

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 9 October 2017



Categorising “Religion”: From Case Studies to Methodology

Podcast with **Teemu Taira** (19 September 2016).

Interviewed by [Breann Fallon](#)

Transcribed by **Claire Berlinger**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/categorising-religion-from-case-studies-to-methodology/>

Breann Fallon (BF): *The category of religion is often referred to as slippery or problematic. As such, scholars have sought to deconstruct the term in order to be free of its weight. But what happens after the deconstruction - where do we go from there? How do we study particular cases? How are new groups officially recognized? What roles do scholars play in the application of the term to new groups? To discuss his work on Karhun Kansa, the People of the Bear, the category of religion, and deconstruction methodologies, I have with me a long-time friend of the Religion Studies Project, [Dr. Teemu Taira](#). Taira is a senior lecturer at the Department of the Study of Religions at the University of Helsinki, and Docent at the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Turku. His recent publications include "Discourse on 'Religion' in Organizing Social Practices" in [Making Religion](#) and "Doing things with 'Religion': A Discursive Approach in Rethinking the World Religions Paradigm" in [After World Religions](#). Thank you very much for joining us today.*

Teemu Taira (TT): Thank you for inviting me.

BF: *So, what we're going to talk about today is part of a conference presentation that you presented at [EASR](#) 2016. If you just wanted to run through the idea of deconstructing the term “religion”—it has a long history at the Religious Studies Project, it's something we've talked about a lot—but the introduction you gave at the presentation was very useful, I think.*

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TT: I've been a big fan of scholars who have written critically about the category of "religion," the fact that its history, its origins and emergents, and many of these scholars, such as Talal Asad, Daniel Dubuisson, Tim Fitzgerald, Russell McCutcheon, Brent Nongbri, J. Z. Smith, and many others have argued that religion is unhelpful and thoroughly problematic as a category. These scholars prefer in their understanding whether religion should be used at all in our analysis. Some say that it can be used for heuristic purposes in particular research, and some say that it's better not to use it at all because the problems related to the category surpass the benefits of using it. This kind of work is largely understood to be deconstructive in a sense that these scholars have detected the history of the emergence of the modern category of religion and problematized its usefulness. And then, some scholars, actually quite many scholars, ask questions like, "Where do we go from here?" One particular example of this is an article by [Kevin Schilbrack](#) entitled "After We Deconstruct 'Religion': Then What?" that was published in 2013 in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. My approach is in a way my answer to that question. (5:00)

BF: *So, your answer to the question—we might work through the case study of the People of the Bear. Would you like to tell us a little bit about the People of the Bear?*

TT: Yeah. The People of the Bear, [Karhun Kansa](#). We're actually talking about a very small Finnish group. They have approximately 30 members, so it's very small. It's currently a registered religious community in Finland. They see themselves as part of [Suomenusko](#), Finnish faith. There are other groups who see themselves as part of that same faith or religion, however they want to call it, but the People of the Bear is the only one that is registered as a religious community, and is the only one that has attempted to register as a religious community in Finland. The name "People of the Bear" comes from the idea that the bear is understood the mythical ancestor of mankind. This is actually quite an old idea that comes from Finnish pre-Christian mythology. In addition, they consider nature and its parts, places, certain stones, sacred. But they don't define themselves as a pagan group, they never use the term in their application, but that's how people often classify them. It has some affinities with other groups which as self-identifying as pagans. One thing that is quite important for the People of the Bear is that they consider *Karhujuhla*, a Finnish national epic, as inspiration for them, as well as all the things we know about Finnish pre-Christian worldviews and mythologies. That's basically what *Karhun Kansa* is about.

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BF: *Why did they want to be recognized and how did that process go for them in becoming a “religion,” to use the term?*

TT: Karhun Kansa applied for the status of religious community in 2012, and the case is very interesting because they first got their expert report from the committee, and that was negative. But in Finland, it is possible to revise the application, and then you have to adjust yourself to the demands of the committee. There are some formal requirements, but also some technical issues. You have to use certain terms and phrase your ideas in a certain way for you to be considered seriously to be registered as a religious community. Obviously, the revised application was much better than the first one, but what I think is very interesting in this particular case is that they also received a lot of media coverage after the first negative report. For me, personally, this is an interesting case because I was involved in that media debate. First, through my blog post, and then it was taken in by the mainstream media, and, in the end, I ended up having a media discussion with the Ministry of the Interior in Finland, who is responsible for naming the expert committee. We can't really talk through the case today, about all the details regarding the media coverage and the nuances of the application, but, in any case, in December 2013, a new positive expert report was released, and soon after that the People of the Bear were registered as a religious community in Finland. One thing that is very interesting in the whole case is to ask why they wanted to become registered as a religious community. There are a couple of benefits you get if you are registered. You may get a license to conduct valid ceremonies like marriages, funerals, name-giving ceremonies, and so on, and you may become part of religious education in schools. **(10:00)** You are eligible to apply for financial support from the Ministry of Education. It's not a lot of money, but it's some. You get legal protection under the law concerning freedom of religion, and in general, you get recognition from the society and people in the same field as well. People usually then consider that you are not just a cult or devious group when you have something on paper, when you are a registered religious community. In the case of Karhun Kansa, a very interesting thing was the fact that they consider certain stones sacred. There was this case in 2010 already, in the city of [Hämeenlinna](#), where the biggest cup stone from the Iron Age was removed in 2010 away from the expansion of a car sales company. In Finland there is this Antiquities Act that protects the stones, but it allows removal as long as the stones remain unbroken. In their application, the People of the Bear stated that they honor particular sacred places and bring gifts to them, and they used cup stones as an example. They emphasized that they consider cup stones as sacred in their original location because they are taught to be ancient sacrificial sites. In Finland, all registered religious communities are able

