

Stealing My Religion

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NOT JUST ANY
CULTURAL
APPROPRIATION

Liz Bucar

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Preface

Sharmila Sen, my editor at Harvard University Press, convinced me to write this book. It was June 2017 and I had just returned from my fourth time walking the Camino de Santiago. We were having a working lunch at a hipster cantina. Over a plate of flan that I refused to eat because, after a month in Spain, I was sick of desserts that jiggle, we discussed my next project. I threw out a few ideas and then said what I had to do first was write an article about cultural appropriation because my students had started to use it to shut down complicated ethical conversations. “They don’t know what the term even means,” I complained. “And they never consider that forms of religious borrowing might be harmful in the same way. I’m so annoyed about it. I have to get that out of my system first.”

Sharmila looked up from her smoky mezcal concoction. “Wait, that is the book I want,” she said. “What? No, it’s not a book, it’s just a journal article,” I said. “It could be a book,” she insisted. And then, just for fun and fueled by cocktails and jetlag, we sketched out what case studies I could include. Since I had just returned from a Catholic pilgrimage with non-Catholic students, that case study was a given. And I knew I had things to say about what happens when religious clothing becomes a fashion trend, things I hadn’t had the space to

address in my previous book, *Pious Fashion*. I suggested circumcision because I knew it made my students uncomfortable. And the whole point of this kind of book was going to be to make people squirm in their seats.

“No, yoga,” she said. “Wait, yoga?” I replied, and then I was taking her more seriously. Part of my job while researching and writing this book was going to be leaning in on yoga? I’d have an excuse to do all the icky things, like spend time in an ashram, attend yoga retreats, or join a fancy studio. And then use those experiences to parse out what was so icky in the first place, as well as why I still wanted to do them. Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, but without all the sex and self-satisfaction. I was in.

The topic of this book—religious appropriation—is personal to me. I am, you could say, a repeat offender. Despite spending most of my professional career studying religion, I am part of the 29 percent of Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹ Yet I practice yoga. I lead an annual study abroad program on the topic of pilgrimage. I write about Muslim fashion and have worn it during fieldwork. The question of when religious borrowing is morally harmful and when it is not touches my personal and professional life.

This book is an opportunity to reflect on the benefits I gain from the religion of others as well as my responsibility to those traditions and communities. And Sharmila was right: that deserved more than a journal article.

Stealing My Religion

Introduction

When I was eleven years old, Madonna became my style icon. I tied mesh headbands in my permed hair, turned hot pink V-necked Forenza chunky sweaters backward, layered black rubber bracelets up to my elbows, and wore white fingerless lace gloves. All accessorized with a gold cross necklace and cross earrings.

Like Madonna, I was baptized Catholic, although I was raised Protestant. By age eleven, I refused to attend Sunday school, and yet even as I was rebelling against my religious upbringing, my personal style became visually more religious. I did not wear a cross in the 1980s as a Christian. I wore it as a tween following a pop-culture trend.

The story of the cross's journey from religious symbol to popular fashion accessory is filled with twists and turns.¹ It begins when Coco Chanel designed her now iconic enameled cuffs in the 1930s. Based on a design adopted by the Order of St. John in 1567, Chanel's accessory featured eight-pointed Maltese crosses of large gems. Other designers incorporated cross motifs. By the 1960s, oversize and bedazzled crosses were mainstream fashion, decadent accessories that elevated the wearer's sartorial game as a sign of her worldliness.

In the 1970s, evangelicals began to reclaim cross pendants as a sign of deep Christian commitments, and the accessory meant something theological again. Once that happened, cross jewelry was no longer

cool as a form of borrowed spirituality. If I had been a tween in that decade, I would not have worn a cross.

Madonna changed that. When she wore a large cross in the 1989 MTV video “Like a Prayer,” she was not communicating religious fidelity or obedience, but rather blasphemy and rebellion. “I know the moral majority is up in arms against me, but I consider that an achievement,” Madonna said at the time.² She was able to change the mainstream meaning of cross jewelry in America again. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was no longer primarily associated with devotional piety or institutionalized Christianity because Madonna had turned the religious symbol into a provocation.

