as well as something about the categories of religion and spirituality themselves.

Let's start with a working definition in case the topic of appropriation is itself still fuzzy to the reader. I like to distinguish religious borrowing in general from a type of more fraught religious borrowing, mainly religious appropriation. What the two have in common is partially present in the engagement with a religious tradition or community by a borrower who is an 'outsider' (often by their own admission) of said tradition/community. Sometimes this borrowing is justified by perennialism – an ideology based on the assumption that all religions have the same core, religious differences and are arbitrary cultural or historical 'quirks', and thus all religious ideas and practices can be adopted and recombined at will. And at the very least, borrowing religion as an outsider depends on the belief that religious practices can be easily severed from religious beliefs so that we can engage in said practices as therapeutic techniques or artistic expressions, and so on, without adopting or even understanding

the doctrines, systems of values, structures of authority, or institutions associated with religion.

The characteristic that separates 'appropriation' from other forms of 'borrowing' is the bad outcomes of the former: not only financial exploitation by other forms of harm and offense such as reinforcing existing inequities, erasing histories, taking on the role of expert of the tradition of others, or even changing the meaning of a practice for religious believers. And these outcomes can't be determined by intention alone. The best way to see if there is a form of exploitation or harm that would justify categorizing a form of religious borrowing as appropriation is determining if the borrowing depends on or exacerbates what the late philosopher Iris Young (1990: 38–65) called systems of structural injustice, such as orientalism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and so on. This is one of the biggest payoffs to considering religious phenomena within the framework of appropriation: it primes us to think of religious borrowing as potentially ethically fraught and encourages us to understand larger social, cultural, and historical systems and structures. So the question that Helen Cornish explores in her article on witchcraft is not so much does witchcraft borrow from other religious traditions, because it certainly does, but rather if the colonial context of that borrowing was exploitative or violent, what responsibility current witches bear for that history, and what the practice of ethical Witchcraft would entail.

I want to highlight two challenges to thinking about religious appropriation that came up for me as I read the preceding contributions, as well as a third that has been animating my current research project.

Religions as unstable traditions

First, a number of these articles highlight how thinking about religious appropriation is challenging because religions both have porous boundaries and are constantly changing over time. This can help us bear in mind that religious traditions themselves are not fixed or closed systems. Rather than repositories of beliefs and rules, I like historian Marilyn Robinson Waldman's understanding of religious traditions as ways humans cope with change by allowing it to become accepted and normalized (Waldman 1986: 326). In order to do this, religions must change and evolve. Or as Cornish points out, what counts as religious history 'remains unstable and subject to agenda in the present'.

But this also means that forms of appropriation can themselves construct new meanings. For me this is most acutely apparent in Albion Butters's contribution on the adoption of pagan visual symbols for fascist purposes. By placing his analysis of Nordic Alt-Right use of religious symbols within the broader historical context, Butters helps us see how religious symbols become readable as symbols of whiteness through a process of appropriation. But that is not the end of the story. This process of appropriation is actually a second-order appropriation of earlier Nazi use of religious symbols, a dynamic Butters calls 'meta-appropriation'. And so we see that the appropriation itself becomes a tradition, and the reason runes 'work' for Alt-Right politics today is because of the success of remaking a swastika into a Nazi symbol of Aryan supremacy. Even if motivated by less problematic intentions (at least judged from a liberal point of view), Viliina Silvonen's and Kati Kallio's article on Karelian laments in present-day Finland shows a similar remaking of religion through the process of appropriation

by New Age practitioners and the white Protestants. In this case we learn how the traditional Orthodox poetics and ritual contexts of lament have been replaced by a new therapeutic one. Even if the healing effect of laments is a more recent invention, it is becoming the dominant one.

The connection of religious beliefs and practices

Second, I was reminded in reading these essays how much religious appropriation depends on the idea that practices can easily be disconnected from belief, which is itself a very Protestant view of religion. This may become a problem for instance in schools, where Protestant teachers educate and represent also minority religions, as Parland discusses in her article. The assumption is that since we are only borrowing the practices or symbols we can avoid the religious doctrines, dogmas, and systems of values and thus safely remain outsiders. We can get the benefit of religion without getting entangled in religion. On this topic, Marcus Moberg's and Tommy Ramstedt's article is instructive. Mindfulness practices are adopted enthusiastically by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) only because it was assumed it would be easy to disassociate them from Buddhist cosmologies and metaphysics. This was helped by scientific studies that prove mindfulness 'works' and thus it must be universal and available to all.

But for many religious traditions, correct practice does not necessarily come after belief. In fact, practice may be the way beliefs are created. On this topic I have found helpful Malory Nye's suggestion that we think of religion not as a noun we do or do not possess, but rather as a verb (Nye 1999: 224). If we are doing religious things, we are doing religion. And since religious practices often endure because they are powerful, able to remake us into particular sorts of subjects, erroneously assuming something like mindfulness can easily be separated from its religious roots may mean we are getting more than we bargained for. Or alternatively, the practice itself may be more effective if we understood its religious associations and purposes better.