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to appeal to the law concerning the sanctity of religion under the law and religious freedom, and this was explicitly pronounced by the chairperson of the People of the Bear, Oskari Ratinen, that a successful registration process may help them to make a case that the locations of cup stones are sacred to them. Thus, their removal would count as a case against the sanctity of religion. You can see that there were obvious benefits to becoming a registered religious community for the People of the Bear.

BF: *They definitely seem to be having much more of a voice when they're registered, as opposed to an unregistered community, which wouldn't have that weight behind the removal of the stones, so there's definitely a big benefit there. Are there any other case studies that you think are relevant before we move on to the methodology side of the interview?*

TT: There are plenty of case studies that are useful to compare with this case and others, and I'll just mention some of the case studies that I've done, myself. I've studied [Wiccans](#) in Finland and their registration process. They failed in that, but that's a very interesting case anyways, because in that process the expert committee was really trying to make up their mind whether Wiccans can be regarded as religious. I've also studied [Jedis](#) in Britain; I've done one case study concerning that. I've studied [the Druid Network](#) in Britain jointly with [Suzanne Owen](#). We co-authored a [chapter](#) on the case where the Druid Network received charity-level status under the “religion” banner in England and Wales. Even though laws are different in different countries—and it doesn't have to be about law, it can be about other institutions for example—many cases have clear connections, even when the law and the context is different.

BF: *These case studies—what do they teach us about methodology and using the term “religion?” Should we be outlining it in our articles? You know, “For the purpose of this work religion is going to be ‘this.’” Do you think that's un-useful? Should we be using a term like “faith” or “tradition?” Where do we go from here with these case studies?*

TT: I think overall these case studies show how people make use of the category of “religion,” (15:00) how they promote their own interests, but if we look from the other direction, they also show how we are governed by the category of “religion.” In studying these cases, I am highlighting quite strongly that I don't define “religion” in these particular cases. I study those cases where other people negotiate what counts as religion, and why something counts as religion, and the consequences of those

processes. It is quite clear that many people find it very tempting to ask, in these so-called “boundary

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cases,” whether in my definition this is really a religion, or if a group is really not a religion, and I try to emphasize that I’m not doing that at all. Even when I was a part of this media debate concerning the People of the Bear, I never suggested that the People of the Bear were a religion, or were not, and I never suggested that the group should be granted the status of a religious community. I was simply trying to highlight how a society operates by using that category. Still, it is quite common that people still ask you the question, “How do you define ‘religion’ then?” Then I have to say that within this setting I’m not. I’m not arguing that religion cannot be used or defined nominally for particular purposes, but I’m insisting that these cases, if they are studied without defining “religion,” are much more interesting, and I think the results are more interesting—at least, that’s my opinion. Of course, we can debate endlessly what counts as interesting and relevant, but that’s my approach, and I try to demonstrate by doing these case studies that other people can see if they find the analysis interesting.

BF: *I think sometimes we get so hung up on, “is it a religion, is it not” that we miss what else the case can offer. I think in these examples, for example the People of the Bear, the idea that their sacred stones were being moved and that idea of legitimacy is, in my opinion, more interesting—as you say, we could debate that—than whether they were a religion or not. There’s so much more to these case studies than just yes or no, this sort of black-and-white thinking; I don’t know what you think about that. So, how do you think power plays into this whole matter of the term “religion” and naming different boundary groups?*

TT: I tend to ask quite simple questions in these case studies, such as, “Who benefits off of being a religion?” or “Who benefits off of denying the religiosity of a group or a practice?” I can also ask, “How are we governed?” if I’m trying to look at the level of state or society more broadly, not just a particular group. I think it is quite clear that people achieve something by being a religion, but that happens within the governing structures of society, so by being a religion you gain some, but at the same time, you lose some. When you get some concrete benefits you are usually moulded in such a way that you have to adjust yourself to the criteria that is used in an institution, in law, or wherever. That is typically so that you have to represent your group as somehow reminiscent of Protestant Christianity. At the same time you are marginalized or domesticated in a way, some people say you are ‘depoliticized’ in a way. **(20:00)** The idea goes that being a religion definitely guarantees some privileges to selected groups, but at the same time it distances them from the so-called “secular centre” of society, that of political, so-called “secular” power. That’s one of the main—and very simple—example of how analysis of power is part of these cases.