My decision as an eleven-year-old child to wear a cross did nothing to keep me in the Protestant church or reclaim my Catholic roots. It was all about being cool. This was the first time I stole my religion. It would not be the last. And I am not alone.

This book focuses on a class of religious borrowings I call religious appropriation: when individuals adopt religious practices without committing to religious doctrines, ethical values, systems of authority, or institutions, in ways that exacerbate existing systems of structural injustice. My use of the term “appropriation” is strategic. For most of my readers, the word will immediately invoke the idea of outsiders taking something from insiders—a distinction I’ll say more about later—that causes harm. I want you to be primed to think of religious borrowings as potentially ethically fraught. The harmful ones I’ll call religious appropriation.

In the American context, suggesting that there are cases of religious appropriation is controversial. Even as moral outrage over racial or ethnic appropriation is increasingly common, religious borrowing is accepted and even encouraged. In fact, the same people who are quick to call out cases of cultural borrowing as exploiting marginalized communities refuse to recognize that religious communities or prac-

tioners can also be exploited when others adopt their practices in the name of politics, education, or well-being. This is especially true of secular liberals—a group I consider myself part of—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. But individuals who are themselves religiously affiliated also presume they can borrow the religious practices of others without becoming entangled in that religious tradition or community.

The goal of *Stealing My Religion* is not to convince readers to avoid interacting with the religion of others. Strict avoidance is likely impossible in our contemporary pluralistic world. Such avoidance might even sacrifice valuable forms of religious exchange as well as disempower the religious actors who want to open their practices to outsiders. And yet, borrowing can depend on and contribute to the oppression and marginalization of religious communities and individuals. It is one thing to accept that religious borrowing is part of our contemporary landscape. It is another to ignore the ethical implications of these borrowings. My first goal is to convince you to stop seeing all religious borrowing as morally benign. Some forms, including some very popular forms, are harmful.

My second goal is to think through how we can borrow in more responsible ways, by describing how religious practices are grounded in traditions and communities, identifying the range of exploitations borrowings cause, and understanding the systems of inequity and violence they reinforce. And while I think “cultural appropriation” is an overused and polarizing term, I also think it can be recuperated for this ethical work. I use the term “appropriation” to signal when I am discussing harmful cases of religious adoption. I use the term “religious borrowing” as a more general umbrella term that includes the possibility of adopting practices in ways that do not cause explicit harm.

In this book, three case studies demonstrate what kind of moral risk religious appropriation can entail, including communicating contempt for the deeply held values of religious communities, becoming involved in intrareligious debates, erasing religious history, and instrumentalizing religion for political, educational, and therapeutic goals. We justify borrowing religious practices of others based on the assumption that we can do so without risk of becoming religious in some way. But my three case studies will show that insisting that we can easily remain outsiders is one mechanism by which well-intended borrowing becomes harmful appropriation. When we appropriate religious practices, we are getting involved in religion.

Cultural Appropriation and Its Limitations

The academic use of the term “cultural appropriation” began in the 1920s when Harlem Renaissance scholars raised concerns about representations of African Americans in popular works, such as J. C. Harris’s Brer Rabbit stories. In literary and art criticism, cultural appropriation became a term for a range of problematic actions, including possession of cultural objects by noncultural members or institutions (for example, most of the British Museum’s holdings), representations of cultural experiences by outsiders to those cultures (for example, the voice appropriation of Brer Rabbit), and use of an artistic style by a nonmember (for example, Elvis Presley’s 1956 recording of “Hound Dog,” based on Big Mama Thornton’s recording four years earlier). Today, the concept of cultural appropriation is used in a range of disciplines, including law, communications, anthropology, critical race theory, philosophy, and literary criticism, and to a lesser extent within religious studies in the context of American Indigenous religion and such Eastern practices as yoga.³

Generally speaking, “appropriation” is applied to cases where individuals or entities of the dominant culture take from the culture of marginalized communities, resulting in some harm or offense. The professional or disciplinary context in which appropriation is discussed determines what counts as appropriation, how it is defined, and the harm it causes. Lawyers, for instance, think about cultural appropriation as the taking of intellectual property without permission.⁴ Legal scholarship on appropriation raises fascinating questions about the manner in which cultural appropriation might be related to copyright or patent infringement, and what legal mechanisms might prevent harms associated with cultural theft, such as intellectual property law.⁵ But since religious ideas and practices cannot be owned like material property, and “permission” is difficult to establish given the heterogeneity of religious communities, these legal discussions don’t fully capture the ethical complexity of religious appropriations.