The limits of spiritual but not religious

Finally, I want to challenge one of the distinctions that seems to ground much appropriation of religion as well as much modern engagement with religion. And it is a distinction even the name of the research project that inspired this special issue assumes has some validity, namely that religion and spirituality are qualitatively different.

Let's think about how the term 'spirituality' is used today: it refers to the softer warmer sides of religion. This includes a wide range of inner experiences that are often vaguely ancient and mystical, and which create meaning, connection, or heightened consciousness. Religion, in contrast, is the term we reserve for the harsher side of religion: its histories of abuse, its doctrines, and its rules. In contrast to the self-curation of spirituality, religion is organized and requires submission to leaders, institutions, and moral codes. The more we allow this distinction to circulate, the more it ends up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: it naturalizes a hierarchy between a superior 'individual spiritual seeker' and an inferior 'religious subject or community'. It displays secular smugness, contributes to religious illiteracy, and in general, makes tolerance of religious difference more difficult.

But there is another reason it is problematic: the 'spiritual but not religious' distinction is hiding from plain sight the fact that we are ripping off religion under the guise of spirituality. In the realm of

appropriation, the tactic of renaming something religious as 'spiritual' is used to insist it can be universalized and even secularized through a few tweaks. Many people, including folks like me who identify as having no religious affiliation, are willing to dabble in the sacred for self-care. I have tried different spiritual practices – from smudging to yoga retreats – hoping they would help me achieve a healthy home, body, and mind, much like the ayahuasca, mindfulness, and laments devotees discussed in this issue. I did so while believing that none of this entangled me in religion, as if merely asserting that made it true.

Calling something spiritual (or saying a technique is aimed at wellness) means we think it is good and immune to bad consequences. But if you think you can try on religious practices in your pursuit of wellness without getting involved in religion, you might get more than you bargained for. In fact, there are at least three types of harms to this very popular form of appropriation.

Harm to religious communities and believers. Spirituality doesn't come from nowhere. It is tied to devotional communities. Having one's sacred objects and practices domesticated, commodified, and consumed by outsiders can be experienced as unpleasant, even violent. And if the adoption contaminates a sacred object or space, undermines core religious values, or unsettles a sense of religious identity, it not only harms, it profoundly offends. Spiritual hacks, or even continuing to insist that spiritual but not religious is a useful category, can be a mockery of religion.

Harm to broader society. There is also broader social collateral damage. Although many folks who integrate spiritual practice into their wellness routines are socially progressive, the truth is religious borrowing can exacerbate inequality and oppression. The reasons we want to adopt some spiritual practices over others – especially Indigenous and Asian practices – are grounded in larger systems of injustice like colonialism, orientalism, and whiteness. Assuming we have a right to rites is to do what we like regardless of the effects on others, and that is the very definition of supremacy.

Harm to ourselves. Sometimes the health benefits we want aren't possible once a practice is watered down and annexed from any communal goals. Perhaps even worse, when we engage in spiritual practices without understanding their religious or social context, we can end up associating with institutions or values that are against our own. This can unsettle our sense of self, and even cause moral injury.

So here is a challenge I want to leave you with. Religious appropriation, spiritual wellness, and so on, are messy processes and practices that we engage in without often knowing what we are getting into. As the articles in this special issue show, slowing down and trying to understand the content and context of these dynamics, asking more questions about their effects on us and others, familiarizing ourselves with religious communities and traditions that have been erased – these are all necessary steps to foster more ethical forms of engaging the religion of others. A side benefit is increased religious literacy, of course, which I believe also contributes to a more informed but also just society.

The truth is, analysing religious appropriation often brings up more questions than answers, and certainly being open to critically examining our own engagement in religious appropriation might be

uncomfortable. And that might make us rethink our own actions. It might encourage us to 'lean out', or 'lean in'.

The truth is, engaging in religious appropriation often requires ignorance of religious traditions, so a better grasp of religious literacy and history can make them less attractive. A deeper understanding of Karelian laments, for instance, might have you reframe their healing nature as a modern Finnish invention, which might lead you to no longer wanting to engage them at all. In this way, increased religious literacy can cause us to lean out: decide to forgo some practices entirely.

Alternatively, you might decide to take the unfamiliar and uncomfortable elements of religion more seriously, 'lean in', put the religion back into your spirituality, if you like. Religious appropriation often leaves behind doctrines, authoritative structures, systems of values. But what if the benefits you seek depend on a form of devotion or an entirely new worldview? For instance, Native religious understandings of plant medicine have resources for countering the hyper-individualism of modern wellness culture and the idea that health is about self-optimization. ■

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