

**THESIS DEFENCE: TIINA SEPP  
PILGRIM'S REFLECTIONS ON THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO  
AND GLASTONBURY AS EXPRESSIONS OF VERNACULAR  
RELIGION: A FIELDWORKER'S PERSPECTIVE**

On 28 April 2014, Tiina Sepp defended her PhD thesis, *Pilgrims' Reflections on the Camino de Santiago and Glastonbury as Expressions of Vernacular Religion: A Fieldworker's Perspective*, at the University of Tartu.

Tiina Sepp's dissertation makes valuable contributions to the fields of vernacular religion, belief narrative, fieldwork – based methodology and pilgrimage studies. She has, above all, significantly enhanced the folkloristic study of the Camino de Santiago, and in addition has perceptively contributed to the study of Glastonbury, a later addition to her research field.

Her contributions fall into four main areas, which are subsequently dealt with one by one, although of course it is in the skilful intermingling of themes, genres, academic literature, fieldwork experiences, scholarly reflexivity and place-related study that the strengths of this dissertation lie.

## **1. Vernacular religion**

Tiina Sepp has firmly situated her research in the academic context of vernacular religion, defined by Leonard Primiano as “an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief” (Primiano 1995: 44).

Because the focus of study in this approach is, in Primiano's words, “religion as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44), this approach “highlights the power of the *individual* and *communities of individuals* to create and re-create their own religion” (Primiano 2012: 383).

For this reason, the author has been careful to record the heterodox experiences and the heteroglot accounts of the people with whom she has worked. She has quite self-consciously avoided privileging the views or expectations of representatives of institutional religion over the lived experiences and perceptions of those self-identified pilgrims she encountered in relation to the Camino, for example.

As Professor Valk and I counsel in the Introduction to our book on *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life*, Tiina has ‘observe[d] and capture[d] the flow of vernacular discourse’ and perceptively ‘reflect[ed] on it’ (Bowman & Valk 2012: 2).

As her fieldwork has been based in two rather complex locations, the author has *also* reinforced Primiano's comments in relation to vernacular religion of the “bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing” (Primiano 1995: 44) and, in this case, in the process of *narrating* belief, which brings us to the second area in which the candidate has made a significant scholarly contribution.

## **2. The content, uses, and construction of belief narrative**

Primiano comments that “one of the hallmarks of the study of religion by folklorists has been their attempt to do justice to belief and lived experience” (Primiano 1995: 41), something that has been successfully achieved by Sepp in relation to belief narrative.

Particularly in her research on the Camino, the author records and analyses the wide range of belief narratives expressed by pilgrims, thereby framing pilgrimage as a narrated journey, potentially including miracles, supernatural encounters and spiritual experiences.

Narrative is extremely significant in relation to pilgrimage, for as Jill Dubisch (1995: 126) has noted, “there is a large oral tradition, consisting of pilgrims’ own experiences and those relayed to them by word of mouth, a large part of which is not found in the literature of the church”. Through the many opportunities presented to the author by participating in the Camino on a number of occasions, and in a range of roles – pilgrim, hospitalera, researcher – she has collected numerous narratives and has commented perceptively on their significance. These narratives have been meticulously and non-judgementally presented for what they are – expressions of belief. As folklorist Gillian Bennett points out, belief stories

- 1) illustrate current community beliefs;
- 2) tell not only of personal experiences but also of those that have happened to other people;
- 3) are used to explore and validate the belief traditions of a given community by showing how experience matches expectations. (Bennett 1989: 291)

Tiina Sepp has not simply presented narratives as text; she has skilfully contextualised them to reveal the varied perceptions of interventions by other than human beings revealed in them, and demonstrated both overt and covert uses of narrative from entertainment to exemplar.

The author has also drawn attention to the role and influence of traditional pilgrim tales, published personal accounts of walking the Camino (her own included), New Age literature and fiction in framing expectations of, and experiences on, the Camino.

If the Camino is a narrated journey, Glastonbury is rather a narrated destination, a location whose multivalence is to a large extent created by and reflected in narrative. While the candidate appeared to move away from belief narrative, or rather to some extent became embroiled in competing narratives around pilgrimage, when the author had a narrative of her own to relate, the ‘green scarf story’, she returned to a familiar territory, demonstrating the importance of narratives, here in the form of explanations, as expressions of belief.

