



Book Review

Daniel Enstedt and Katarina

Plank (eds): *Eastern Practices and Nordic Bodies: Lived Religion, Spirituality and Healing in the Nordic Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 306 pp.

In recent decades the field of alternative or holistic spirituality has gained increasing scholarly attention within the study of religions. Daniel Enstedt's and Katarina Plank's edited volume, published in the *Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities* series, examines this phenomenon in the Nordic context. The book consists of an introduction and twelve chapters, providing case studies from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The book argues for the importance of a lived religion approach, and most of the studies are based on ethnographic or interview material; a few also incorporate quantitative approaches.

The book sets out to explore the reception, development, and construction in the Nordic countries of what the editors call 'Eastern practices'. In the introduction the editors seek to contextualize the process of the 'Easternization of the West' (p. 3) and the increasing interest in non-Western spiritual practices in Nordic societies' religious and cultural landscape. It thus provides a helpful outline of the Nordic cultural and religious context for an uninitiated international audience. As the editors describe them, Nordic societies are characterized by the welfare

state model, religious homogeneity, and the dominance of Evangelical Lutheran majority churches, as well as the prevalence of secular-rational values and high levels of religious belonging without believing.

However, the editors present the interest in holistic spirituality as part of cultural changes in relation to religion and spirituality in the Nordic countries: the decline in church membership; a gradual diversification of the religious landscape; and an increasing number of people identifying as spiritual but not religious. They further maintain that the popularization of alternative spiritual and health practices has blurred the distinction between secular and religious ideas and institutions. Hence, as the editors point out, many of the chapters deal with the entangled processes of secularization and de-secularization, and related questions of 'legitimacy, authenticity, and authority' and 'the relationship between science and practices in the area studied' (p. 2).

The editors stress on the one hand that alternative spiritualities are increasingly secularized and 'distance themselves from religion and align themselves with more scientific, medical, and therapeutic language' (p. 8). Many of the chapters illustrate this, describing a deliberate toning down of religious and even spiritual features. For example, Tuomas Martikainen's and Kimi Kärki's chapter shows that Aikido teachers in Nordic countries

clearly distance themselves from the practice's religious aspects, and even if they do identify as spiritual, they hesitate to reveal this. Other chapters further point to a discomfort with religious authorities. For example, Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen argues that Norwegian Transcendental Meditation (TM) practitioners find submitting to an Indian guru 'unnatural' (p. 125). This also applies partly to Finnish practitioners of *kirtan*, the collective singing of mantras, as Tero Heinonen shows. Even if *kirtan* is rooted in devotional Hinduism and originally aimed to praise God or a guru, half of Heinonen's informants rejected the guru institution, as well as religious or spiritual belonging. Many chapters show that instead of religion or spirituality, the emphasis lies on the practices' therapeutic aspects, which frame them in terms of physical and mental health, well-being, and emotional management.

On the other hand, the editors point out that the field of alternative spiritualities also creates 'new religious expressions' that are not always recognized as religious (p. 11). Indeed, many chapters show that despite the secular/rational framing and legitimation, the fuzzier level of personal experience is of central importance. For example, Halvor Eifring's chapter on the Norwegian Acem meditation school shows that the shift to secular psychological explanation models does not mean spirituality is entirely rejected. Eifring points out that even if Acem deliberately distances itself from its original ties to TM and Indian spir-

ituality in favour of a more psychological approach, it rejects labelling meditation practice as therapy, partly because this would undermine its existential and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, the secular framing of spiritual practices does not mean they are mere manifestations of individualism and the subjective turn or result in a complete void of religious authority. Enstedt's chapter on Nordic adaptations of Qigong shows that while spiritual and magical aspects are downplayed, Qigong's ritual nature is important, constituting a 'new form of collective liturgical practice' that is highly formalized and does not allow individual self-expression (pp. 157–158). Henriette Hanky's chapter on Osho meditation centres in Norway shows that these centres cater to two different crowds simultaneously. They organize shorter and more recreational retreats for a wider audience and longer retreats for dedicated devotees, where *satsang* with the guru is a central element.

Of course, the changes in religiosity the volume describes are not unique to the Nordic countries. What might be specific to Nordic adaptations of non-Western practices in contrast to the wider process of Westernization of Eastern spiritualities therefore remains somewhat unarticulated in both the introduction and in many of the chapters. In a globalized context developments in the Nordic countries naturally mirror those in Western contexts more generally, as many of the chapters observe. It would have

been interesting, however, to read more reflection on differences and adaptations not only along the East/West divide but also between Nordic countries and, for example, Anglo-American contexts, on which much of the previous research on 'spiritual but not religious' identities focuses. Given the Nordic countries' relative secularity, could it be that the secular framing of alternative spiritual practices is especially strong in the Nordic context, or that one could identify a typically Nordic position of 'secular but still a little spiritual'?

The book could generally have had a little more internal alignment and structure. The chapters are divided into two loosely thematic parts, 'Embodiment, Movements, and Practices' and 'Aesthetics, Nature, and New Contexts'. However, the division seems somewhat strained and undefined, as the editors do not elaborate on the themes, and in my view any chapter could easily have fallen under either theme. Furthermore, there is little reference between the chapters, even though many authors deal with similar themes and spiritual practices. Nor does the introduction really draw on the chapters' content, which is scarcely referenced, apart from a chapter summary at the end (which is a little unpolished and inconsistent in style and format). A greater dialogue between the different contributions in the introduction might have brought some coherence to the volume and provided valuable additional insights.

For example, given the widespread discussion of practices of holistic spirituality and therapeutic culture, both as examples of neoliberal individualism and self-management and as spaces for their contestation, it is somewhat surprising that the introduction fails to address this theme – especially as many chapters point to it. For example, Elin Thorsén's chapter argues that modern Advaita appeals in a stressful, individualized, and performance-oriented society because it functions as a therapeutic tool for coping with daily life while offering a promise of transcending the individual self. I think the volume could have contextualized the interest in holistic spiritualities not only in terms of religious change but as part of wider societal developments in the Nordic countries, such as the increasing influence of neoliberalism and the concomitant erosion of the welfare state, privatization of care, and blooming of a therapeutic self-help culture.

I would also have expected more critical engagement with questions of whiteness, religious appropriation, and exoticism from a volume titled 'Eastern Practices and Nordic Bodies'; they have been discussed in both international scholarship and recently in the Nordic context. In my view the lack of deeper engagement with these discussions is the book's biggest shortcoming. This would have been especially important because the book deals specifically with white Nordic adaptations of non-Western practices,

not with the religious practices of immigrant populations, for example (p. 7). Some chapters do address the theme of cultural appropriation, but the concept remains somewhat unelaborated. For example, in her chapter Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger identifies two contrasting tendencies in Danish yoga that she names cultural appropriation and reappropriation. By the former Fibiger refers to the tendency to disconnect yoga from Indian spirituality; by the latter she describes the quest to connect yoga with its 'authentic roots'. Little critical attention is paid to the underlying structures of racialized power and privilege or the exoticizing tendencies connected with this search for authenticity, however. The scarce discussion of whiteness and appropriation in the volume in general raises questions about which bodies count as 'Nordic bodies' and the racial power relations at play in the 'Easternization' of the Nordic countries.

That said, the book provides a rich collection of interesting case studies of contemporary spirituality in the Nordic context.

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