Book Review


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The study of indigenous religion comes with many challenges and questions. Among the most pressing questions are the following: Can we apply concepts of ‘religion’, which originate from a European context and are an integral element of colonial hegemonic structures, to communities that do not use this word for their worldviews and practices? What makes a ‘religion’ (or worldview, cosmology, or spiritual practice) ‘indigenous’? Is ‘indigeneity’ something we can identify without reference to power imbalances and coloniality? Who is the ‘we’ in this question anyway? Are ‘we’ in a legitimate position to speak for ‘them’, being aware of the social, political, and economic implications our theories and statements have? Is there really something that connects all ‘indigenous religions’ across continents and historical periods, perhaps even from prehistorical times through today, from Australia to Siberia?

The authors of *Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks*, all of them working in the field of religious studies, are fully aware of these questions, and they have found sophisticated ways to navigate the potential pitfalls of their research themes. The volume is a result of a collaborative research program under the same title, funded by the Research Council of Norway and hosted by UiT, The Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø, from 2015 to 2020. All the authors had been involved in the research program and engaged in extended discussions and exchange of research results over the years, including visits to the ‘local grounds’ of the other researchers in the team. This led to a collection of highly diverse case studies that despite their differences contribute to an overall analytical frame. The general insights distilled from the
case studies are further enhanced by the fact that the authors engage in comparative analysis in addition to detailed fieldwork in their respective contexts.

The cases this volume explores are not the ‘typical’ contexts and communities readers may expect under the rubric of ‘indigenous religion(s)’, and that is programmatic: Bjørn Ola Tafjord compares articulations of indigeneity in Talamanca (Costa Rica) and Tromsø (Norway/Sápmi); Siv Ellen Kraft looks at Sámi activism at Alta (1979–1981) and compares the discourses on indigenous religion in Sápmi with the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota pipeline in 2016–2017; Arkotong Longkumer examines the way sovereignty is played out in the Naga areas in India, where local discourses are increasingly moved into a reference frame of global indigenous traditions and identities; Gregory D. Alles focuses on the performative translation and transformation of the U.N.’s International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples into World Adivasi Day in Gujarat, India; finally, Greg Johnson turns to ‘engaged indigeneity’ in Hawai‘i, where indigenous communities organized protests over the prospective Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea, a mountain considered sacred by many Hawaiians.

The volume’s ‘Introduction’ explains the way these cases contribute to the program’s overall interest in ‘how articulations of indigenous religions arise and come to be recognised in different contexts’, while the authors ‘do not promote a particular definition of indigenous religions’ (2). This is an important decision, which supports a bottom-up approach to ‘indigenous religion(s)’ and allows for nuance, change, and transformation of meaning and identity, both on the side of ‘indigenous’ stakeholders and on the side of academic ‘observer-participants’ (who also are stakeholders, as several chapters acknowledge). In fact, it is this change of meaning and function of ‘indigenous religion(s)’ that is the main object of study here.

Discourses on indigeneity are contextualized in political, economic, social, and religious frames of reference, which allows the authors to circumvent the pitfalls of (over)generalization and essentialization so common in the study of indigenous religion. As the authors point out, the book goes against both widespread popular ideas and common scholarly perspectives. Part of what we do in our project is to examine translations, performances, mediations, and comparisons that ascribe to indigenous practices attributes that are often understood as typical of indigenous religions, like animism, holism, shamanism, and sacred environmentalism. (3)

The volume also disagrees with scholars who claim ‘that detachment and distance from the people with whom we work are preconditions...
for sound scholarship’ (4). Indeed, taking seriously the entanglement of scholarly engagement with discourses on indigenous religion(s) generates ‘critical edges and exchanges that are far more informed, nuanced, and serious than those which are constructed theoretically from afar’ (4). This approach allows the authors to provide a critical analysis of local situations in the light of larger and even global frames of reference, including the theories in anthropology and the study of religion. The authors convincingly describe these mechanisms as questions of scaling and scalability: local situations are always tied into developments with regional, national, international, and global changes, from political contexts to new technologies such as social media and the internet. It is in these relations—and in these relations only—that meanings of ‘indigenous religion(s)’ emerge, change, and become relevant for all stakeholders involved.

This is not the place to acknowledge all relevant contributions that the individual chapters provide. All of them are worth exploring in detail. Let me just give two examples that illustrate what is at stake here. When Siv Ellen Kraft reconstructs the history of Sámi environmental protest movements and links them to the Standing Rock protests, it becomes clear how the involvement of Sámi representatives in the North American protest fostered an ‘indigenous turn’ among the Sámi themselves. This turn, as Kraft points out, includes the articulation of local spiritual traditions, the reclaiming of what is known today as Sámi religion, and the increasing circulation of indigenous religion. ‘There was not yet a standardised vocabulary of indigenous religion at the time of Alta. There was one at Standing Rock’ (81). What can be called a ‘global translation’ of local traditions is seen, for instance, in the rendering of the Sámi goddess Máttaráhkká as Mother Earth (ibid.).

The building of indigenous community across local concerns also comes to the fore in Greg Johnson’s analysis of the Mauna Kea protest movement in Hawai‘i. ‘Collectively on Mauna Kea’, he concludes, the religious practices involved in the protests ‘have been functioning together as a form of Hawaiian religion, singular’ (176). For Johnson, the religious idioms and ritual actions the Hawaiian protesters embrace and enact are particularly relevant in their formal aspects (ceremonies, prayers, stories, etc.), rather than in their content. Johnson identifies the notion of the ‘sacred’ as a common thread, not necessarily in the sense of some noumenal essence but as ‘a way of marking and remarking upon highest order agreement and congruence’ (177). Often, these formations of indigenous sacred claims are addressed over against ‘the presumed failure of broader society’s extractive and alienating treatment of nature and indigenous peoples themselves’ (178).

It would have been interesting at this point to hear more about how
the analysis of the Mauna Kea movement, and the project of *Indigenous Religion(s)* in general, relate to theories of the ‘sacred’, particularly in the version Émile Durkheim propagated many years ago, a version that does not try to essentialize ‘a religion’ but looks at ‘religions’ as unified systems of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, to things set apart and forbidden. This question could be added to the list of ‘issues left insufficiently explored’ that the authors mention in the concluding chapter of the volume. Based on their research design, but also as results of their ongoing investigation, they identify gender, class, and economy as dynamics in need of further exploration; in addition, ‘nature’ discourses turned out to be of high relevance in many articulations of indigenous religion(s) (see 187–188). To be sure, many of these intersectional points of discussion—and their mutual dependency, such as the link between gendered understandings of nature-culture and the indigenous stereotype of ‘being close to nature’—have been discussed in fields of gender and queer studies, post- and decolonial studies, or ecofeminism. Particularly when it comes to indigenous religion(s), the academic study of religion still needs to engage more actively with these intellectual debates and critically revisit its own analytical toolbox and research practices.

*Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks* is an excellent and important contribution to an interdisciplinary engagement with discourses on indigeneity and religion. Building on existing research, it provides new insights and asks important questions for further discussion. The individual chapters, in combination with the Introduction, provide very good material for classroom discussions and will be of benefit for everyone interested in indigenous religion(s). The volume is a good start for a critical engagement with two notoriously difficult concepts, which needs the collaborative expertise from many fields of scholarly research.

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