The third area in which she has made a significant contribution relates to methodology.

## **3. Methodology, particularly in relation to fieldwork and reflexivity**

In her very first sentence, Tiina Sepp states that “this dissertation has been completed through close collaboration between me and my informants”, signalling, I think, the importance for her of interpersonal and dialogic relationships.

American folklorist David Hufford, in what I consider a ground-breaking article, *The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies*, writes:

*Reflexivity and the strong light that it shines on the importance of viewpoint and perspective urges on us a multiplication of perspectives. We can never have a set of observations made from everywhere any more than we can have a view from nowhere, but the more views we consider, the more reason we have to be hopeful about our conclusions.* (Hufford 1995: 60)

I believe that the author has succeeded in shining some light on the importance of viewpoint and perspective.

Sepp emerges from these studies as a highly skilful and experienced fieldworker, both engaged and engaging. She has given considerable thought to the conduct of fieldwork, and indeed the conduct of the fieldworker, particularly in relation to her third article, somewhat sensationally entitled, *Interview as an Act of Seduction*. This article displays considerable candour and a high degree of reflexivity, but manages to avoid the self-indulgence that reflexivity can sometimes induce in researchers.

To quote Hufford again:

*The tendency to count disbelief as the “objective” stance is a serious, systematic bias that runs through most academic studies of spiritual belief.*

*If impartiality in belief studies cannot consist of having no personal beliefs, then impartiality must be a methodological stance in which one acknowledges one’s personal beliefs, but sets them aside for scholarly purposes. Recognising that each of us has a personal voice, for research purposes we choose to speak instead with our scholarly voice.* (Hufford 1995: 61–62)

The author’s reflections on her own ‘situated-ness’ in the fieldwork process, the potential impact of her personality, her own preferences – and to some extent prejudices – in relation to authority and institutional religion help her to recognise the personal voice that must exist in tension and negotiation with her scholarly voice. This is also relevant to the liminality of the fieldworker and the author’s recognition that “as researchers and fieldworkers [we] will always have one foot in the academy and one foot out”.

Although the author talks of emic and etic, and putting on her pilgrim’s hat and her folklorist’s hat, it is obvious that there are not simply two different positions, but a spectrum, along which the fieldworker constantly moves and recalibrates.

So, I think it is fair to conclude that the author has tackled difficult methodological issues, in ways that problematise but also progress the field.

#### 4. Pilgrimage studies

Tiina Sepp said in her comments on her dissertation that when she finished her fourth article, she realised that the process of her research had directly (and unintentionally) reflected the history of pilgrimage studies (p. 22). She had moved, metaphorically, from Turnerian *communitas* to Eade and Sallnow’s contestation. This in turn highlights the

extent to which we as scholars frame our research and the impact this might have in relation to what we look for and what we see. Even in the author's first article, although she concluded that the experience of *communitas* was central to being a pilgrim, contestation was there. For example, this was amply demonstrated in the diversity of motivations, experiences and disharmony recorded by her in conversations and narratives.

Professor Ülo Valk and I have observed that "genre [--] has considerable power to illuminate the processes, how texts are produced, perceived and understood. As genres emerge and grow historically, they mix the voice of tradition with individual voices, and instead of being univocal, they are always ambivalent, dialogic and polyphonic" (Bowman & Valk 2012: 8). Producing nuanced, contextualised, folkloristically informed accounts of belief narratives on the Camino undoubtedly has been a valuable contribution by the author to the scholarship of the Camino.

Simon Coleman and John Eade in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* comment that in contemporary pilgrimage we see "diverse processes of sacralization of movement" and the idea of "meta-movement – the combination of mobility itself with a degree of reflexivity as to its meaning, form and function" (2004: 18). I think the careful recording of the extent to which hierarchies of pilgrim identities were formed in relation to means of transport, for example, contributes to such discourse.