Discussions of art and appropriation have similar limitations. For example, the central concern for philosophers of art in determining the moral acceptability of appropriation is whether the results are aesthetically successful or not.⁶ An ethical analysis of religious appropriation has to also consider the implications to communities of religious practice and belief, not just the aesthetic success or failure of the appropriated form.

The variations in the way appropriation is used by different academic disciplines do cause some confusion over how best to apply this term to religious forms. And yet the barrier to exploring religious appropriation that I have encountered most often is the way appropriation is used outside the academy in rather anemic ways, ways that are polarizing instead of constructive. Most people encounter the idea of appropriation today not as academic jargon, but rather as a weapon of mainstream outrage. Celebrities’ actions are often called out as cases

of cultural appropriation, such as Gwen Stefani's bindi, Kim Kardashian's braids, and Katy Perry's geisha-themed performance. But any of us might be offenders by how we dress our kids for Halloween, where we find inspiration for home decor, or how we adorn our body. Aladdin costumes, Zen decorations, and hoop earrings have all been described as instances of cultural appropriation.⁷

I agree with the core ethical impulse of calling out cultural appropriation. Acts of appropriation by those of privilege—whether that privilege is based on race, gender, or class—often bring some sort of harm to those being appropriated. The playing field is not level, and thus even innocent borrowing from a minority culture is an exercise of privilege, frequently contributing to the disenfranchisement of already vulnerable people.

Yet the popular use of cultural appropriation lacks precision. It can refer to many types of borrowings, ignoring the fact that these cases might raise different ethical issues. And merely calling something cultural appropriation does not convince everyone that it is morally objectionable.

Most important, we rarely have discussions about cultural appropriation. The term is an accusation, a condemnation, an expression of moral outrage. Once it is deployed, conversation halts, as each party digs its heels in. This polarization assumes that the ethical implications of cultural borrowings are cut and dried, which they rarely are. I see this in my classroom all the time. Once the word “appropriation” is introduced into a conversation, students either retreat or feel emboldened to express indignation. Critics consider it an overly sensitive term, one that exemplifies political correctness gone bad, and that relies on essentialist notions of culture. Proponents point out that those critics are often part of communities of racial or economic privilege. And as everyone is convinced only they have the moral high ground, things can get pretty heated.

Novelist Lionel Shriver's keynote address at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016 was an occasion in which this dynamic played out. Shriver is best known for her 2003 novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, written from the point of view of a school shooter's mother. At the festival, Shriver, a white woman, delivered a speech arguing that accusations of cultural appropriation curtail literary creativity and potentially challenge an author's right to create fiction entirely. And she did this while wearing a sombrero.

Shriver's headgear was a reference to a recent incident at Bowdoin College in Maine, where a tequila-themed party with miniature sombreros resulted in a campus scandal. A strongly worded statement from the student government accused the party hosts of creating an environment where "students of color, particularly Latino, and especially Mexican, feel unsafe."⁸ Shriver found the whole incident laughable, but also symptomatic of a state of cultural ultrasensitivity, one that she believed was an attack on the fiction writer's craft. "Because who is the appropriator par excellence, really?" she asked the audience. "Who dares to get inside the very head of strangers, who has the chutzpah to project feelings into the minds of others? . . . Who is the premier pickpocket of the arts? The fiction writer, that's who." She ended with the following declaration: "We fiction writers have to preserve the right to wear many hats—including sombreros."⁹

Shriver was implicitly drawing on the idea that some forms of artistic appropriation are justified by the aesthetic success of the art they produce. She went further by suggesting that fiction writers are, by trade, appropriators. But what she ignored entirely was the possibility that some novelists' cultural borrowings are not morally neutral because of existing systems of inequity.

