

**Pilgrim/Poet – Citizen/Seer:
Epic Song and the Sacred Journey of National History**

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Through songs of origins and of being-in-the world the singers of epics weave together tales of both the sacred and the nation-state. Life forces from the mortal and the immortal conjoin, sounding the ordinary as the extraordinary, affording everyday worlds religious dimensions. As genre, the epic achieves its power through its counterpoint of narratives about national history and sacred history, especially about the inevitable ways in which they come to define and express local identities in global contexts.

My keynote in Helsinki examines the ways in which epic song enters the historical *longue durée* when sacred meaning accrues to it. The paper itself will have broad historical and historiographic dimensions, starting comparatively with epic traditions that realize the sacred origins of human life, among them the *Torah* in the Judeo-Christian Bible, the *Ramayana* in South Asia, and the *Kalevala* in Finland. I contrast epics about the origins of the sacred with contemporary epics, in which modern struggles for the power of the state are repeatedly waged, among them the Balkan Kosovo epics and the Iberian *Cid* epic about confrontation between Christianity and Islam, and Bollywood epics such as *Padmavat*, with its persistent historicizing of the recent rise of Hindutva in the conflicts between Islam and Hinduism. My larger goal in this keynote is to expand the ways we listen for the sacred in the genres that constitute epic song globally and to lay theoretical groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of how the sacred and the national intersect every more powerfully even in our own age.