One of the Glastonbury websites claims:

*The growing interest in sacred places has led to a modern awakening in the value of Pilgrimage. In every age there have been Pilgrims travelling to the sacred sites and places of the world as an act of spiritual devotion to their particular creed [--] The difference now is that the modern Pilgrims visiting the sacred places are of many different beliefs and often of no belief.*

*They do not necessarily come to be in touch with any specific divinity but they come to be in the energies of the sacred places and by being in these places to understand themselves more clearly and to see their role in the world.*

Tiina Sepp's fieldwork and reflections on the role of energies as a focus of pilgrimage, and discourses around perceptions of male and female energies and competing energies helpfully develop this strand within the study of contemporary pilgrimage.

Eade and Sallnow have concluded that major shrines and pilgrimage sites have the "capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses, to be able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires" (Eade & Sallnow 2000: 15).

Pilgrimage as a term and concept *is* contested, used in different ways by different scholars as well as by participants. I note that even for informants in the first article, pilgrimage could be a difficult concept. Pilgrimage studies, nevertheless, is a vibrant field, enjoying increasing interdisciplinary interest. Further additions of vernacular religious perspectives and genre-informed, folkloristic fieldwork data of the type produced by the author undoubtedly strengthen the field.

These are some of the contributions to scholarship that I believe have been made by this dissertation.

In the following I briefly discuss some issues related to the contrasting locations chosen by the author as foci for her research.

## The Camino de Santiago and Glastonbury

Kim Knott (2005: 33) claims that the “particularity of a place arises from the complexity of its social relations and the sum of the stories told about it” and both the Camino and Glastonbury undoubtedly involve complex social relations and numerous stories. But there are significant differences.

As the author has indicated, on the Camino de Santiago the focus is on the journey, getting to the destination, reached by a variety of highly structured routes with established infrastructures (such as pilgrim hostels). Although people undertake the Camino for a variety of reasons – religious, personal, therapeutic, spiritual, self-discovery – they nevertheless appear willing to conform to this structure, and it seems that the majority want to have the *compostela* that confirms their status as pilgrim. The stress, though, is on the Camino as journey. Belief narratives, as presented in this dissertation, tend to relate to supernatural help in *getting* there, stories relate to appropriate behaviour by people ‘on the road’.

However, if the Camino is Europe’s pilgrimage superhighway, with service stations and to some extent policed by the Roman Catholic Church, Glastonbury is by comparison a country lane. There is nothing like the same formal pilgrimage infrastructure of the Camino, no unified tradition of what pilgrimage in the Glastonbury context might mean, and certainly something like the official *compostela*, certification of one’s credentials as a pilgrim, is simply impossible to conceive of in the Glastonbury context. While pilgrims arriving at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostello can engage in centuries old rituals such as hugging the statue of St James, Glastonbury Abbey, which was the traditional focus of Christian Pilgrimage, is a ruin as a result of the 16th century Reformation.

Pilgrimage and journeying in relation to Glastonbury, in contrast to the Camino, is focussed on the destination, and therefore it is anticipated that extraordinary experiences will result from **being there**. Belief narratives in Glastonbury tend to reflect spiritual encounter and instances of synchronicity or meaningful coincidence once there. While people might and do visit all year round for spiritual purposes, *formal* pilgrimage activity in Glastonbury – as indeed in many traditional pilgrimage sites and shrines in Europe and beyond – has been marked by the procession.

There were, therefore, significant adjustments to be made in relation to fieldwork in these two sites, including terminological and contextual adjustment and expectations.

## Conclusions

Accepting, as Primiano claims, that “all religion is both subtly and vibrantly marked by continuous interpretation even after it has been reified in expressive or structured forms” (Primiano 2012: 384), we can comprehend that the study of pilgrimage and the study of vernacular religion *per se* can be enriched by *anticipating* heterogeneity, individual creativity and ‘non-conformity’, as the author has succeeded in doing. Focusing on pilgrimage as one aspect of religion, “as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44), folkloristically recording and analysing the stories told within the contexts of pilgrimage processes and sacred sites, and the myriad expressions of belief revealed thereby, can only lead to an ever deeper

understanding of the phenomena of vernacular religion. For such academic work to be conducted by a methodologically sophisticated and reflexively self-aware research is ideal.

As I said at the start, it is in the skilful *intermingling* of themes, genres, academic literature, fieldwork experiences, scholarly reflexivity and place-related study that the strengths of this dissertation lie, and Tiina Sepp has indeed made valuable scholarly contributions.

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