Consider the reaction to Shriver's speech by author and media commentator Yassmin Abdel-Magied, who attended Shriver's 2016 keynote, at least until she walked out. She wrote about the event for the

Guardian. Abdel-Magied experienced Shriver's talk as "mocking those who ask people to seek permission to use their stories" and celebrating "the unfettered exploitation of the experiences of others."¹⁰ To add insult to injury, the other listeners seemed to agree with Shriver. As Abdel-Magied wrote, "As chuckles of the audience swelled around me, reinforcing and legitimizing the words coming from behind the lectern, I breathed in deeply, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. The stench of privilege hung heavy in the air, and I was reminded of my 'place' in the world."¹¹ It was not only the existence of appropriation, but the writers' agreement that they had a right to engage in it, that was offensive to Abdel-Magied. As a Black Muslim woman of Sudanese heritage, Abdel-Magied belongs to communities that are marginalized. On that day, surrounded by predominantly white colleagues who seemed to agree with Shriver, Abdel-Magied was reminded that she was an outsider to her own professional guild.

I will have more to say about the role of oppression in religious appropriation, but for now I want to point out that the exchange between Shriver and Abdel-Magied was really a case of two people talking past each other. If we read Shriver generously, her concern was with drawing strict cultural boundaries that would prevent any form of cultural exchange. Abdel-Magied's concern, in contrast, was with the contexts of inequality and marginalization that make some forms of cultural borrowing exploitative. Both were convinced they had framed the issue of cultural appropriation correctly. It seems clear Shriver ignored that the harm of appropriation comes from the way it interacts with oppression. And while I am sympathetic to how the event made Abdel-Magied feel like an outsider in her own community of fellow writers, her piece in the *Guardian* did not address the issue of boundary policing that Shriver was trying to raise. This exchange was not a conversation about cultural appropriation, but rather was a display of moral righteousness, a common but problematic dynamic on this topic.

From the point of view of ethical understanding, conversations are often the means by which discernment and change occur. But such conversations rarely happen on the topic of appropriation because the term is so polarizing in public discourse. In this book, I try to rehabilitate appropriation to reimagine what this conversation could be about.

Stealing My Religion

The idea that inspired this book is that the moral implications of some forms of religious borrowing can be best understood through the framework of cultural appropriation. This use of appropriation depends on several theoretical understandings about such things as the boundaries between cultures, the nature of power, and the type of harm appropriation can cause. In addition, since I think appropriating from religions raises distinct ethical issues, I need to clarify how I am distinguishing religion from other cultural forms. Let's explore these theoretical concerns by taking a closer look at the title of this book, *Stealing My Religion*.

“Stealing” implies that (1) there is an object or practice of value, (2) being taken from its owner, (3) which causes some sort of injury. But all three of these dimensions—value, owner, injury—become complicated when we try to apply them to religion.

In the cases of religious appropriation that I explore in this book, the “thing being stolen” is not an object, but rather a religious practice whose value may not be quantifiable or even tangible. For the religious community, the practice is valuable because it does something that is beneficial for an individual practitioner or the community. Those outside a religious community who borrow a religious practice also presume it has a value, but in this case the value is assumed to be independent of its religious context. The benefits that

animate the case studies that follow include expression of solidarity, religious literacy, and personal health.

As “stealing” implies that the practice is taken from its owner, how we understand religious ownership will affect which cases of appropriation we think deserve our attention. No person, community, or institution can legally own an entire religion. And this is especially true of abstract religious ideas and lived practices that intellectual property law often frames as “open source.”¹² And yet to say that no one morally owns religion would be to insist that we have no responsibility to communities and traditions that claim religious ideas and practices as not only real, but ultimate truth.

At issue in the case studies in this book is what form of ownership of a practice a religious community might reasonably claim, based on its members’ shared experiences of that practice. One way to ground this claim to ownership is to recognize that shared practices are what create a religious community, because they promote a sense of common identity and group connection.¹³ When one of these practices is taken by someone outside the group, the group members’ right to privacy is violated and a powerful mechanism for creating group identity is undermined.¹⁴

If group intimacy is what establishes the right to ownership, only a group member could make a legitimate claim of appropriative harm. This introduces another challenge: who is an insider? Having a clear and fixed criterion about who counts as a group insider versus an outsider will reinforce stereotypes and generalizations about a group, obscure forms of oppression within a group itself, and leave out members who don’t fit the dominant mold.¹⁵ We need a way to determine insider status without slipping into cultural essentialism, which itself is harmful.