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BF: *Are there any examples you can think of where a group really didn't want to apply to be officially labelled a "religion" in legal terms?*

TT: There are actually many cases, even in the cases I've analysed, for example, Wiccans in Finland and the Druid Network in England and Wales. There are definitely plenty of self-identifying Druids in Britain who didn't want to be part of that Druid Network. They considered it something that domesticates Druidry, and that they lose some of the experience of the nature of Druidry, and maybe lose something about their radical nature or their self-image as being radical people or a radical group. In Finland, Wiccans were quite strongly divided. Some wanted to put in the application and become registered as a religious community, and some said that they weren't a religious group at all, and that those who were applying were just a bunch of weirdos—that they weren't proper Wiccans at all. Then there are examples like groups in Finland who don't want to be classified as a religion because, even though they may qualify as a religion according to many—even most—scholarly definitions of religion. Some groups just don't want to do it because that's how they are able to attract people to their events—maybe not members, but people for events, because in Finland many people are officially members of the Lutheran Church. You get the question of exclusion, whether you accept that there are two religions or religious identities and things like that. Some groups consider it better not to go down that route or do that debate at all. People reflect and negotiate what is most useful for them.

BF: *This discourse seems to be working on many levels. There's an element of power, there's an element of benefit, but also those who are kind of railing against that. I know in your presentation you had six big points to summarize the discourse. I don't know if you just wanted to run through that to wrap up the interview?*

TT: Yeah. We've been talking already about the two methodological points that I wanted to make first, that we don't have to define religion in these cases, and second was highlighting that power ***. The third point is that I argue that discourse operates on many levels, it's not simply by looking at the origin of the modern discourse on religion or the modern category of religion. There are many useful studies focusing on that, and they are very good, but they are mostly focusing on the 18th and 19th centuries. I think they don't talk enough about the many functions of the category of religion. I think it's a more situational and contextual issue, and that is why we need empirical case studies, and my small contribution has been to that scholarship. My fourth point was that I'm very interested in these boundary cases. That is how discourses operate: by exclusion, by negotiating in boundaries. I think it's

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very interesting to study when we use Foucauldian terms, when simple utterances become seriously taken statements. When statements are taken seriously they become more effective, usually they need some institutional support, whether that's in school, in law, in parliament, or somewhere else. **(25:00)** The point I want to highlight is that—because some people say, "Is it useful to study these small groups, these marginal groups?"—I'm not really studying these marginal groups. They are cases about how discourse on religion works and changes. In my presentation I even suggested that it seems to me that there is something like what I call a "reflexive moment" going on in the category* of religion. People have become more aware of the work that the category of religion can do. That is how all those debates are so topical at the moment. Religion becomes more discussed, contested, challenged, and so on. We can negotiate whether that is really going on, has it always been the case, and what is really the historical change in that, but I'm just putting it on the table so that people can develop or criticize. My sixth point was a self-reflective point about scholars who also produce discourse on religion. Scholars are not, and they cannot be, total outsiders in these debates. Sometimes scholars are directly involved by giving expert statements or commenting in the media, but even in cases where scholars are not directly involved, they are sometimes referred to. In that sense, you cannot be an outsider, and this is something that should be reflected on in the analysis. Analysing discourse is itself a discursive practice; although it's a different kind of discursive practice, nonetheless, it's part of the field. Especially this case about the People of the Bear is interesting for me personally because I was so strongly involved in the public debate. This is sort of my answer to Kevin Schilbrack's question, "After we deconstruct religion, then what?" We can analyse these cases.

BF: *Yeah. They're definitely very useful, and, as you say, they give us so much to think about, not just in terms of, "Are they religion or are they not?" but the benefits and the power and everything that's playing into it. Any concluding points to leave us with?*

TT: I think there are methodological tools to be developed in studying these cases. I don't think that we really need a step-by-step method on how to do these case studies. What we need is to test and develop a theoretical vocabulary, what kind of terms we use and how we think about what kind of data is appropriate for these kinds of case studies. I'm doing it myself and I hope that some others are inspired to do that too.

BF: *Great. I think that this has definitely given us a lot to think about, particularly in not just looking at the big cases, the Scientology cases and things like that. These sort of, as you say, boundary cases*

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are so important in our discussion and in learning where we stand as scholars. So, thank you very much for joining us, and we look forward to interviewing you next time.

TT: Thank you.

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