One way to sidestep the issue of having to adjudicate who counts as an insider is to rely on self-reports. In this book, for instance, I give

weight to appropriative claims made by self-identified religious insiders. However, even this approach has limitations. Religious communities are highly heterogeneous. Individual members will have different interpretations of what counts as a core religious practice and will experience appropriation by outsiders in different ways based on their lived experiences. There won't necessarily be a group consensus about whether a form of borrowing causes harm. And those who agree there is harm might disagree on what that harm entails. In fact, even religious insiders might engage in practices that fellow group members experience as appropriation, given internal debates about the "right" way to practice.

Another problem I have noticed with mainstream conversations on religious appropriation is that if any group member gives permission to borrow, it is interpreted as absolving a potential appropriator of any moral responsibility. Who is deemed capable of giving permission for an entire religious community matters. Often, clergy or institutional leaders are allowed to act as spokespersons. And yet, this relies on hierarchies of power and erases internal diversity.

Take, for instance, the range of Catholic reactions to the 2018 Met Gala, the extravagant annual fund-raising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The 2018 theme, "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination," meant the who's who of fashion, film, and music industries walked the red carpet in their stylists' wildest interpretations of Catholic fashion. Some celebrities came dressed as religious figures. Singer Katy Perry was a golden Versace angel, with six-foot feathered wings and above-the-knee shiny boots. Actor Jared Leto was a blinged-out Gucci Christlike prince. Actress Zendaya was a silvery Joan of Arc in a chain-link Versace design. Singer Lana Del Rey was so very Marian, dressed in a Gucci tribute to Our Lady of Sorrows: a long white gown with gold embellishment and seven daggers piercing her chest. The singer Rihanna, one of the hosts of the

event, came dressed as the pope. She wore a jewel-encrusted white Maison Margiela cloak and minidress with a matching miter, the medieval papal headgear. Others incorporated Catholic aesthetics as design elements. Singer Ariana Grande got some attention for her Vera Wang garment that turned Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" from the Sistine Chapel into a flowing chiffon gown, an image of the resurrected Christ placed strategically on her chest. Actress Sarah Jessica Parker paired her Dolce & Gabbana gold brocade gown with a complete Neapolitan nativity scene on her head.

As soon as images for the Met Gala began to circulate, Catholic Twitter started buzzing with moral outrage using the tag #MyReligionIsNotYourCostume. But these complaints were drowned out by high-profile cultural critics and fashion reporters who defended the event, relying in part on the Vatican's support of it. The Vatican donated forty items to the exhibit. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the Vatican's president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, even attended the Met Gala. As Jessica Andrews of *Teen Vogue* put it, "cultural appropriation implies a lack of consent and participation."¹⁶ For her, Vatican endorsement got everyone off the hook.

But given that religious communities have multiple members with varying life experiences, we should be suspicious when agents granting permission occupy positions of relative privilege, since they are less likely to feel the sting of appropriation as exploitation. To avoid reinforcing forms of inequality within religious communities, in this book I pay special attention to insiders who are marginalized as female, Black, brown, or have other identities that make them more susceptible to systems of inequity.

This is all to say that considering existing power dynamics, including those within a religious community, is important when determining whether borrowing causes appropriative harm. An act of cultural borrowing is not wrong just because it transgresses a cultural boundary; for

example, because an outsider borrows a cultural practice of an insider. It is wrong because of the way it interacts with existing oppression of specific groups in ways that further contribute to their oppression.¹⁷ Put differently, borrowing becomes stealing when a dominant or privileged group borrows from a marginalized one. Borrowing in the other direction is assimilation, not appropriation, and not the focus of this book.

I have found American political theorist Iris Young's concept of "structural injustice" helpful for understanding how the conditions of oppression make some instances of borrowing forms of appropriation. Young developed this term to refer to a systemic condition that "exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities."¹⁸ In my discussion of religious appropriation, that means capitalism, sexism, racism, orientalism, and Christian hegemony are all relevant forms of structural injustice.

In the case of religious appropriation, a shallow understanding of power—one that does not account for structural injustice as overlapping forms of domination—can prevent the identification of exploitation. This is why some commentaries dismissed concerns raised by lay Catholics over the Met Gala. They assumed that Catholicism was not eligible to be stolen because of the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Let's revisit Andrews's commentary for *Teen Vogue* in which she wrote, "cultural appropriation hurts the powerless, and the Catholic Church is one of the most powerful institutions in the world." Andrews had a point. Roman Catholicism has been an imperial force in the world for much of its history, and it operated as such in precolonial America. Pope Alexander VI gave Spain the exclusive right to acquire territory and to trade in the New World with his 1493 papal bull *Inter Caetera*. The Spanish *Requerimiento* of

1513 used Catholic theology to justify forced conversion, land seizures, and violence against Indigenous peoples.

But none of this political and institutional history means lay Catholics can't be discriminated against. On the contrary, we have a robust history of anti-Catholicism in the United States. Many of the first settlers were Protestant, and they did not have a generous view of Catholics. In fact, after the continent's Indigenous peoples, Catholics were among the very first to become disenfranchised on North American soil. In 1642, the Colony of Virginia passed a law prohibiting Catholic settlers. In 1719, Rhode Island denied Catholics voting rights. Even Maryland, a colony established in 1632 explicitly as a haven for Catholics facing persecution in Europe, outlawed Catholicism and banned Roman Catholics from public office by 1689.

There was a resurgence in US anti-Catholic sentiment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to waves of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland, Quebec, and Mexico, especially within the Ku Klux Klan and other nativist organizations. And today, Hollywood loves to take cheap shots at Catholics, as James Martin has recently argued in an essay titled "The Last Acceptable Prejudice?" for *America Magazine*.¹⁹

I disagree with Andrews's assessment that Catholics can't experience exploitation when outsiders borrow their practices. In fact, one entire case study in this book is devoted to an instance of religious appropriation involving a Catholic pilgrimage. But I agree with her impulse that what makes appropriation harmful is past and ongoing systems of inequality and marginalization. And certainly, some groups, such as religious minorities, are more likely to experience harm. But the issue of power in cases of religious appropriation is not as simple as categorizing some religions as immune from exploitation just because they are associated with powerful institutions or leaders.

One reason religious appropriation is so common is that we assume there are no victims, or at least no victims that have a legitimate claim.

Thus, identifying various forms of exploitation experienced by diverse religious actors will be an important aspect of this book. I prefer the term “exploitation” to “harm,” because it reminds us that the injury depends on forms of structural injustice and is thus a form of moral harm.²⁰ But it is also important to note that exploitation in cases of religious appropriation is not the same as in other forms of cultural appropriation.

Economic exploitation is the most common way of describing the harm caused by cultural appropriation, particularly when the products of the labor of one group are monetized by another group in ways that reinforce asymmetrical power dynamics. The exploitation of religious appropriation can be economic—Madonna commodified Catholic aesthetics to promote her brand. But it can also be ideological. Religious practices are co-opted for political agendas, religious histories are erased, and stereotypes are reinforced. Sometimes, that exploitation is about the corrupting of the practices themselves, insofar as they are extracted from their original context or disconnected from larger religious ideas and beliefs. Other times, exploitation comes from leveraging the value of a religious practice for personal benefit. In still others, it is about reinforcing orientalist narratives that encourage the appropriation in the first place. Understanding these exploitations helps clarify how religious practices are specific types of cultural phenomena, and thus we might need to take extra care when we borrow them.

American philosopher Joel Feinberg has a concept I have found useful for thinking about the exploitation involved in stealing the religion of others: profound offense.²¹ In the context of criminal law, he makes a distinction between minor and profound offenses. Examples of the latter include voyeurism, desecration of venerated symbols, and mistreatment of a corpse. Actions that are profoundly offensive do more than put us in an unpleasant state of mind. They are an affront to our core values and sense of self. Religious practices build

group intimacy and religious identity, but they can also be the foundation for how an individual sees themselves, the world, and the very meaning of life. Religious appropriations that are profoundly offensive disrupt these worldviews. They are enacted heresy.

What “my” refers to in *Stealing My Religion* depends on your perspective. It could mean, “Someone is stealing religion from me,” or “I am stealing religion from someone.” The ambiguity is intended to make space for the diverse relationships my readers will have to this topic. For some of you, the sting of appropriation I discuss will be personal, such as when campaigns adopt your religious clothing for political agendas or when the wellness industry promotes sanitized versions of your own religion to you as therapy. But for many of my readers, you will be on the other side of the table, borrowing the religion of others in the pursuit of what you consider to be nonreligious goals.

If the term “stealing” signals my presumption that appropriation is exploitation, the “my” in the title suggests this book is also a confession: I myself have appropriated religion. My Madonna phase, my yoga practice, some of my pedagogical choices, even my politics—these have all involved appropriating the religious practice of others. I am not presenting myself as a role model. I am a cautionary tale. I have stolen my religion in problematic ways, in ways that I am embarrassed by. My experiences with religious borrowing show how challenging navigating the ethics of religious appropriation can be, even for an expert in ethics and religion such as myself. But when I acknowledge these mistakes, take moral responsibility, and reflect on what I could have done better, I hope they become teachable moments.

I also want you to see yourself in this topic. In the early stages of writing, *Stealing Your Religion* was this book’s working title because I think most Americans are guilty of stealing their religion. Likely, there are things you do that place you in the world, give you pleasure, con-

tribute to physical or mental health, and so on, which are rooted in religious traditions you do not identify with. I am not trying to catch you in a “gotcha moment,” but I do want you to consider how these religious borrowings might impact others. There are lots of reasons that so many of us steal our religion, but I want to put a significant amount of blame on liberalism. This ideology’s emphasis on individual freedom and self-management encourages the curation of a personal spirituality instead of submitting to the authority of a religious institution or community.²²

As I define religious appropriation, anyone can engage in it. But certainly, it is easiest to identify this practice in the United States among two groups: “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) and non-religiously affiliated who self-describe as “nones.” I would argue that anyone who calls themselves SBNR is in danger of engaging in religious appropriation, since they insist they are religious outsiders but also intentionally engage in ad hoc religious borrowings. Nones’ refusal to affiliate with organized religion does not mean this group is irreligious either. Author Tara Isabella Burton describes nones as “the religious mix and matchers, the theologically bi- and tri-curious who attend Shabbat services but also do yoga, who cleanse with sage but also sing ‘Silent Night’ at Christmastime.”²³ Insisting that they have no religious affiliation while acting religiously “bi- and tri-curious” is a situation ripe for religious appropriation.²⁴

More generally, the agents of appropriation discussed in this book can be described in a couple of ways. Much as I depend on self-reports for determining who is a religious insider, I have selected case studies in which borrowers concede that they are not part of the religious community in which the practice they adopt originated.²⁵ In fact, assuming they can remain an outsider is part of what enables them to appropriate the practice in the first place. A non-Muslim woman who wears a hijab for the day as a political symbol. A Camino pilgrim

who describes himself as an atheist. A yoga practitioner who insists her practice is merely therapeutic. As we will see, these individuals work hard to remain religious outsiders by rejecting religious doctrines, norms, and metaphysics. They don't dispute religious boundaries. In fact, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is fundamental to their comfort with ad hoc borrowing.

There are versions of religious appropriation that most of us would agree are immoral, such as the Nazi Party's use of the *svastika*, the Hindu symbol of good fortune. But, in this book, I focus on cases of religious appropriation where the intent is meaningful engagement because these are the situations that tend to avoid ethical scrutiny. The agents of appropriation in my three case studies are all motivated by goals that would be considered "good" if judged by the tenets of liberalism: solidarity with a religious minority under attack, education through experiential learning, and the pursuit of health and well-being.

However, intentions do not determine whether an action is just, because they do not predict how that action will be experienced by others.²⁶ Instead, we need to consider whether the action results in oppression because it relies on or reinforces existing forms of structural injustice. Asymmetrical power relations, not intentions, are how we determine the exploitation of appropriation. In fact, since the borrowing agent likely occupies a position of relative privilege, they are not in a position to see, much less understand, appropriative harm. Good motivations don't get us off the hook.

An outcome might even be in direct opposition to the appropriator's intended effect. We will see, for instance, how forms of solidarity hijab, displayed and worn to combat gendered Islamophobia, were experienced as further marginalization and powerlessness by Muslim women. If the goal of my study abroad program on the Camino was to increase religious literacy, in practice, it reinforced a Christian-

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